

-THE- --DEACON--

by
Bob Smith
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-----Prologue-----
-----MISCONCEPTIONS-----

The old bastard had but a few moments to atone for the sins of a lifetime. The chasms of Hell yawned wide before him. The smell of death hung in the air. He clutched at the hand of his trusted friend and vassal, a friend whose face he had not lain eyes upon for more than twenty-five years.

The Baron tried to speak but the words were drowned out by the gurgling rattle emanating from his throat. His eyes, filmy with impending death, beckoned to the candlelit warrior.

“Come closer.” he croaked. “There is much to say and I have but little time.”

Sir Edmund moved in, knelt, and lay a hand among the yellow roses covering his lord’s deathbed. The other wiped away the tears welling up in his eyes.

The Baron spat, summoned his remaining strength, and managed to raise himself up on one elbow.

“Can you ever forgive me?” he implored. “I asked... I asked too much of you. It has haunted my dreams. ...given me nightmares. I am a failure... As a man... As a friend... As your friend. I’m so, so sorry.

“How could I... How could I have murdered my own babies? How could I have asked you to help?”

Silence filled the room. Edmund knelt on the floor, head in hands. Exhausted, the Baron slumped back to the bed. His sightless eyes stared past the ceiling, seeking the good times he and Edmund had shared, back when the first Baroness was still alive. With great effort, he forced himself to continue.

“...must do what I can. ...right some wrongs. Three requests, my oldest, my dearest... My only friend.”

He gasped for air, consciousness fading in and out. From the blazing fires of eternal damnation, he forced himself back to the candlelit room and its unfinished business.

“First: the Red Knight... Must be stopped... Already killed thirty-two of my warriors. The yellow Rose is laughed at... He. Must. Be. Stopped!

“Second... The Deacon. ...must be exposed. Exposed for what he is. No one is safe. Evil...”

The Baron jerked up, grabbing Edmund by the shoulders. His eyes blazed with hatred.... and fear. Spittle flew from his lips. He was snarling. Then all went limp and he slumped back to the bed, assisted by the still silent warrior.

She was standing before him, twin boys suckling at her breasts. She smiled at him and beckoned him towards her. Oh, how he loved that woman. He had never stopped loving her. Nothing had been the same since she had died in childbirth.

He smiled at her. Those must be his sons, the twin boys whose deaths he had ordered twenty-five years before. No! Not he. It was the Deacon. He was the one who... She spoke but he could not hear. She was there and then she was gone. He opened his eyes and was once again in his bed.

He focused on the tall thin warrior now standing before him. The years had been good to him. Though not the haughty young cavalier of twenty-five years ago, Edmund's was still a commanding presence. He wore chain mail and a belted surcoat with the Camberly family crest upon it: a white oak tree on a vibrant green background. His aquiline features were filled with pain and his neatly trimmed gray beard was stained with tears.

The Baron motioned for some water. Edmund brought a tankard and, cradling his Lord's head, dribbled its contents across parched lips. Laying back down, the Baron continued:

“Third... Protect Beck. Guard the succession. Many enemies... His mother... The Deacon... Owen... Be there for him. Callie, too. Once more, I'm sorry. The Barony needs you... Again.”

The Baron's features sagged, no longer possessing the strength to communicate. He awaited Edmund Camberly's reply.

Owen let forth an audible gasp. He stiffened, fearful that he had been overheard through the cracked door he had been using to listen in on his father and the dying Baron. 'So the old bastard thinks he can and absolve himself of murder as easily as that.' he thought, fingering his rosary.

So, the rumors were true. The Baron had fathered and lost, (killed!), twin sons twenty-five years ago, coincidentally less than a year before he, Owen, and his twin brother, Arthur, entered this world. Stranger and stranger. Things were going to get quite interesting. Owen's mind raced with the whispered stories that had been part of the Barony for as long as he had.

At one time, life in the Barony was good. The Baron was a kind Liege Lord. He and the Baroness were loved. The fief prospered and the people were happy. The Baroness conceived a child and everything felt right in the world.

Then, on a moonless night some twenty-five years back, everything had changed. There had been a commotion at the Castle and, being near the Baroness' time, and expectant, spontaneous celebration had broken out. Two days later, the mood had grown to one of fear and concern. For those two days, and three more, Frismont Castle had remained closed to the outside world.

On the Sabbath, a proclamation had been read: 'The Baroness and child had died in childbirth. After an appropriate mourning period, the Baron would remarry and try for another heir. In the interim, out of respect for his loss and to allow him time to mourn, the Baron's duties would be carried out by his Chamberlain. This man would come to be known as the Deacon.

That was the end of the proclamation, but not of rumor, nor of the event. Eleven servants disappeared from the Castle, their absence never officially explained. The Baron had remained locked in his Castle for much of the past twenty-five years, trotted out only for official occasions, one of which was a marriage to the second Baroness, one as universally loathed as the first one was universally loved. She bore two children: a daughter Callie and a

son, Beck. Power remained in the hands of the Deacon. Life was hard.

Amidst this oppression, rumors abounded about what had happened that night. Some said the child had not died. Others talked of twins. The caskets, one large and one small, remained closed during the elaborate memorial service presided over by the Deacon.

There had even been those so bold as to suggest that he or Arthur or both of them were actually the Baron's heirs. Owen had scoffed at these as old wives' tales. ...but now this. They were half right. It was twins. But those twins were dead.

Owen sagged. He had to admit that all his life, a part of him dreamed that he was truly the lost heir. Arthur was a few moments older and that made all the difference. Arthur would inherit everything. Owen, as the younger son, would get nothing.

At this very moment, the hated Arthur was preparing to sail off to war in the Valley, at the head of the finest of the Camberly retainers. As the eldest son, Arthur had everything. As the youngest son, all Owen had was the burning desire that his brother never return.

How he loathed Arthur. All their lives he had come up short in their father's eyes when compared to his damned brother. They had been raised in virtual seclusion at Quentin Castle. Arthur was obedient, studious, and pious. Owen was hot tempered, argumentative, and restless. After a particularly nasty confrontation with the sainted Arthur, a fourteen year old Owen had finally had enough. He left Quentin Castle, never to return.

Fate led him to the Deacon's doorstep, which led to an apprenticeship with the Brotherhood. He had spent his teen years in pious study of the good book, and intensive training in the art of killing his fellow man.

For the first time in his life, Owen had felt like he belonged. The Deacon became the father figure he had always craved but never known. These days he was the Barony's Paladin, of late entrusted with the mission of seeking out the Red Knight and his

golden haired lady. Owen considered his a mission and a life guided by God Himself.

His mood had been an ugly one when he had returned to the Castle earlier that afternoon. His quest had been a failure. For six weeks he had scoured the Barony, stymied by false leads, near misses, and dead ends. His last clue had dissolved across the bay in Oakton, with him knowing little more about his elusive quarry than he had when he began. It was there that he had decided to return and face the wrath of the Deacon.

He had been on his way to make his report when he'd seen his father slip into the Baron's chamber. Sir Edmund hadn't left Marinwood in twenty-five years. Owen had gone to investigate.

A sudden shout from the other room brought the Paladin out of his reverie. Through the door he could see his father shoving a sheaf of papers at a shouting, red-faced Baron. When the dying man settled himself, Edmund resumed speaking.

"Tis true M'Lord. A good Christian don't go around killing babes. I couldn't do it... Two little boys... 'tis true... Your heir lives. Your *true* heir."

Owen stumbled backward, dazed by what he'd just heard. Knocking into a tray-carrying servant, they both went down with a crash. Owen was quickly on his feet, bounding down the stairs three at a time. He needed to get away. He needed to think. He needed Arthur dead. He mounted his black charger and spurred him down the hill, and away from the Castle. He couldn't help but laugh out loud at his good fortune.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

The Baron had just put his signet to the second copy of the revised will when a clatter from the hallway startled Edmund into action. He whirled, will in hand, raced for the door and threw it open. Behind him, the second copy of the will fluttered from the Baron's hand onto the floor.

Edmund crossed the hall and towered over the trembling servant. He could hear footsteps receding down the stairs at the far end of the corridor.

“Who was listening at the doorway?” screeched the old warrior. “Speak up boy!” The youth could not find his tongue. Edmund grabbed him roughly by the shirtfront and pulled him to his feet.

“Br-Br-Brother Owen, M-M’Lord.” was all the boy could manage, one trembling finger pointing toward the far stairwell.

With a groan, Edmund threw the boy down and raced off after his son, already knowing it was too late. By the time he reached the courtyard, Owen was gone. Knowing he’d never catch him, he turned and raced back to the Baron’s chamber. The fourth Baron of Friston had taken his last breath. His lifeless eyes stared into the nothingness of the ceiling. What little peace he would find was his at last. Edmund reached out, closed his eyelids, made the sign of the cross, and mumbled a prayer. He folded the lifeless gray hands among the yellow roses covering the dead man’s chest.

He searched frantically for the second will, his senses slow to detect the lingering scent of rosewater that permeated the death chamber.

“The Deacon...” he mumbled with terrified recognition. He turned and hurried from the room, fearfully glancing back over his shoulder.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

Owen was on his way to confront Arthur once and for all. Having left Frismont Castle behind, he skirted the northern edge of the Enclave and spurred his steed up Signal Fire Hill. Reaching the top, he stared north across the fog-shrouded water towards Camberly lands he hadn’t set foot upon since he was fourteen years old.

After a quick stop at his monk’s cell in the tower that loomed ahead, he would head back down towards the docks. ...and

Arthur. Chilled to the bone, he urged his steed forward, paying little heed to the jagged cliffs which plunged from his left to the beach far below. The metallic clink of his armor was both muffled and amplified by fog.

Ever since the Dark Times, the Baron's family had ruled Friston and the lands surrounding the bay. Seemingly buffered from the horror stories which arrived from far off lands, the Barony had prospered. With the ocean to its west, the Inland Sea to its east, and rugged mountains to the south, Friston and environs were spared the worst of it back in the days when the marauding Unwashed had ruled the land.

Owen sighed. 'It seemed like just yesterday.' The years spent under the Deacon's wing had been the happiest of his life. For the first time he had felt like he belonged, belonged to something bigger than himself. Now, one red-clad warrior threatened everything. ...and Owen had failed to bring him in. He had never failed the Deacon before. The Brotherhood. He did not take his responsibilities lately. For Owen Camberly, the taste of defeat was indeed a bitter one.

"Damn thy red armor and thy golden hair! Thou art mine." he seethed. "God's Will be done."

His voice died on the fog, inches from his lips, accompanied by the muffled sounds of clanking armor. Hearing a muffled shout from the foot of the cliff, he moved closer to take a look. What he saw made his mouth hang open and set his blood to pounding in his ears.

Below him, the last, harsh rays of the setting sun had cut through the fog to brilliantly illuminate two riders blocking the beach. The huge mounted knight was encased in flawless chain and plate mail, colored a bloody red. Sunbeams played among the blond ringlets of his companion, cascading down to milky white shoulders swathed in red velvet. Riding sidesaddle, her horse was as large, and as black, as her companion's.

Coming out of the fog at them from the west was a mounted knight and his squire. The yellow roses on their surcoats proclaimed their loyalties. Owen settled in his saddle to watch as

the two warriors lowered their lances and galloped toward each other, leaving their companions behind. Even up here, Owen could feel the earth shake as the two heavily encumbered warhorses lumbered toward each other at little better than a walk. Time seemed to stand still, lances seeking targets, shields, attempting to come between.

The red lance hit home first. As it glanced harmlessly aside, the other found a target. It hit the blood red helm where it attached to the shoulder, jerking its owner backward and tumbling him to the ground with a reverberating clatter. When the dunes came alive with scurrying peasants, the Baron's knight wisely continued down the beach. His squire took a roundabout path to catch up.

Owen's mind raced as he watched the peasants struggle to sling the wounded warrior across the back of his charger. Once that was accomplished, the peasants disappeared back into the fog as quickly, and as quietly, as they had appeared. The Lady took hold of the reins, turned both horses and cantered off in the direction of Friston harbor.

The one they called Brother Owen lovingly cradled his flail, turned his steed, and spurred it on to head them off on the far side of Signal Fire Hill. Arthur would have to wait. Redemption was at hand.

It was dark by the time he had skirted the hill to lie in wait. The fog had thickened, reducing visibility to not much beyond the tip of his nose, distorting sound so that it came from everywhere and nowhere at the same time. He blocked the path and waited, the Lord's Prayer on his lips.

He didn't have to wait long. The boxed-in silence of the fog, accompanied by the gently lapping surf, was soon joined by the muffled rhythms of two fast-approaching riders.

He had only a moment to react. They were three horse lengths away when their shadows materialized out of the mists. He sat before them, a stationary armored warrior, a gold cross on a red field emblazoned upon his surcoat and shield. Over his

head swung a large, spiked, metal ball, its chain providing a wide arc.

"In God's presence I command you to stop!" he boomed, knowing it was already too late. The two riders swerved apart to pass on either side of the Paladin. No weapons were visible. Cloaks covered the riders. Both sat in the saddle.

The flail struck the one on the left first, a face shot crunching bone and splattering blood. As the spiked ball reversed its arc, Owen could see out of the corner of his eye, a rider crashing to the ground, its face a bloody, oozing pulp spraying blood in all directions. Even before the fearsome weapon impacted the second rider in the middle of his chest, Owen knew he had the wrong quarry. He sighed and darted a glance towards the heavens, trying not to see the yellow rose surcoat's as the hoofbeats of the two retreating horses pounded unnaturally loud in his ears. He had chosen the wrong cut-off point, a fact which became more obvious with each passing moment. He glanced over his shoulder in the direction of the docks. Once his quarry made it into that warren of hovels and maze of alleys he would never find them. He sighed again and looked down with annoyance upon the young squire, writhing on the ground, clutching at his shattered chest. The other body littering the fog-shrouded roadway had made its last sound.

With another sigh and the heavy weight of responsibility bearing down on him, Owen clutched at his rosary, dismounted, and knelt over the whimpering boy. The eyes staring up at him went wide. Owen made the sign of the cross and reached out. He placed a gloved hand over lips and nostrils, all the while mumbling the last rites. The eyes went wider. Then they went blank. Owen crossed himself and stood up.

He lifted his eyes to the heavens, then gazed down at the two fallen warriors. 'Twas God's will.' After all, he was God's retribution here on earth, wasn't he? But that didn't mean he should be leaving any witnesses to his overzealousness, did it? God would sort them out. With the Lord's Prayer lovingly tumbling from his lips, he mounted up and cantered off toward the docks.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

Sir Edmund groped his way along the darkened passage. His torch did little to illuminate the ancient, tile-covered walls and moss-slickened floor. He proceeded slowly, all too conscious of his diminishing eyesight and reflexes.

He thought bitterly about the last time he had used the tunnel. It had been more than twenty-five years ago. That time he had raced its length, twin babes slung over his shoulder, a wounded little servant boy under his arm. 'Yep, twenty-five years had taken their toll,' he thought sadly. '...in more ways than one..' Slipping again, he cursed, got up, and groped his way forward.

"That night..." he muttered under his breath. It's hard to believe the whole world can crumble in an instant. But it can. And it had.

He couldn't believe his good fortune in getting a chance to right it all before he passed on. If only he could get to Owen before... 'Damn him! He had it all wrong.' His thoughts trailed off and he concentrated on going faster.

The tunnel was old, older than the written history of the Barony. It had rarely been used, and few alive knew of its existence. The exit was well concealed in the basement of a tavern located in the warren of ramshackle buildings down by the docks.

Closing the tunnel door behind him, Edmund made sure to conceal its presence from the outside. He sat upon some boxes, tending his scrapes and bruises in the fast-fading afternoon sun filtering in from a filthy, ceiling-level window. His breathing was almost normal again.

He gathered his strength, wrapped his cloak tight about him, and headed for the stairs to the street. The last time he'd used them had been the only time that a Camberly had ever defied his liege Baron. Together, the two families had brought the lands between the waters out of the Dark Times. But Edmund was no baby killer. He eased his guilt by telling himself that he had defied

the Deacon, not the Baron. He had covered his tracks well. The Baron's true heir lived. But he had to reach Arthur before Owen did.

He lovingly patted the will in his travel pouch. It made all the difference. With his deathbed acknowledgment, the Baron had made the elder twin heir to his title. "Deacon be damned!" he muttered as he latched the cellar door behind him and scurried off down the alleyway.

Arthur was scheduled to leave for the Valley tonight. He had to be stopped. Owen could be dealt with later. He had to reach Arthur before Owen did.

Luckily for Edmund, he knew where Arthur was. He should be at the Camberly warehouse down by the docks, making final preparations for sailing to the Valley. Edmund would set things straight. It was the least he could do. It was his duty. After all, he was a Camberly.

Owen had always been the thorn in his side. Owen and Arthur were like night and day. He had never showed either favoritism. ...never treated them differently. 'How could two boys be so different?'

Edmund's reverie was broken as he rounded the last corner leading to the Camberly warehouse. He burst open the front door, screaming for his chamberlain.

A weathered old man appeared in the doorway. He had served the Camberlys for more than fifty years. In their youth, he had served as Edmund's tutor; now he was in charge of running his Lord's household. He had accompanied Arthur into Friston to make preparations for sailing off to war. He wasn't nearly as sharp as he used to be, but Edmund made allowances.

"Edmund...? Edmund...? ...that you Edmund? What you doing here? Owen? No... ain't seen 'im. ... ain't seen 'im in years. Tonight? Here? Tonight? No. Arthur? No. He left. ... left for the boat. Left early... How long? ... two hours? ...no... half-hour? ...no... ... not sure... What?"

"Come, chamberlain." Edmund yelled over his shoulder as he bounded up the stairs. ... to the Valley! ... to Arthur!"

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-
-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

-----Chapter One-----
-----CONFLAGRATIONS-----

“What do you think is gonna happen when the Baron dies?” grunted the muscular young apprentice as he lowered yet another barrel of provisions into the hold below. The grizzled ship’s Captain to whom Will had spoken lay splayed on a coil of rope, basking like a hog in the gentle breezes which blew off Friston Bay. His bulk drooped to the deck in all directions from the red, sunbaked head splashed into the top of it. A small fat hand appeared from somewhere to palm the meat and grease from around a fleshy, gap-toothed cavern of a mouth.

His head slowly tilted to one side, accompanied by the rippling of many necks. The leathery red fat covering his bald head seemed to droop, one eye peering from a dark, fleshy cavern, the other wide luminous, and critical. He spat for emphasis.

“Boy, ain’t you bin raised right?” yelled Cap’n Waldo, accenting ‘boy’ just enough to make it sound degrading and somewhat unclean.

“You don’ go asking questions like dat. ‘tis God’s will. Especially here in da Baron’s own port. There’s stories that would curl your staff, boy.” he spat out, again soiling the last word.

Knowing what would follow, Will rolled his eyes and hurried down *The Barnacle*’s gangway and headed toward the Cap’n’s warehouse with a long, loping gait. His eyes were bright blue and darting left and right under a mop of gleaming yellow hair. Halfway there, having exorcised Cap’n Waldo’s insults, he began to whistle, providing a musical score for the daydreams that got him through each and every back-breaking, monotonous day. It also helped to drown out the noisy port sounds and distract him from the noxious smells assaulting him from every direction.

Will hated being in port, not least because he usually turned into a draft animal the second they were tied off. He rolled his aching shoulders. ‘No.’ Will liked it best when *The Barnacle* was under sail, gliding along the bays, inlets, and rivers which made up

his world. Cap'n Waldo, dead drunk, would spend most of his time in the cabin below while Will manned the tiller, eyes greedily mapping all they passed, mind blessedly daydreaming of a life more meaningful.

A scurrying of rats brought Will back to the present with a shudder. 'God how he hated those damn things.' ...almost as much as he hated dogs. But all Enclaver's hated dogs. Rats were just a part of life. But not for him. For him they embodied something deeper, something darker, something more primal. 'Rats, Uuugh!'

He picked up his pace, annoyed at himself for allowing such thoughts to enter his mind on such a beautiful day. He resumed whistling, eyes glazing over, transporting himself to a time and place far, far away.

For anyone in the Barony with a penchant for daydreaming, most starting points involved the first Baroness, twins...

"In da good ole days..." Will singsonged under his breath, mocking Cap'n Waldo and the others old enough to remember those days and courageous or drunk enough to reminisce about them.

Through the mists of imagination he could see himself approaching Frismont Castle astride a black charger. He would ride straight into the Great Hall, confront the Deacon, and proclaim that he was the lost son of the good Baroness, returning to claim the title that was rightfully his. It would, however, take masterful swordplay to overcome the Deacon's dark retainers and wrest power from their grasp. Will's heart fluttered at the sight of the beautiful, flame-tressed Callie Friston hovering in the background.

This was the part where recent events in the Barony changed the direction of the daydreams: the crowd rejoiced, shocked to see that their new Baron was the knight who had mysteriously appeared all over the Fief, leaving over thirty knights of the Brotherhood vanquished in his wake, each time disappearing as mysteriously as he had appeared. As Will stood on the steps of the Castle keep, the Deacon's last line of defenders strewn at his feet, the townspeople looked on in awe.

They had never seen a more beautiful suit of armor before, it's reddish tint reflecting rays of the setting sun off the cornsilk ringlets of the beauty who stood beside him.

Will was still basking in the adulation of his imaginary subjects as his long strides took him through the open doors of Waldo's provision warehouse. Though he slowly brought his consciousness back to the present, he couldn't clear the Red Knight and his lady from his vision. He rubbed his eyes and move closer. The knight spoke to Will, staggered, and dropped in all his red splendor to the hay below. The woman screamed and Will dropped to his knees, capable of neither movement, nor speech.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

The immense carcass of Waldo Gump lay facedown near the gangway, his battered head the focal point for an ever-widening pool of blood and vomit. Sputtering and gasping, he fought to regain his breathing. A steady stream of blood-mottled spit ran down his cheek, mixing with the rainbow of stains and odors which made up his tunic. A greasy, filth-encrusted maw fought to reach his face and clear the blood from his eyes.

One eye opened wide, fueled by pain, fear, and hatred. As it focused, he could see their backs receding in the bright moonlight which lit the Friston Quay. There had been three of them. 'Now Waldo Gump wasn't the kind to let a fellow salt goes thirsty on returning from the sea.' Since the ale houses were closed out of respect for the Baron, he had invited them aboard *The Barnacle* for a nip.

He could see that they were wealthy. 'Never hurt to make high-class friends', he always said. The thought sent shivers of pain racing through him. 'After all, who else could afford a full-length ermine cloak?'

Without even touching his drink, their leader had spit out questions about Sir Edmund. 'Why was it so damn important they find him tonight?' Cap'n Waldo prided himself on knowing what

went on in the Barony, but could he help it if the noble Sir Edmund didn't check in regular and proper like? 'Hell no, he couldn't!'

He had told them all he knew, their leader could see that. Those eyes of his pierced the soul. You couldn't hide nothing from him. But he couldn't tell them what he didn't know.

In all his years, the Cap'n had never seen one as big as the barrel-chested guardian who towered two heads over his not-so-short companions. With a slight nod from the leader, the big one had grabbed Waldo's fat right hand, twisting and kneading the fingers to a crescendo of frenzied screaming.

Consciousness had returned with visions of fists and feet disappearing into the flabby folds of his own prone body. Old evil eyes had pulled them off only after they had pummeled him into a bloody, bruised, mass of defeated flesh.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

A single tear rolled hesitantly down the young woman's cheek, pausing momentarily before tumbling to the lips of the fallen warrior lovingly cradle to her breast. Her eyes cried out to Will with the pain known only to those on the edge of an abyss. Her muted whisperings called forth conflicting visions of hope and despair.

Slowly, and with great effort, her deep blue eyes tore themselves away to face the speechless apprentice kneeling before her.

"Isn't there anything you can do?" she implored, her voice cracking under the strain.

Burdened with the overpowering intensity of the moment, Will was slow to leave his knees. His mind was racing blankly, unable to compensate for the confusion he felt since entering the warehouse. He could not push aside the feeling that he had walked into his own daydream.

She rocked back and forth gently, her eyes still directing their unanswered questions at Will. Golden ringlets caressed the red-clad warrior's forehead, cascading among the velvety tatters of

mystery left to the silently heaving bosom below. Her white thighs cradled him from below, their former covering providing the bandage for the wounded forehead which lay between them.

Again she whispered, but Will sensed rather than heard it. She seemed so very far away. While closing the gulf of time and distance between them, he struggled to banish his confusion, filling the void with a newfound desire to right the Lady's wrong.

"M'lady," he softly intoned, kneeling to take her hand. "Let us try to put him on his back."

Shifting her gaze downward, she placed the bandaged head in the hay beside her. She rose gracefully, accepting Will's outstretched offer of assistance. Solemnly they lowered their eyes to the fallen warrior between them.

Not without some difficulty, they turned the fallen warrior onto his back. Will removed the swathing of maroon velvet which had once been a part of the ladies skirt. Beneath was a forehead, bloodied, blackened, and swollen. His breathing was irregular. He was unconscious.

Using tools the lady had brought with her, they removed the suit of incriminating red armor. It had covered a tall, muscular body, criss-crossed with the many distinctions of a warrior. His heart was beating and nothing seemed broken. Even the bloody gash on his head would cause no long-term problem. Relief was apparent in the adoring eyes of the golden haired beauty who knelt above him.

They half-carried, half-dragged the unconscious body behind a pyramid of barrels adorning the store houses far corner. Then they replaced the soiled bandages in silence, noiselessly creeping away afterwards.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

The three men made for quite a sight as they trudged up the hill toward Frismont Castle. Their obvious leader wore a full-length ermine cloak, it's hemline brushing the ground to better cover a crippled foot painfully clumping up the hill. Towering over

him protectively was the largest human being anyone in these parts had ever seen. His eyes never strayed from the third member of the party, an elusive being whose presence drifted in and out of the shadows; here one moment, invisible the next.

Their leader was Richard Hawkins, well-known in these parts as a successful merchant out of Sacton. No one could remember ever seeing him out of the presence of the silent, towering hulk with the fitting name of Simon. The third member of their party, Richmond, was known for his quick tongue and even quicker temper.

Hawkins was deep in thought. A week ago he had been contacted at his Sacton address by a courier from Sir Edmund. The message had said only to proceed to Friston with haste. At the bottom was a coded symbol which informed Richard that the time had come. 'Finally they were going into action.' The groundwork he and Edmund had laid these past two years would soon bear fruit.

The three travelers had arrived in Friston at dusk aboard Hawkins' fastest ship *The Siarra's Mist*. Inquiries at dockside let them know that Edmund had been summoned to the Castle. 'Indeed the time must be near.' It had been twenty-five years since Sir Edmund had set foot inside those walls.

Hawkins smiled involuntarily. He wondered whether the old warrior had been able to convince the Baron to attach his seal to the wills he had helped draft. So much depended on them. He hoped he wasn't too late. There was much to do before he could return to the safety of Sacton. He always felt uneasy in Friston, within the grasp of the Deacon. After all, it was in his Sacton workshop that the suit of red armor had been forged. But that could wait until tomorrow. 'First things first.' The Castle loomed in the distance. Hawkins quickened his pace, dragging his useless foot behind him.

Unbeknownst to the travelers, Sir Edmund was at that very moment one street over, pushing his steed as fast as it would go, toward the docks they had just left.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

Will clung to the railing, perspiring profusely and gasping for air. It had taken three trips to secure the cumbersome armor in this upper loft. All the while she had sat there in the hay, her graceful legs delicately forming a pedestal beneath her, breasts immodestly peeking from among the tattered remnants of a velvet bodice. Golden tresses cascaded from a head lowered, as though she no longer possessed the energy to support it.

Gazing down upon her, Will knew for the first time that it was all real. If the hundred pounds of armor hadn't convinced him, her muted sobbing certainly had. The power she had called forth now seemed spent. "It's time to stop dreaming." he muttered. With renewed determination he headed for the ladder. Halfway down, he began whistling softly.

He sat next to her in the hay until she slowly brought her eyes level with his.

"Hold me." she whispered. For the longest time they remained intertwined in embrace; she seeking the little solace left her in a rapidly crumbling world, he finding the strength to do what he must.

They parted slightly, her lips trembling as if to speak. "We have come in search of Arthur Camberly. Can you find him for us?"

Eager to be of assistance, Will's mind raced. "Sure Cap'n Waldo..." His voice trailed off with the memory of the Cap'n who must be furious by now. Not knowing what else to do, he told her to stay in the storehouse and left, locking the door behind him.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

The darkness was punctured by an incessant babbling, it's melody indicative of unanswered questioning. Neither identification, nor comprehension, proved possible, fleeting as were his lapses into consciousness. The darkness at the tip of his nose was replaced by feet, at first a single blurry pair planted

inches from his eyes, in time their many variations receding into the distance. His nostrils flared, assaulted by the sea air and the mildewed planking against his face. Then the pain returned, emanating from beneath his massive, tortured bulk. The involuntary groan which escaped his battered lips ushered in a rippling silence among the crowd.

Their self-appointed leader knelt, barking out orders as he did.

“Get back! Let the man breathe.” His eyes darted.

“Where’s that damn water?” Beckoning to three of the bigger man, he managed to roll the corpulent sea captain onto his back. Straining, they set him upright against a piling. Hands akimbo, the leader shook his head and laughed.

“Well, Cap’n Waldo, good thing you bounce, eh?”

Waldo sputtered on the blood still clotted in his throat. His eyes darted about, seeking an escape for his humiliation. The water arrived and he managed to sip some. In the background a chatter of disappointment preceded the crowd’s dispersal. Waldo’s eyes slowly added outline to the colors dancing before them. In the flickering torchlight he could make out the figure of the Friston harbormaster. When he finally spoke, very few of the once large crowd remained.

“Wha-what happened?” stammered the yet-disoriented seaman. Staring into the answerless torchlit eyes of his benefactor, it all came back. ‘The questions. The beating. The cripple. The fall.’ Back also came the pain. His hands screamed; it’s high-pitched soliloquy fronting for a deep chorus of throbbing harmonies.

The pain quieted. The inertia of the waiting man’s question was dead-ended with a flutter of the lips as the Cap’n finally addressed him.

“Was dere enny witnesses? You see ‘em?” The words were accompanied by a subtle tilt of the head. Receiving a negative nod, he continued with renewed confidence.

“’twas frightful. Dere was eight, mebbe ten of them. They sneaked onto me vessel. I was napping, waiting fer dat damn

'prentice to return. You seen 'im? Tall, lanky fellow. Blonde hair? When I does find him, he'll feel me wrath. His lousy fault. You know dat? If he was back like he should have been I'd of got 'em all."

His gaze detected no unspoken dispute. Feeling bolder he continued.

"I got me three of 'em." he exclaimed, jerking his head for emphasis.

"Could na get 'em all. Hell, there was fifteen of 'em. They held me down. Cain't be 'spected to take on that many, kin I?"

His gaze zeroed in on the harbormaster.

"They's looking for old Sir Edmund. You know why deys looking fer dat one? No? Me neither. Cain't tell 'em nothing. Don't know much meself. Wouldn't of told 'em anyway. I fought like an animal. Got this for me efforts." he bellowed, his swollen fist punching weakly at the an unseen enemy. The searing pain again raced up his arm, as if testifying against the exaggeration of his account.

The interval was filled with those questions yet unanswered for the port official. The Cap'n, with great effort, forced the pain back down his arm.

"No, I never seed 'em before tonight. I sent 'em to the Castle. Huh, that's a good one on them. Edmund ain't been there in twenty-five years. Everyone knows dat. No sirree, they could na have been from 'round here. They must..."

He hesitated in mid-sentence with the realization that they'd be back. Probably not before morning. They'd never get inside the Castle after dark. He had to find Will and get the hell out of Friston. It took decades of hard work to get *The Barnacle*. Nothing was going to take it from him. 'Nothing!' He didn't care what he had to do: that ship was going to sail out of Friston harbor under his command.

"Be damned Edmund Camberly! You and everyone else in dis stinkin' God-forsaken Enclave. I'll beat all o' youse or my name ain't Waldo Gump." He had to get to that warehouse and get Will back here. But first he had to find a way to stand up.

“What’s the matter? You remember something else?” asked the official, abruptly derailing the Cap’n’s train of thought. The fleshy, red head shook slowly and he smiled conspiratorially.

“Yeah, I ‘membered something. You look like a man don’t mind making a little gold? I din’t think so.

“Let’s ask us a few questions. Why’s a bunch of hooligans looking for a knight been disgraced for twenty years? ...and the Baron on his deathbed? Good question? Somethin’ fishy’s going on. Dat’s for sure. Only question is how’s you and me gonna make some profit on it? I gots me a plan. You interested?”

His words achieved the desired effect. His companion’s blank stare was replaced with greedy curiosity. The Cap’n’s face was a masterful mask of conspiracy, yet inside he chuckled smugly. ‘It would work. Greed was so motivating.’ He had to get that ship out of here. He had to protect what was his...at any cost.

“Here’s me plan. As I sees it, we gots us a boy for an heir. Power’s going to lie wid da Deacon. If’n Edmund is up to something, likely it’s against the Deacon. Methinks he’d pay greatly for this info. You in? Good! Help me get off this damn dock.”

The official replaced the gangway and went on to *The Barnacle*. He found a rope and lowered it over the side. Threading the other end through the mast pulley, he raced down the gangway to fasten the harness to his fat-conspirator.

“Yeah” he muttered. “If I get your fat ass off this dock, the hardest part will be over.”

After much sweating and swearing, Waldo was on his feet. His mind ticked off the things he had to do before he could sail. He was brought back to the present. “Huh, what’d you say? A tankard of ale? Lead the way. I’m right behind you. Hey, ain’t the taverns closed ‘cause of the Baron?”

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

As exists in every place, at any time, such establishments which cater to the needs of the citizenry denied by public decree

the means to dull its senses and erase it yesterdays, there too in Friston was such a place. For there the obese sea captain was led by his greedy compatriot.

"This way Cap'n" beckoned the harbormaster, darting down a dark alleyway. They descended a rickety stairwell and the official rapped sharply three times, then twice. He was recognized and they were let inside. Waldo immediately stopped in his tracks.

At the far end of the room, near the huge stone fireplace, stood Will. Waldo cleared a wide swath in his anxiety to get at the apprentice. The official followed doggedly at his heel. As he neared, he could hear Will asking if any of them knew where he could find Arthur Camberly. 'What was all this interest in the Camberly's all of a sudden?' Waldo was on him before the apprentice realized he was there. The Cap'n stopped abruptly, his companion bouncing into him from behind. 'Where was the vacant dreamy stare?' The eyes that now glared at him bespoke fire.

Waldo recovered his outward composure quickly. Few, if any, detected the brief instant of doubt that had flashed across his features. Waldo had blustered his way through life up to this point: when in doubt call on your strengths.

He grabbed a heavy tankard with his good hand and caught Will off guard with a resounding blow to the temple. Down he went, his bones disappearing with the impact. Though crumpled on the floor in shock, the eyes still blazed forth. They uneased the Cap'n but failed to deter him. 'He had to get that boat out of the harbor.'

For that he needed the young man crumpled at his feet. But a lesson must be taught. Grabbing a warm poker from the fire he beat Will, careful not to break anything important. The other patrons stared in disbelief, immobilized by the suddenness of it all.

"You cur!" roared Waldo. "Leave me to be killed, will ya? Never again!"

Will scrambled across the floor to get away from the skin-searing poker, the crowd quickly sidestepping any involvement in the matter. The Cap'n followed, lashing out with both poker and

tongue. He tired quickly, but not before he had the undivided attention of the now sympathetic crowd.

Waldo recounted again the story of his beating, dramatically embellishing it to hold the crowd's sympathy and protect himself from any revenge on the part of his apprentice. With the crowds' emotions in his pocket he let them in on the plan he had whispered to the harbormaster, vocally supported by the hotheads in the crowd. They were his. Greed always worked. 'What fools.' He wouldn't go near the dam Deacon for all the whiskey in Hell. Now was time to play his trump card. He had to get that ship out of the harbor.

"Quiet! Quiet down!" he boomed. "There is one small problem." They looked at him with newfound skepticism.

"The one fer which dis info is most, shall we say val'able, is de Deacon hisself." It worked. The dangers were now all too real. After all, who was going to demand gold from *him*. Their greed had been replaced by fear. His eyes sparkled. All was going according to plan.

"Dinna worry 'bout da Deacon. I bin working fer him for years. I take care of getting de gold outta him. I know'd they was coming. I was waitin' in port for them." Waldo like to reuse lies. Say them enough, he always said, and they becomes real.

"Here's all I needs from you. I be going to the Castle to see his Em'nence. You never need see him. Them hooligans has a boat in the harbor. Soon as things get hot, they're gonna try and make a run for it." He had them right where he wanted them. He paused for emphasis, his fleshy jowls slowly spreading into a large grin. The room was silent except for the crackling from the fireplace.

"You see, you is going to be awaiting. I want you to go down to the dock and sees to it that no one gets on that boat. Soon as they tries to leave Friston, you nabs 'em. Then I get the Deacon to trade gold for them. Sound good?"

Breathless, the Cap'n halted. As the greedy babble subsided, the harbormaster jumped up on the table and barked out orders.

“Yeoman: get your bows. Any with swords: bring them. Bring some food and warm clothes too: might be there all night. Get ready. There’s gold awaiting!”

Moving as one, the crowd scrambled for the door. For the moment the Cap’n and his fallen apprentice were forgotten, except by the man sitting in the dark corner, away from the fireplace, calmly finishing his ale. He stood, his floorlength cloak wrapped tightly about him. He strode across the room to confront the seaman, cutting across the grain of the rapidly departing crowd.

“So you know the Deacon.” he hissed at the obese sea captain two heads shorter than he. With his back to the others, he let his cloak fall open, revealing a red cross on a gold field: the Brotherhood!

Waldo tried, with little effort, to hide his terror. Before him stood Owen Camberly and what he was sure was his own death warrant. His mind raced, examining potential lies, a rabbit caught in the open, searching for shelter from the hawk. He found none.

“M-m-m-m’Lord,” he stammered.

“Silence.” commanded the other. “Come! You shall ride with me and identify these devils.” The Paladin half-led, half-dragged the whimpering seaman across the floor. He would see that justice be done. But first he had to get the Captain away from his apprentice. Camberly had overheard the pleas made by the young man before the captain had arrived. He had his quarry in sight. The apprentice was young and foolish. He would return to their hiding place if left alone. ...and Owen Camberly would be right behind. It was God’s will.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

The alehouse had emptied, save for the fallen apprentice and its owner washing tankards behind the rough-hewn bar. Neither was very happy, their displeasure aimed at the fat man dragged through the door moments ago. The barman had expected this to be one of the most profitable nights of the year:

now the tavern was empty. Will swore to himself that he would never again be humiliated by the fat Cap'n Waldo.

The latest indignity still stinging, he drew himself up. Sitting on the stone ledge fronting the fireplace, he reached for his tankard. He downed it in one swift gulp, wiping the foam from his lips with the back of a hand. His eyes blazed. Try as he might, he couldn't conjure up visions of revenge, visions which would have come easily in days past. No doubt a change had taken place. This latest indignity only served to strengthen his newfound resolve.

"Barman, another ale!" he yelled, beckoning to the balding but muscular older man. The barman just glared. He wasn't too pleased with Will, and Will knew it. He picked up his tankard and crossed the room, his eyes never leaving those of the other. He slammed the tankard down on the bar, along with one of the gold coins the Lady had given him. The barman poured an ale and reached for the coin. Will slammed his hand down on top of the other's. All the while their eyes never broke contact.

"There are more where that came from. Are you interested?" said Will, removing his hand and allowing the other to quickly pocket the offering. Without a word, the barman indicated that he was. Will's mind raced. He just had to help the Lady. 'He just had to.' And to do that he needed to get through the blockade of greedy townspeople the Cap'n had sent to guard the dock. Just before Cap'n Waldo had interrupted him, he had found out that Arthur Camberly was at that moment aboard a docked ship making hurried preparations to sail.

The barman watched him, fingering the coin in a ham-sized fist, letting his eyes do all his talking. The coin, which he handled with surprising dexterity, was already twice the amount he would have taken in had the tavern remained full. Will continued.

"I want to buy some grog from you. The strongest you have. ...and your services for a few hours. There'll be more gold in it for you at the end. Interested?"

“That’s all? What’s the catch? Apprentices don’t go throwing around gold like it was ships provisions. You are a apprentice, ain’t you?”

“Unfortunately, yeah. His.” The barman clearly understood the meaning behind the pronoun.

“I give you enough gold not to be asking me questions. I want you to take four casks of your strongest stuff down to the dock. About now it ought to be filled with a lot of thirsty men. Here’s another gold now, and there’ll be two more in the morning. Will grabbed the hand reaching for the gold, his eyes never leaving the others. “Deal?” he asked.

“Deal.” answered the barman.

Rising abruptly, Will crossed to the doorway without looking back. Gold tinkled behind him.

A few steps later Will paused in the alleyway outside the tavern, eyes adjusting to the darkness. He smiled at his good fortune. ‘Arthur already in Friston. Who would have believed it.’ But he had better hurry. Arthur was preparing to sail. Whistling softly to himself, he strode out of the alleyway and turned left toward the warehouse. Ducking into another alley, he took a route parallel to the unruly crowd now forming on the dock. Like a shadow, he flickered down the way, careful not to draw their attention. From the cross streets he noticed that there was another ship tied up in the harbor. When he had first gone to the warehouse there had been only three ships there, *The Barnacle* and two vessels flying the Camberly crest. He figured that the new one must have been the one that brought in Cap’n Waldo’s attackers. He smiled to himself.

As he neared the rear of the storehouse, his thoughts returned to the Lady. He couldn’t wait to tell her the good news. It would work. It had better. He tapped on a shutter and called out to her. She let him in, hinges creaking loudly. Will peered around into the darkness and climbed through, securing the shutter behind him. He failed to notice the fat sea captain and his tall, cloaked companion lurking in the shadows across the way.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

They emerged suddenly from the darkness, scurrying across the moonlit backstreet. The tall one flickered forward, a fleeting shadow of silent purpose. His much shorter, much stouter companion again proved to be the essence of unwanted attention. A cacophony of sights, sounds, and smells assaulted the senses under his command. They converged on the shuttered window so recently used by the fat man's apprentice. Waldo flailed futilely at the fast-approaching stone wall. Assaulting it with ribs and cheek, he stopped, momentum depleted with a greasy, suctioning thud. He clung on desperately.

As his face hung suspended from the wall, one eye enveloped by fleshy folds of suctioning head, the other bobbing and weaving menacingly, a long, wet lolling tongue strained at the end of an unseen leash. The lopsided, crazy-eyed stare went unnoticed by the Paladin standing a few feet away.

"Please, high holy one." Waldo whined. "Youse gonna kill me. I can't run no more. Just can't! Mercy on a fat man's soul. I gotta rest."

Waldo still hung suspended from the wall, trying his best to look defiant under the circumstances. The Paladin was examining the shutter, paying him no heed.

If nothing else Waldo was persistent. 'He was working on a plan; wasn't he always?' If the Paladin fell for it, he and Will would be far from Friston before he'd notice. Waldo pressed on. He needed to save Will or he'd never save his ship.

"Waldo Gump ain't nebber bin one to run from a fight. Ain't gonna start now. What's yer plan? We going to see him? No, M'Lord! You're not seriously planning to jist rush in there? Oooh, Lord A'mighty, Waldo be coming to..."

Owen moved. Waldo flinched.

The Paladin pressed his eye to the shutter, looking through a knothole. Waldo walked along the wall to another shutter and peered into a crack. Beyond, in the faintly torchlit room, Will sat in the hay opposite a beautiful golden haired woman. Waldo rolled

back up the wall and whistled softly to himself. 'Damn!' Will had got himself involved with the damn Red Knight. Everyone knows the Paladin has only one thing on his mind these days. That holy Hell raiser gonna burn Will's chestnuts for sure. This is going to take some fast thinking.

The Paladin disappeared around the corner, checking latches as he went. It gave the captain just enough time to put his plan into action. Tonight was going to require his best performance.

When Owen reappeared from the other direction a few minutes later, Cap'n Waldo lay on the ground writhing and thrashing. The Paladin approached warily, checking the two remaining shutters along the way. He stayed cautiously back and drew his mace.

Waldo knew that the Paladin suffered from a little bit too much religion. His only hope lay in convincing him that he was a messenger from holy places, so to speak.

He writhed and moaned on the ground, Owen circling with weapons drawn. Waldo babbled of fire, of redemption, then of fire some more. His eyes were glaring out from the nether reaches, glassy as the Baroness' jewels.

Suddenly he rolls so that his feet are on the bottom, finding the strength to stand. He glares straight ahead, eyes now blazing.

Curiosity eroding caution, Owen circled closer. Waldo could feel the hot steamy breath in his face as the warrior moved in. With all his will, he had to fight the fear boiling up inside of him. He had to save that ship!

"Fire... Fire... Fire... Fire..." he chanted, eyes blazing forward. Energy spent, he fell against the wall, bliss on his face. He dared a peek at the Paladin. 'It worked!' He rejoiced inside, careful not to let it show. The Paladin stared back at him, unable to speak. He had bought it. Every last bit of it!

After he 'recovered' Waldo feigned confusion. When the Paladin told him what had been said, he was more than happy to help him decipher the 'message'. After much hemming and hawing, he 'helped' the Paladin figure it out.

“How wise M’Lord. Raining fire down from the sky on them. Remember all those casks of oil in there! Burn them out. Your vision was so wise, holy one.”

Waldo stopped, afraid of laying it on too thick. He had what he wanted. Time enough to get Will and get the Hell out of this accursed place. ‘Wonder what Sacton is like this time of year?’ he wondered to himself.

The Paladin hurried off to gather the manpower necessary to put his vision into action. The Cap’n smiled to himself. Me and Will will be long gone before this building ever burns. He chuckled.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

Will took one last look at the Lady, secured the door behind him, and headed for the dock. Her mate had still been unconscious when he had returned, and she refused to leave without him. He certainly couldn’t lug the knight down there by himself, so he was on his way to get help from Arthur’s men. Will felt uneasy about leaving her behind, but he couldn’t quite explain why.

He rounded the corner onto the main thoroughfare, being careful to stay in the shadows. Directly ahead were four masts, two under sail. As he got closer campfires and huddled bodies could be seen at the far end. A dull, drunken roar filled his ears. Passing across the moonlit street, Will paused in the shadows of *The Barnacle*.

With a quick glance, he took it all in. Most of the gathering lay dead drunk around smoldering campfires. A noisy quarrel was still going strong around a blazing central bonfire. Pickpockets darted among the darkened outer fringes. A few fights were in evidence. Off to the side was the barkeep, rows of barrels behind him. Next to *The Barnacle* were the two Camberly ships. The furthest was darkened and empty. The adjacent one was fully rigged, a bustle of activity filling its decks. At the far end was a vessel Will had never seen before. It was fully masted and

crewmen lolled about on the decks, eating, drinking and gambling. It flew an unfamiliar crest.

“Barkeep.” Will yelled, coming upon him from behind. Startled, the older man turned to face the young apprentice. He looked at Will and then at the stack of coins he had collected for the grog he was supposed to have given away.

“Lots of risk, you know, the Baron and all.”

“Don’t worry.” Will reassured him, “...you did your job.” He reached in his purse and pulled out two gold, dropping them into the greedy barman’s open palm. Without awaiting reply, he turned on his heels and headed up the gangway, onto *The Barnacle*.

Will stood on the deck and looked about at the disarray and damage. ‘Waldo wasn’t lying.’ He eyed the unfamiliar adjacent ship and its crew with renewed suspicion. If they were aware of his arrival, they took no notice. Will was sure the Camberly crew hadn’t seen him board the ship.

He crawled across the deck and, remaining hidden, spied on Arthur’s crew. It was obvious to Will that Arthur hadn’t come on board yet. Every inch of the vessel was being cleaned and shined. The family pennants hung in ceremonial readiness. Carpets covered the gangway. He settled down to wait. It would be futile to do anything until Arthur arrived. He couldn’t rid himself of the nagging concern he felt for the Lady back at the warehouse.

He didn’t have to wait long. Trumpets sounded in the distance as six hard-riding warriors appeared on the thoroughfare. At their lead was the leather-clad Arthur. His squire, Blackwood, carried the knight’s banner, it’s white horse shimmering against the green background. All six were heavily armed, though not armored.

The rippling wave of drunken humanity parted just enough to allow the party access to their ship. Arthur climbed the gangway, then stood in the bow and waved the crowd to silence. He told them he was on his way to ValleyHo to rid the Enclave of the threat of the Unwashed. They roared. He told them he would then return to dedicate his life to saving them from the evils which afflicted them. Nothing would quiet them now. Arthur didn’t try.

He stood between the massive green pennants, smile on his face, and Blackwood at his side. With a final wave, he turned on his heel and disappeared into the hold below. Blackwood paused, then followed. The crowd just cheered and cheered.

Will elbowed his way to the foot of the gangway and hailed a sentry, requesting permission to come aboard. He had to scream to be heard above the now delirious crowd. Showing that he was unarmed, the sentry motioned him up the gangway. He was immediately surrounded by four heavily-armed seaman. Will spoke with their leader who told him to wait while he went below to talk to his Lord.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

The view from the rooftop was breathtaking. Peaks, chimneys, and spires glistened in all directions. An occasional fire glinted with orange warmth against a cold background of moonlit blue. The angular blackened shadows of Frismont Castle loomed menacingly on the western horizon. It was balanced by the tall masts of the four ships in the harbor a few hundred yards east. Behind them, the bay snaked its way north, connecting Friston to the Great Western Ocean and the mouth of the Sacton River.

'Why was the Camberly ship under full sail this late at night?' wondered Waldo. Men could be seen scurrying about on its deck.

Without looking down, he reached out and pulled the barrel to the roof. Untying the rope, he lowered it again, stepping back from the edge.

Owen had returned with a score of commandeered townspeople, each rolling a hogshead of oil. With the help of a few strong backs and the storehouse's grain hoist Owen had gone up to the roof. Upon his return he told Waldo that both the knight and the Lady were inside. He assured the sniveling Captain that the roof was solidly beamed and would support both his bulk and that of the barrels. There wasn't a whine, wheedle, or snivel Waldo didn't try, but the Paladin could not be deterred. Since the

'divine inspiration' had come through him, Owen felt it only right that he get the glory of doing the job. It had taken the grain hoist and Owen's charger to raise the obese seaman to the roof. The whole trip Waldo prayed to the god of rope. Now here he was, stuck on the roof, moon and stars above.

Waldo reached out and pulled in the ninth barrel. Again he dared not look down. Eight barrels were already positioned around a gaping hole in the center of the roof. The rope harness he had tightened about them would, with one solid tug send ten barrels of flaming oil through the hole into the hay below. He lowered the rope for the last of the barrels and stepped back.

With great effort, he rolled the casket to the gaps encircling the hole, returning in time to haul in the tenth and final barrel. With them all in position, he carefully rigged the harness which would deliver fiery death into the hay below. He removed the corks and stuffed long woolen wicks into the darkened oil of each barrel. The acrid smell assaulted his senses, replacing the warm salty breeze of the sea.

He chuckled to himself. 'Some poured fool was going to lose a warehouse, the whole damn port might burned down. So what?' He had to save *The Barnacle*. He had to find Will and get out of this accursed place. He had seen his apprentice leave for the docks as Owen and was rounding up the townspeople. At least the other two were still inside. He had seen them through the shutter. 'Who knows what the Paladin would have done to him if they had escaped.'

She had been sitting in the hay below when Waldo positioned the last of the barrels around the hole and threaded the pull-rope through the grain hoist and lowered it to the ground. She was gone from there now, but she didn't leave the building either, that's for sure.

Below him the townsmen hurried about under the mounted scrutiny of Owen Camberly. Carts were positioned to block all the doors except the one fronting the alley. Hay was heaped inside each and piled liberally under each window. The remaining casks of oil were used to liberally soak the hay-strewn perimeter. Try as

he might the Cap'n just couldn't get Owen's attention. He was beginning to worry about getting off the roof. 'Maybe he wasn't supposed to get off!' His yelling became more frantic. 'How could he save that damn boat if he burned up?' Waldo caught his breath and shook his head in despair.

He screamed at the townspeople, but they just looked at him like he was crazy. Owen had gotten an arrow from one of the men-at-arms and was affixing an oily rag to it. The townsmen were pulling on the rope attached to the barrels on the roof. Waldo turned just in time to see the barrels disappear through the roof. Owen fired the now-flaming arrow through a slit in one of the shutters. Waldo turned back, lost his footing and tottered on the edge of a three-story predicament. The air shimmered all around as the perimeter caught fire. Heat blazed forth through the roof opening. Waldo rushed around, frantically searching for Owen on the ground below.

The Paladin emerged suddenly from the burning building. He darted across the moonlit alley into the darkened shadows of the stable opposite. Slung over his shoulder was the limp form of the scantily-clad girl.

Owen placed her gently in the hay and knelt over her. A cross was flashed and incantations were mumbled. Waldo stepped back from the edge, careful to avoid being seen, yet mesmerized by the scene unfolding below.

Owen gently held her hand, his crucifix clutched to his heart. His lips mumbled and her eyes opened. Waldo was sure he had seen a resurrection. Even he had felt the power Owen poured forth. He felt it physically. Emotionally. Spiritually. It seared through him with an intensity he had never known.

"God's Will be mine!" reverberated up the alley. The Paladin clutched the crucifix and shook it at the heavens. "Thou hast given thee thine power. And in Thy name it shall be used!"

He knelt before the girl, his breastplate alive with the dancing flames of Hell. A quick swipe left atatter the remnants of her velvet gown. Gazing down upon her, he remained motionless

for what seemed like minutes. The girl showed no sign of life. He descended upon her.

“Lord have mercy.” inhaled Waldo as Owen took from her the most cherished of gifts. He crept back from the edge, his ears assaulted by agonizing, high-pitched screams. Then they were gone, replaced by an orgasmic incantation of the Lord’s Prayer. Then all was quiet in the alley below.

Only now did he become aware of the building which was burning fiercely all around him. Frantically he tried to find a way down. The townspeople were long gone. The grain hoist was engulfed in flames, along with most of that side of the roof. Waldo wailed. He got no response. Flames had backed him into the corner, licking at the distant outer perimeter of his rotund middle. His last thoughts were of saving *The Barnacle*. He plummeted over the side, landing on his throbbing hand.

The Cap’n lay face-up on the thoroughfare fronting the storehouse. Everything hurt. Above him, flames reached out to consume the wooden cross beam from which hung the storehouse’s swinging sign. As if to add insult to injury, it plummeted down, striking the sprawled sea captain with a flat-sided wallop. He winced and stirred. He had survived again. He had to save that damn boat. He painfully rolled over. His eyes cleared but it took a moment to register. The sign before him held his own crest. He had burned down his own storehouse! He let forth and agonizing wail.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

-----Chapter Two-----
-----INTRODUCTIONS-----

Will knelt weeping in the straw of the stable, oblivious to the cinders which flickered like fireflies in the acrid black smoke swirling around him. A tear splashed into the lifeless eyes of the red-clad Lady lying in the straw before him. Choking back a sob, he weakly cried out for help he knew would not be coming. Then he reached down, cradled her head in his arm, and brought her up to a sitting position.

With his free hand he reached for a dipper of water from the trough and brought it to her lips. She sputtered, choked it down, and clutched at his arm. Then it passed and she was as lifeless as before, her eyes staring through him to some unseen Hell.

Will picked at the straw peeking from among her blonde ringlets. Then, with a sleeve, he attempted to wipe away the soot-filled tears which streaked her face. Reaching across for more water, his arm brushed her naked, heaving bosom. Embarrassed by the feelings that stirred within him, he did his best to rearrange the few remaining tatters of her velvet bodice. His heart ached for the purpled-yellow bruises there, throbbing blackly in the firelight from the burning warehouse behind them.

He held her and rocked gently back and forth, his face buried in her hair. His gaze was drawn to her long sinewy legs, ending in small bare feet, then to the blackened firelit pool flowing between them. Captured by the movement, his eyes retraced it to its source, the bloody offal oozing from between her bruised, blood-stained thighs.

He flinched. She was losing a lot of blood and Will didn't have to be a doctor to know she needed help, and she needed it soon.

Will stood and removed his cloak. He gently swaddled her in it and helped her to her feet. The spell having been broken, he turned around in search of a cart, noticing for the first time that the fire had spread to the far side of the stable.

He headed for the door. She wasn't much help but she didn't resist either. Will put his arm around her, eliciting a moan as he held her up, a hand along the soft underside of her bruised breast. Holding on to Will for support, she limped through the front door of the stable and was led across the street. Will set her down against the stone wall, upwind from the oily smoke now pouring from both the warehouse and the stable.

Racing back across the street, Will plunged through the front door of Waldo's warehouse, but was immediately stopped by a wall of flame. The corner where he had left the fallen knight no longer existed, having caved in upon itself from the flames. The armor which he had expended so much energy securing in the upper loft was lost somewhere in the middle of the collapsing inferno. The building was a complete loss.

Choking on the oily smoke, Will back through the doorway into the street. Running next door to the now fully engulfed stable, Will spied a handcart in the alley between.

Dipping his shirt in a nearby horse trough, he threw it over his head, and braved the cinder-swirling, smoky Hell of the alleyway. Grabbing the hot-to-the-touch cart, he headed for the mouth of the alley just as the warehouse wall started collapsing around him. Stopping at the trough, he wet down both himself and the cart before hurrying back across the street.

Will knelt down. He avoided her eyes but she knew. He lifted her gently and placed her in the cart. As he pulled her down the street, fire at their backs, he could hear her softly sobbing. Picking up speed, Will whistled softly to himself.

Turning onto the main thoroughfare leading to the docks, he could see, at the end of the street, the flickering remains of the drunken revelry he'd helped instigate. It was quiet, but wouldn't stay that way when he crossed the quay and started yelling.

He looked up at the moon. It had taken longer than he thought it would. With a quick glance back at the orange glow in the sky, he entered the quay yelling: "Fire! Fire!"

As the townspeople sprang into action around him, Will set the cart down and sagged to the ground. He looked back at the

Lady now curled up in the it's bottom. Then ahead at the sail of Arthur's ship, which had left without him and was casting moonlit ripples behind it as it sailed out of the harbor.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

The sentry atop the closed gate of Frismont Castle was losing his patience.

"Go away. Come back in the morning." he yelled down at the motley trio staring up at him. "I don't care what you bin told. Edmund Camberly ain't here. And he ain't the one who's in charge of this damn gate. I am! Now git out of here and come back in the morning."

The sentry looked uneasily over his shoulder, back towards the Baron's quarters and the comings and goings that were not normal for this time of night. When he turned back and looked down to give the three interruptions of his nap one final piece of his mind, he was surprised to see that they were already hurrying back down the hill. The one who had spoken to him, the one in the long fur coat, was limping away as fast as he could, the other two protectively flanking him.

Just as the sentry was about to congratulate himself on his good fortune and settle back into his nap, his eye caught a flicker in the distance. The docks were on fire! It was going to be a long night. He raced off to raise the alarm.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

Waldo screeched as the Doc pulled on his dislocated fingers. "Not as bad as it first looked, my ass." he thought as the healer reached for another purple, crooked finger. Waldo took another big slug from the jug he cradled in his other arm. Then he screamed again.

By the time they were done, Waldo was more than a little drunk, but the waves of pain marching up his arm seemed to be subsiding. He tried to stand, but that wasn't going to happen just

yet, so he plopped back down, dizzy and nauseous from the combination of pain and jug.

The Doc had already treated the other cuts and bruises resulting from Waldo's fall off the roof. Now he was scrambling around, filling his medical bag, preparing to head out into the firelit night outside his windows.

Even in here, Waldo's nostrils burned from the smoke. Through watery eyes he could see through the windows to a street lit bright as day from the fire raging just down the way, a street filled with devilish orange-lit faces hurrying toward the fire, cries of alarm on their lips.

With assistance from the Doc he was finally able to stand on wobbly legs. They went through the front door, the Doc turning towards the fire, Waldo away from it.

"Let the whole damn town burned down." muttered Waldo as he pushed against the sea of humanity racing to put out the fire. He had already lost his storehouse. What did he care? His only concern was getting back down to the dock and getting *The 'nesses Revenge* under sail.

Waldo approached the quay cautiously. He could see that the crazy cripple's ship was still tied up alongside his, and that was a trio he had no intention of running into again. Peering out from the shadows, his eyes roamed a now nearly-deserted dockside. A few small campfires smoldered among the discarded tankards and the other garbage left by the revelers. A few drunks lay sprawled about. In the shadows at the far end, Waldo saw a pushcart. To his left, the greedy tavern keeper was packing up his remaining wares.

Seizing the initiative, Waldo strode up behind the barkeep and cuffed him on the ear with his good hand. When he went sprawling, Waldo placed a big, dirty boot in the middle of the barman's chest. Waldo growled, hawked up a big one, and spat right in the little man's face.

"Have yous seen that damn 'prentice o' mine?" he spat out, the pressure on the other man's chest increasing as he moved his face down closer to the prone man.

“Not... Not... Not since he left my alehouse.” lied the fallen man, eyes darting to the money bag which had fallen under the table.

Waldo followed his gaze, eyes lighting up with greed at the site of the moneybag. The barkeep let out an “ooof!”, his chest nearly crushed as Waldo leaned over to snatch it up. With a jingle, he poured it out on the table, scooped up the coins, and disappeared them into his pocket.

When the barkeep’s lips fluttered in the beginnings of a protest, Waldo turned back on him with a snarl.

“Don’t test me asshole.” He ground his foot into the other’s chest, pushing it forward until the other’s teeth clacked together.

“Youse kin git this gol back.” he said, tinkling the contents of his pocket. With the toe of his boot he pushed the barman’s jaw until he is staring at the three ships lined up across the quay.

“Helps me git *The ‘nesses Revenge* unnerway ‘n’ we kin pertend we nebber met. Howzat fer a deal?” he spat again, splashing up dirt at the tip of the others nose.

Waldo removed his foot from the middle of the other man’s chest and stood straddling him, arms akimbo. Bending at the waist, he leaned down, as far as he could and sputtered, “Deal?” Gasping for air the other nodded acceptance.

Without looking back, Waldo turned and strode off towards *The ‘nesses Revenge*. Still shaken, the barman stood up and followed his gold.

Halfway there, Waldo spied movement aboard *The ‘nesses Revenge*. He quickened his pace. ‘To Hell with the bar keep.’ That gold had Waldo’s name on it now. After beating Will to within an inch of his life, that last inch was going to help him get *The ‘nesses Revenge* out of here before the whole damn town burned down.

Waldo was jiggling at full speed as he charged up the gangplank to confront his apprentice. One huge paw was raised to strike as the kneeling figure stood up and turned around. Waldo stopped in his tracks.

“Welcome aboard Cap’n Waldo.” said the tall cloaked figure.
 “Come. We have much to do.”

Waldo nearly cried as Brother Owen brushed past and beckoned him to follow down the gangway. He looked longingly at Arthur’s ship sailing out of sight and apprehensively at a port glowing more orange by the moment. With heavy footsteps, he followed the Paladin back down the gangway.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

‘That was a close one.’ thought Will as he peered out from behind the pushcart at the retreating back of Owen Camberly, Cap’n Waldo in tow. He had been just about to ascend the gangplank, the Red Knight’s Lady in his arms, when Owen boomed for Waldo to follow him down it. Will virtually threw the Lady back into the cart, then dove behind it just before the two of them appeared at the top of the gangway.

As Waldo and the Paladin disappeared into the shadows, Will returned his attention to the Lady. Lifting her gently from the cart, he carried her over to one of the still-lit campfires dotting the dockside. He made her comfortable and threw some more wood on the fire.

Arthur’s ship had disappeared into the mists out on the bay. The Doc, along with the rest of the townspeople, would be fighting the fire. Will looked frantically around. If he didn’t find help for her soon, she was going to die. When he’d lifted her out of the cart, her blood had soaked the front of his shirt.

Making her as comfortable as he could, Will ran off in search of help. Two blocks back from the dock, he banged on the door of a midwife, but got no answer. He considered heading over towards where they were fighting the fire, but feared he wouldn’t find anyone who could help, and if he could, he’d never be able to convince them to return to the docks with him. As he stood there, torn by indecision, one eye on the docks, the other on the fire, a voice called to him from the shadows.

“Hey, you... Crazyboy... How come you ain’t heppin fight the fire?”

Will turned in the direction of the voice, but couldn’t locate its source in the dimness.

“Down here.” she said, directing Will’s gaze. “Macy’s my name. Pleased to make yer ‘quaintence.”

Will followed the voice, looking down upon a skinny, dark-haired, little thing with too much face paint and not enough clothes. She was sitting on the ground, leaning up against the midwife’s firewood box. One tiny breast peeked out from what was once a fine dress. One thin leg was hiked up in a leave-nothing-to-the-imagination sort of way.

“Wanna do me?” she giggled.

“I don’t wanna *do you*.” Will barked back, turning on his heel and striding back toward the dock. With the persistence of youth she jumped up and followed.

“Kin I have some money. I’m hungry.” she asked, skipping along beside him. Will ignored her babbling and increased his pace. It was only when he knelt down next to the now unconscious Lady that she finally shut up.

Will reached down and brushed the blond curls out of the Lady’s eyes. He placed a hand on her forehead. She was burning up. He loosened the cloak she was swaddled in, eliciting a gasp from Macy when her bruised breasts were exposed to the firelight.

“It’s Sara.” whispered the young girl reverently.

Will jerked his head around to find himself face-to-face with Macy’s tiny chest.

“Cover yourself up girl.” he growled, pulling the girl’s dress closed. Before he could begin asking questions, the young girl was babbling again.

Energized by the hope she seemed to offer, Will gathered up the unconscious beauty and placed her back in the pushcart. He followed in the young girls wake as she headed for a side street, pushing the cart as fast as it would go.

As he was about to leave the quay, he heard a clatter of horsemen behind him. Looking back over his shoulder, he saw a group of riders flying the Camberly banner enter the dockside and head for the lone Camberly ship remaining tied up there.

Will followed Macy down the street, in a direction away from the fire, which now seem to be consuming and great swath of the southern end of the dock area. She seemed to know where she was going. She beckoned him to go faster.

When Macy turned off into a narrow alleyway, Will had to abandon the cart. Cradling the limp form of Sara in his arms, he headed down the alley toward an open door with light spilling from it. Macy appeared to be in heated discussion with someone on the other side of the threshold.

As Will approached, they cleared a path for him to enter. He wasn't prepared for what greeted him just inside the door. From a dark and dirty alley he had entered a bright chandelier-lit room, filled with sofas and plants and mirrors. Thick carpets covered the floors. Rich tapestries hung from the walls.

The room was seemingly filled with eyes, all silent, staring in his direction. Will just stood there dumbstruck, holding the unconscious blond beauty in his arms. Staring back at him were women of every age, shape, size, and color. There were petite Asian girls with shiny black hair and powdered nipples. There were big blondes in pigtails, dark-haired beauties draped in silk and satin, and a tiny little redhead draped in nothing at all.

Will looked down at the limp form in his arms, then at the tiny form of Macy tugging at his elbow. He allowed himself to be led to a sofa, which emptied as he approached. He gently placed his burden down, and turned to face the heavy-set, bejeweled Madam who had stood aside to allow him entry. Bangled arm around Will's shoulders, she led him away from Sara, towards the bar. A drink was waiting and Will downed it in one swallow, then choked half of it back up, spewing it all over the place. The Madam pounded him on his back until his breathing, if not his eyes, returned to normal.

Feeling his pain, Macy's sidled up and lay her head on his shoulder. Big brown eyes repeated her offer of earlier in the evening, but for different reasons. She reached out and clasped his huge hand in her tiny one, giving it a sympathetic squeeze. He squeezed back.

"Don't worry son." said the Madam, more gently than Will would have thought possible. "We know a thing or two about her kind of injuries in a place like this."

When Will looked back towards the sofa, Sara was gone. Before he could protest, the Madam shushed him with a finger to the lips.

"She's upstairs and she's in good hands. Come back to my office." she said, steering Will through the sea of ogling, half-naked girls, Macy following in their wake. "I've got a proposition for you."

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

The bells of Frismont Cathedral were pealing the alarm before the cripple and his companions were halfway back down the hill. Below them, the fire raged out of control, the scent of smoke carried on the wind.

Out in the bay, an orange flickering wake trailed a Camberly ship already halfway to the horizon. The three ships still in dock glowed orange from the nearby fire. Off to the left, the tall, white tower atop Signal Fire Hill danced in the moonlight, a canvas for the intermittent orange flickers from the rapidly spreading fire in the valley below it.

Even as they watched from their vantage point high on the hill, the sails of the second Camberly ship were unfurled. Seaman could be seen scurrying about the deck, hoisting anchors and preparing to cast off.

"Edmund!" yelled Hawkins, gathering up his ermine cloak and urging his party downward. "We must catch him before he sails."

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

Waldo trudged up the hill, muttering at the back of the long striding Paladin. ‘How did he ever get a hooked up with this holier-than-thou nutbag?’ A few hours ago life was good: He was basking in the sun aboard his ship. He had a nice little business, a dog of an apprentice, and all the grog he could pour down his throat. His hand wasn’t all purple and painful.

Now? His ship was in danger, his warehouse burnt down, and Will was God knows where. His hand hurt like Hell and he was beginning to feel the hangover effects of the jug he had downed at the Doc’s.

It had been a bad day for the Cap’n, “All because of that crippled bastard and his search for that asshole, Edmund Camberly.” he muttered.

His mind raced. He had to regain control of the situation, but that wasn’t going to be possible until he got away from the crazy man he now trudged after.

Waldo was so caught up in his misery that he failed to notice the ermine-clad cripple and his two companions as they hurried past him headed in the opposite direction. ...headed for the docks. Waldo started wheezing as he turned the corner to trudge up Signal fire Hill after the Paladin.

At the top, Owen went over to the cliff and stared down at the beach, waiting for the corpulent sea captain to finish huffing and puffing his way up the hill.

“What do you know of the Red Knight?” asked Owen, hands clasped in front of him, glazed-over eyes staring down at the beach below.

Waldo wasn’t sure what to say. Everyone in the Barony knew of the Red Knight, and most of the common people considered him a hero. But the Cap’n didn’t think it would be too wise to voice those sentiments to this particular fanatic atop this particular cliff. ‘Oh, no. Waldo knows better’n dat.’ He decided to play it safe.

"I knows he's dead, M'Lord. Burned up in dat warehouse back dere." winced Waldo. "Good riddance, I sez. ...nuttin' but trouble."

Owen reeled his eyes back in and cast them in Waldo's direction. Waldo winced again. Owen smiled.

"You lie well, fat man. Obviously, you've had lots of practice." Owen took a look down at the beach, made a growling sound, and lunged suddenly toward Waldo, who flinched, cried out, and wet himself.

Owen stopped, laughing out loud for the first time since Waldo had met him.

"I like you, fat man. You make me laugh." he chuckled. "I won't throw you off the cliff. Promise." He winked, turned on his heel, and strode off toward the tower. Waldo glanced down uneasily at the beach and followed on shaky legs, digging at his soiled butt.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

"Kin I? Kin I?" squealed Macy as Will sat staring dumbfounded at the fat Madam sitting across the table from him. He didn't even protest when the exuberant young girl launched herself from across the room, landing in his lap light as a whisper.

"Kin I? Kin I?" she repeated. Ignoring her, Will's attention stayed focused across the table.

"You want me to WHAT!" he managed to eke out. The Madam just smiled at the rhetorical question. The offer was on the table. Her repeating it wouldn't make it any easier for Will to process. He was going to say yes. But it would take time.

Will heard the door open behind him, accompanied by a whiff of perfume. The scent grew stronger as the little Asian girl he had seen upon entering appeared over his shoulder, carrying a tray of meats, cheeses, and bread. Will was certain that she intentionally brushed his cheek with her small, powdered breast as she leaned over to set the tray on the table. That, combined with the bouncing Macy in his lap, caused a reaction that made Will

shift uncomfortably in his seat. Macy wiggled knowingly and snuggled closer. “Kin I?” she whispered in his ear.

Will was flustered into silence but he knew he couldn’t say no. He was being played: If not by the fidgeting Macy, then certainly by the shoulder-massaging Asian girl rubbing her pubes into the back of his head. The Madam smiled knowingly at him as she dipped a ring-encrusted paw into the goodies on the table before them.

“Why me?” Will asked. “Who else?” replied the munching Madam. He shook his head knowingly. Macy wiggled around to face the table and began feeding her face with both hands. The Asian girl ground harder. Will whispered: “Alright... I’ll do it.”

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

Waldo lay at the base of the tall white tower, having collapsed there when Brother Owen disappeared inside. He’d been tempted to turn right around, head for *The Baroness’ Revenge*, and get far, far, away. But something about the look in the Paladin’s eye told him that might not be the smartest of ideas.

Waldo sighed as he looked down upon most of his net wealth going up in flames. The fire that had consumed his warehouse seemed intent on burning down most of the south end of town. It burned bright enough to see both Camberly ships out on the water, but was spreading away from the dock so *The ‘nesses Revenge* and the cripple’s ship seemed safe for now.

Off to his right, atop Noble Hill, the Baron’s compound was framed by Frismont Castle to the east and the Cathedral to the west. The whole compound was lit up and the Cap’n could sense, more than see, the activity there. Obviously his wasn’t the only tale to be told in Friston this night.

The Cap’n lay back and stared up at the Tower disappearing into the fog above. The signal fire alight at the top of it played off the fog swirling below. It was the tallest structure in the Barony and pre-dated the Dark Times. For as long as anyone could remember, it had served as the chapter house for the

Brotherhood of the Flame, an order of fighting monks who served the Barony and tended the signal fire at it's top.

Just as Waldo was drifting off to sleep, Owen re-appeared in the doorway lugging two big packs. With a strength that nearly pulled the Cap'n's arm out of its socket, the Paladin jerked the fat man to his feet.

"C'mon," he said, throwing a pack at Waldo and heading off down the hill in the opposite direction. "I have a Lady to see."

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

"You're a dreamer, Callie." said the maidservant to the budding beauty dancing barefoot and naked in front of the fire. Having just climbed from her bath, she was spraying water in all directions, her long red hair twirling around her.

She laughed, skipping away from the big fluffy towel the other girl was trying to tame her with.

"...am not!" she shrieked, ducking low and leaving the other grasping at air. "I just know what I want is all. And I don't want Owen Camberly. That's that. I don't care what father says. I don't care what the Deacon says. Maybe I'll run off and marry the Red Knight. That'll teach 'em!"

She shrieked again as the maidservant had her temporarily in her grasp.

"Here, give me that towel." she said. "I'm dry now. Let me do my hair."

Callie took the towel and went to stand in front of the fire while toweling off her flaming red tresses. She liked the feel of the fire on her bare, damp skin. Wrapping the towel around her head, she ran her hands over her body. She rubbed the dampness from her flame-warmed backside, then turned around to face the fire. She looked down between her perky breasts to ten perfect little toes wiggling on the warm hearth. She reached down to rub dampness from the bush of flaming red hair glowing in the firelight.

Callie was beautiful and she knew it. She wasn't consumed by it but she knew it nonetheless. It wasn't a beauty that went skin

deep. It was a beauty that went to the very core of her being. She woke up every morning and attacked life with a joy and passion that showed in her every movement, gesture, and expression.

“How dare they think I am going to marry that awful Owen Camberly. I’ll kill myself first. I will.” She stuck her chin out and dared her maidservant to disbelieve her.

“I will!” she shrieked and started dancing around the room again. A clatter from outside the window caught her attention and she pranced over to inspect. From her window high up in Frismont Castle, she could see down Sacton Road into the heart of Friston. When she neared the window, she stopped prancing and brought her hand up to her mouth.

The whole of Friston harbor was ablaze. The entire south end of town was burning, burning so bright that the tower atop Signal Fire Hill to the left glowed orange. As did every ripple on the water. The Castle’s bells tolled.

Standing there, framed naked in the window, she looked down to see that she too was glowing orange in the firelight. She felt a tingling between her legs and her nipples began to harden. She reached down to touch herself. That’s when she noticed a commotion in the courtyard below. ...and the face of Owen Camberly staring up at her mouth agape. She stuck her tongue out at him and tugged the drapes closed.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

“I can’t believe I’m doing this. I can’t believe I’m doing this.” Will chanted to himself like a mantra. ‘How did he ever get talked into this craziness?’ He looked out past the mess that was the quay to a horizon that was on fire. Kneeling down, he secured yet another box of provisions to the deck.

He glanced worryingly over his shoulder in the direction he’d seen Cap’n Waldo disappear with the Paladin an hour or so earlier. He had to hurry if he was going to get out of the harbor before Waldo returned. Later, he could tell the Cap’n he had only

done it to save *The 'nesses Revenge*. Waldo wouldn't believe him but that would be a fight for another day.

Halfway across the quay he saw a pile of provisions hurtling toward him, propelled forward by Macy's skinny little legs pumping from beneath. "Kin I? Kin I?" he mocked under his breath. 'How could he have ever agreed to take her along?' Admittedly, he couldn't sail *The 'nesses Revenge* by himself and what she lacked in size she made up for in energy. Will smiled to himself. Her enthusiasm was contagious.

Will's reverie was broken by the slapping of her little feet as they padded up the gangway. She was babbling away from behind the pile in her arms, but Will couldn't understand a word she was saying. She plopped everything down on the deck and continued without missing a beat.

"I nebber been across the bay. Kin you believe I nebber even bin outta Friston? Not once. Not ever. Can you believe it? Now I git to go with you!" She'd looked longingly at him, babbling as though she would burst.

When Will leaned over to tie down the boxes she'd brought on board, Macy ran up to him and planted a big sloppy kiss on his cheek.

"Thank you. Thank you. Thank you." she squealed. Lowering her voice, she whispered in his ear.

"D'you think Sara will git better? The Madam helped me when I had..." she cleared her throat, "... women's stuff. She did." When she lifted her skirt to show him, Will 'tsk'ed' her and turned away.

"What am I gonna do with you?" he said with false severity. "Always shakin' yer skinny little butt in my face. ...or on my lap."

After securing the last of the boxes, he turned back to a now pouting Macy, standing there, dress hanging open, jaw thrust forward, hands on her boyish hips.

"Sure you don't wanna do me?" she challenged with a wiggle. When Will grabbed for her, she took off squealing for the front of the boat, bare butt pumping in the moonlight. Will

cornered her in the bow, grabbed her by the arms, and lifted her up until she was eye-to-eye with him.

"You have to stop throwing yourself at me if we're going to be of any help to Sara." She giggled and wiggled her little chest at him. When her toes started at his knees walking northward, Will knew he'd lost control of the situation. With a mighty heave, he threw her overboard into the bay.

Sputtering, she rose to the surface and cast a scowl in Will's direction. His laugh turned it into a coltish pout.

"Ain't you gonna pull me out... Crazyboy?"

Will grabbed a rope, threw it to her, and reeled her in. He knelt in front of the dripping girl, helped her out of the dress three sizes too big for her, and threw a big towel around her shoulders. He wiped off her running face paint. Big brown eyes stared soulfully back at him from behind dark, dripping bangs.

"Don't you like me?" she whispered, oblivious to the conflicting emotions her nubile young body stirred in him. As she stood there shivering, Will wrapped the towel about her, and engulfed her in his big arms.

"Of course I do." he said, and she sobbed into his shoulder.

"I like you." she said in his ear. "You make me feel safe."

Standing up, Will put his arm around her and headed for the hold below.

"C'mon let's get you some proper Seamen's clothes. We've got to get outta here before the Cap'n gets back."

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

By the time he strode up the gangway of the *Caliezonnia*, his leg was screaming at him. Hawkins took off his ermine cloak, threw it at his second mate, and hurried forward to the helm.

"Get this damn boat underway!" he bellowed. "Edmund is headed for Benton. If we catch the head wind off Pelican Island, we should be able to make up for his headstart. Move it! Move it! Move it!"

He stared east into the mists of the bay, oblivious to the bustle of activity behind him. The first signs of dawn appeared on the horizon, countering the cinder-filled, flame-lit mess still filling the western sky.

Squinting into the fog, Hawkins knew he wouldn't be able to make out either Camberly ship. Off to starboard he could see the fat, whiny sea captain's ship pulling out of its berth. The Captain was nowhere in sight. ...probably below decks drunked up. Hawkins shook his head. The second he turned away, the other ship lurched into his, knocking Hawkins to the deck with a howl. As he went down, a screaming form at the end of a rope flew through the air, missing his head by inches. He sat up and let loose with a string of invective aimed at the back of the tall Seaman manning the other ship's helm. He ducked again as the flying form made one more screaming arc past his head.

Then the other ship was away into the harbor. Hawkins could see it was called *The 'nesses Revenge*. As he watched, the sailor who had flown past his head got the rope and sail under control, tying it back down. As he screamed and shook his fist, he was greeted with a bare butt wiggling back at him in the firelight, accompanied by a screeching string of obscenities every bit as colorful as his own. Then *The 'nesses Revenge* was past them, out into the harbor.

Hawkins sat there speechless, rubbing his sore leg. He looked up at a tap on the shoulder.

"Are you all right? What was that, Da?" Hawkins had to admit he didn't really know.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

Waldo pointed, sputtering, but no words came out. He tugged at the sleeve of the Paladin who stood next to him, looking up, mouth hanging open. Waldo followed his gaze to the second floor of the Castle, just in time to see the drapes flutter closed. He tugged at Owen's sleeve again.

"I'll k-k-k-kill 'im." he fumed, body sagging as he watched *The 'nesses Revenge* pull away from its berth and head for open water. Something had gotten into that boy, and as far as Waldo was concerned, it wasn't a good something. But he never imagined that the dreamy-eyed apprentice would have had the stones to steal *The 'nesses Revenge*. It had been a bad night.

Now, the first rays of dawn were peeking over the hills that lined the east side of the fog-enshrouded bay. Friston was still ablaze and the fire wasn't showing any signs of abating. *The 'nesses Revenge* was under sail, headed north.

"C'mon," said Owen as he headed across the courtyard in the direction of the stables. "If we're going to have any chance of catching Arthur, we've got to hurry. Daylight is wasting."

The Cap'n looked over his shoulder at the fog-enshrouded *Baroness' Revenge*, then at the back of the retreating Paladin. With a last curious look up at the curtained window, he shrugged resignedly and followed. He wasn't looking forward to telling Brother Owen that their means of pursuit was at that moment sailing out of the harbor. .

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

Drapes still rustling, Callie jumped over the bed and raced to the far side of the room. Through a second window she peeked again into the courtyard below.

"Annie," she called softly to her maidservant. "It's him. It's that awful Owen Camberly and he's down in the courtyard. He's with some fat guy. Now they're headed for the stables.

"I won't see him. I won't! I won't! I won't!"

"You won't what?" came an imperious voice from the doorway. Callie's whole being sagged, the light in her eyes extinguished. Her mother was the rain on Callie's parade.

The Baroness stood haughtily in the doorway as Callie slapped her way back across to the hearth where Annie waited, curtsying, head bowed. Callie's mother was a tall woman with severe features. One look and it was obvious where Callie got her

beauty, if not her outlook on life. Whereas Callie's eyes twinkled, her mother's smoldered. Callie's thin lips curled up at the ends, her mother's: down. Callie's energy was that of a forest pixie. The Baroness was a force of nature. Callie's red hair cascaded freely, throwing off sunbeams. The Baroness' was piled high atop her head, absorbing all light.

Nose in the air, the Baroness swept into the room, pushed Annie aside, and warmed her hands by the fire. The room darkened and a chill swept over Callie's still unclad body. Annie tried to make herself as small as possible.

Callie's mother turned, rubbing her hands together, a smile forming on her lips.

"Never mind," she said dismissively. "Your days of 'won't' are coming to an end. Now quit shivering and get some clothes on. Breakfast is almost ready." With that she headed for the door, turning back once more.

"By the way, your father died last night. Now get dressed." With that, she turned on her heel and was gone as suddenly as she'd appeared.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

As they entered the stables, Waldo was going over his options when it came to telling Owen that he no longer had a boat. He trailed the Paladin as they passed the forge and entered what looked like an armory. All around them were the weapons of war: armor, swords, and shields. Bows, maces, and chainmail.

Owen waded in and started throwing stuff the Cap'n's way.

"Put it on," he said. "We're headed north and who knows what we might find there."

When he was done, Waldo stood there in a chainmail shirt and visored helm. He held a small wooden shield and mace. He felt ridiculous. He was a lover, not a fighter. He had given up his fighting days about 200 pounds ago.

Just as he was working up the courage to tell Owen about the boat, the Paladin brought it up himself.

“Since your boat has sailed itself out of the harbor, we’re obviously not going to get to Benton that way. I’ve sent some men ahead to prepare the iron wagon.”

Waldo nearly soiled himself again. His lips moved but no sound came out. He’d once seen an iron wagon from a distance, but he’d never been near one, much less ridden in one. ‘God help me.’

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

As her mother disappeared through the doorway, Callie collapsed sobbing into Annie’s lap. The two girls had grown up together, Annie having been accepted as a lady-in-waiting when they were both small girls. The daughter of a lesser noble from over by the Inland Sea, Annie now felt that Callie’s family was more hers than her own. They would both miss the Baron. ... and his protection. One visit from the Baroness made that rather obvious.

As she cradled the sobbing Callie to her breast, she pushed aside her own emotions, deferring yet again to her charge, her friend, her sister in everything but blood. But then again, in many ways, wasn’t that her job? Callie had always been the mercurial one. Annie complemented her well.

As she watched Callie’s tears splash onto the warm, firelit hearth, Annie thought back on all they had shared over the years, both good and bad. Everything would change now. The Baroness had never much liked her. Too independent. Too intelligent. Too fiercely loyal to Callie. And Beck. ‘Aaah, poor Beck.’ If anyone was going to have it rougher than she and Callie in the coming days, it was undoubtedly going to be Beck Friston.

‘Oh, yeah,’ thought Annie. ‘...interesting times were coming to Frismont Castle.’ She held Callie closer.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

Waldo stumbled along the darkened passage, encumbered by the armor the Paladin had forced upon him. Up ahead, Owen's torch cast an oily black smoke back at him every time it brushed the low-lying ceiling. Waldo coughed.

They had been descending for the better part of an hour, ever since they had entered the hidden door deep in the bowels of Frismont Castle. It predated the Dark Times. That was obvious. The Cap'n shuddered to think of how many lives it cost to build.

Up ahead he could see Owen's torch start to descend yet another staircase. By the Cap'n's reckoning they must be halfway to Hell by now. He crossed himself. A bloody iron wagon! Down here? No good was going to come of this. No good at all.

When he got to the top of the stairs, Owen was already far below him. Mildew assaulted his nostrils and Waldo could hear dripping in the distance. He gingerly probed for the first step and started down after the Paladin.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

Callie composed herself, gave Annie a thankful peck on the cheek, and stood, offering her hand. "Come. Let's get ready. It's going to be a long day."

Annie stood and went over to the wardrobe to exchange Callie's outfit for one more suited to the solemnity of the coming day. When she returned, Callie was again warming her backside to the now-dying fire.

She helped Callie dress, then went to throw open the drapes to the first rays of morning. Fires still raged below and the smell of smoke was on the wind. When she turned back around, Beck Friston stood in the doorway. She blushed.

Though he'd never really had the courage to come out and say it, it was no secret that Beck Friston was in love with Annie. Two years her junior, he had grown from a pesky little brother into an introspective young man every bit her intellectual equal. 'He wasn't bad to look at either,' she thought.

The young man standing in the sunlit doorway had the same thin lips, high cheekbones, and flaming red hair as his sister. But whereas her eyes were filled with fiery mischief, his burned with determined curiosity.

He was pretty, but he wasn't a pretty boy. He was a boy, but one could already see the man he would become. ...if he got the chance.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

The noise was deafening in the low-ceilinged cavern. Everything was fire and brimstone on black. Waldo cowered in terror, reciting the few prayers his besotted mind could still recall. Fires raged. Sparks flew. Brimstone swirled. Waldo was in Hell.

Owen stood before him, laughing so hard he was holding his sides. Waldo couldn't hear him above the din, but the sight alone was enough to shame him. Waldo Gump hadn't led the most pious of lives, but he didn't deserve to be dragged into Hell by this fanatical madman, either.

With a tug at the scruff of his neck, Brother Owen dragged him to his feet and urged him forward. The iron wagon loomed ahead, the source of all the fire, brimstone, and noise. Waldo's knees grew weaker by the step as he approached. Hot fog swirled around him. Sparks flew.

If Waldo wasn't in Hell, he was certainly on his way to it and, as the swirling brimstone parted, he could see that Hell had a name, printed in large letters on the side of the iron wagon. He mumbled it softly to himself.

"Southern Pacific."

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

-----Chapter Three-----
-----PREPARATIONS-----

The sun was high overhead, yet the fog was just burning off the bay, replaced by a smoky pall from the fires still burning back in Friston. Will looked furtively over his shoulder, then back to Macy who was curled up sleeping on a coil of rope in the front of *The 'nesses Revenge*. That crippled guy's boat must have braved the headwinds off Pelican Island because, when the fog cleared, there it was, just a few hundred yards back off his port side.

Will estimated that he was about an hour out of Benton. Off to starboard lie the ruins of the East Bay foothills, with the tower of Calber Castle receding behind him. There was no help in that direction. He couldn't outrun the cripple's ship and he certainly couldn't outfight it. Not with a crew of one skinny girl. He looked worriedly back to the sleeping Macy.

"I make her feel safe," he muttered. "Hah!" He looked back over his shoulder again and shook his head. It would be a bad thing if *The 'nesses Revenge* were overtaken and boarded. ...a very bad thing indeed. He had to do something. He tied the wheel off and went forward to wake the sleeping Macy. He had an idea.

Kneeling down, he reached out to jostle her awake, hesitating at the last second. He drew his arm back and smiled down at the angelic sleeping face. He had only met her a few hours ago, yet she felt more like family than anyone he had ever known. He didn't want to let her down. He wanted to keep her safe.

The stories she had told him as he piloted the boat out of harbor and up the bay made his hair stand on end. She had never known her parents. Her earliest memories were clouded by the pain of fending for herself on the streets of Friston. Orphanages and the workhouse had scarred her body but not her spirit. A few years back the Madam had taken her in and provided her with the only stability she had ever known.

Will reached out to brush the long dark locks out of her eyes, still hesitant to wake her and break the spell of the moment. Macy had learned so many valuable street skills that, by the time she was taken in at Madam's, she was able to survive with her wits rather than her body. Something was needed: Macy found it. Information was learned: Macy passed it along. Tensions flared: Macy diffused them.

She had been with men before, but not in the way Will first thought.

"What do you think I am!" she had shot back at him indignantly when he had made one too many assumptions. Will's eyes saw a scrawny little thing, but his heart told him he was looking at much, much more. 'Is this what love was? Is this what family was?' Will wasn't sure since he'd never known either. But he knew he would do everything in his power to keep her safe. He reached out and gently jostled her awake.

"Come below with me." he said. "That cripple's ship is catching up to us and we have to prepare. Come now." Groggily, she rolled over and rubbed her eyes. She reached out and clasped her hands behind his neck.

"Carry me." she said. Will reached under her knees, kissed her on the top of the head, lifted her up, and headed for the stairs. Ducking down, he carried her below. He sat her down on the bunk, then went to its foot and opened a large wooden trunk.

"Take that shirt off." he hollered over the open trunk lid.

"You finally going to do me, Crazyboy?" she giggled. Will gave her the evil eye and she giggled some more. Will rooted around in the footlocker, then returned to the now topless vixen, a roll of cloth and a pair of shears in his hand.

"C'mon now. Get serious. We don't have much time." he said. "Raise your arms." She didn't have much in the way of a chest, but what she did have had been standing at attention through the seaman's blouse she had been wearing. Sitting there with her arms in the air, she looked up at Will and blushed.

He unrolled the linen he'd brought out and started tightly wrapping her chest, leaving no trace of femininity when he replaced her blouse.

Throwing a cloth around her shoulders, he reached for the shears. He hated doing it but the hair had to come off. He didn't want to think what might happen if that crippled brute and his companions boarded *The 'nesses Revenge* and found out she was a girl. He shuddered at the thought.

"Not my hair!" she squeaked when she figured out what was coming.

"Hush now and don't argue." Will shot back, a bit more severe than he'd intended.

"If you hadn't shaken your butt at them and then cursed like a sailor, maybe we wouldn't be in this situation. Now sit still."

Will couldn't bring himself to cut all her hair off, so he cut it just above the shoulders and tied it back, away from her face. Plopping a slouch hat on her head, he held her at arm's length, shaking his head.

"It'll have to do. The rest will be up to you. Think you can pull it off?"

Macy jumped off the bunk and stomped across to the galley. She turned around, scratched her crotch, leered at Will, and spat. "Howzat Cap'n!" she growled with a smile.

Will laughed and shook his head.

"It'll have to do. You're too pretty to be a boy, but a pretty boy is the best we can hope for."

Macy launched herself across the room and into Will's arms, kissing him on the cheeks.

"That's the nicest thing you've ever said to me." She hugged Will tighter and fought back a tear. It was Will's turn to blush. He sat her down and composed himself.

"C'mon, let's get above deck before they get here." Will said. He spanked her playfully on the rear and prodded her up the steps ahead of him. Just as he was about to poke his head through, there was a loud banging and the ship lurched, throwing

him to the deck. Macy tumbled back through the hatch and landed butt first in the middle of his chest, knocking the wind out of him.

She was up in a flash and went back through the portal before Will could catch his breath and protest. He struggled to his feet and followed.

He poked his head through the hatch, prepared to fight. He looked around frantically for Macy. She tapped him on the shoulder and he whirled around, facing the bow. Macy was laughing and he followed her pointing finger to find out why.

A couple boat lengths ahead of them sailed the *Siarra's Mist*, headed for Benton. The big man was at the wheel. The little one was up in the rigging. And wiggling at them from the stern railing was the bare butt of a young seaman, accompanied on the wind by a string of cuss words that would have done Cap'n Waldo proud. Will joined in the laughter, untied the wheel, and commenced the pursuit.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

The drapes rustled closed behind the back of the departing Deacon. Callie glared. Annie fidgeted. Beck sighed. The Baroness smugly finished her dessert, pinky finger extended.

"I told you so." she said over the tip of her nose. "Your days of saying what you WILL or WON'T do are over." She dabbed the powdered sugar from her lips and rose.

"I have preparations to make. If you'll excuse me..." Then she too disappeared through the drape, following in the Deacon's wake.

"I hate her. I hate her. I hate her." seethed Callie under her breath. "I'll never marry Owen Camberly. I'll run away first. I will!" Her anger spent, she sagged. Placing her head in her hands, she sobbed gently. Annie jumped up and went to stand behind her chair. Beck hurried over and ended up behind Annie, reaching past her to comfort his sister. Their eyes met. Their lips fluttered. Yet they remained speechless in the awkwardness of the moment.

The silence was broken only by Callie's soft sobbing. Finally, it was Beck that spoke.

"Let's go out to the terrace. We could all use a bit of fresh air. Besides," he said with a glance over his shoulder at the servants clearing away the mid-day meal. "...there are fewer ears out there."

Together, he and Annie gently lifted Callie out of her seat and headed for the far end of the stately dining room, and the terrace which overlooked Friston harbor.

Frismont Castle dominated the eastern and of the Baronial Compound atop Noble Hill, book-ended in the west by Friston Cathedral. Overlooking the harbor, the bay, and the East Bay foothills, the Castle's foundations dated back to before the Dark Times. It was among the oldest and most mysterious buildings in the Barony. The secret passages and tunnels supposedly emanating from dungeon level were the stuff of folklore and legend. The rumored secrets of its sub-levels were used to scare children to sleep throughout the Barony. It had been home to Callie, Annie, and Beck all their lives.

As the trio walked the length of the dining hall toward the doors opening onto the terrace, the smell of smoke became stronger. All morning, occupants of the Castle had looked down upon the townspeople's efforts to put out the fire which devastated a good part of the south and of town. Just before sitting down to eat it looked as though they had finally gotten it contained. But the sky was still paying the price, a gray pallor hanging in the air.

The terrace was one of Annie's favorite spots in the Castle. She often came here to gaze beyond the eastern foothills to the life she had left behind, the life that wasn't meant to be. It was a special place, dominated by breathtaking views, and filled with potted trees, gurgling fountains, and secluded seating arrangements. It was towards one of these that she and back guided the distraught Callie. Annie looked past Callie and into Beck's eyes.

"Is there nothing you can do? After all, you will be the Baron."

"Haah!" Beck shot back. "The Baroness is loyal to the Deacon. The Knights are loyal to the Deacon. The guard is loyal to the Deacon. And the servants are loyal to the Deacon." He was almost as depressed as Callie was. Their situation looked hopeless. Annie knew she was going to have to be strong for the both of them.

"The people have always loved the two of you." she offered, seeing the weakness of her argument in the reflection of their eyes.

"And what about the Red Knight? What's his role in all this? It certainly can't be good for the Deacon."

Beck shrugged, unconvinced. Callie stared off into the distance. Both seemed to be staring into a future neither one wanted to see. Annie persisted.

"The Red Knight has to be the key. Someone out there has it in for the Barony. And that means someone out there has it in for the Deacon. The enemy of our enemy is our friend. Right?"

Beck looked up dejectedly.

"What good does that do us? We don't know who he is and, besides, we're stuck here in the Castle."

"Well-I-I-I," said Annie, avoiding his eyes. "...maybe I can do something about that."

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

The 'nesses Revenge eased into one of the few remaining berths in the bustling port of Benton. Before the vessel was even tied off, Hawkins was down the gangplank in search of Edmund Camberly. The hulking Simon and shifty Richmond shadowed him protectively. Eric watched from the rail.

Benton Enclave had been built upon the ruins of a town that had predated the Dark Times. Its strategic position at the mouth of the Sacton River made it important militarily, commercially, and politically. It was the Barony's gateway to Sacton, the Inland Sea, and the wild lands beyond.

Eric gazed out upon a city at war. Its streets were filled with the bright pennants of mounted knights and their retainers. Oinking, bleating, and mooing herds were being shepherded toward the ValleyHo gate by barking dogs. Carts of every description were clattering over the cobblestones. People seemed to hang from every second story window, shouting encouragement's and offers. Masts of every configuration filled the harbor.

It was towards one of these, one flying the Camberly white and green colors, that Hawkins and his cronies headed. Simon pitched peasants left and Richmond pitched them right so that not a single clumping step was lost. Hawkins glanced back over his shoulder at *The 'nesses Revenge* which was just then entering the harbor. He then turned his attention back to the task at hand.

Eric too looked over his shoulder at *The 'nesses Revenge*. When he looked back, his Da was now gesturing to the seamen aboard Edmund's ship. They talked animatedly for a while, pointing in the direction of the ValleyHo gate. As the Camberly seamen turned back to their chores, Hawkins and his band hurried back to *The 'nesses Revenge*, trampling peasants in their haste.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

Annie had found the passage many years before, while playing hide-and-seek with Callie and Beck in the bowels of the Castle. Why she hadn't told them about it she wasn't sure. She thought of it as her little secret, a secret that probably hadn't been used since the Dark Times. That thought made her shiver.

So, as she made her way with only a torch to guide her, she thought back to the first time she'd dared traverse its length, many years back. She had left behind the sheltered, courtly life of the Castle and emerged into the unstructured chaos of the bustling port. Her senses had overloaded on sights, sounds, and smells she'd only dreamt about from her secluded terrace up on the hill.

She learned early on to dress down for the occasion, leaving her Castle finery behind in place of clothes she'd borrowed

from the servants' quarters. She learned to fit in, rather than stand out. The Annie they knew up on the hill was a far cry from the one who now stumbled out of the passageway in the basement of a tavern down by the docks. Secretly the door behind her, she drew her cloak tight and headed for the stairs. At their top, she opened the door onto the sights, sounds, and smells of a dockside tavern.

"Ouch." she yipped, as her foot got stomped on by a drunk heading for the stairs and the privy at their bottom.

"Sorry Mizz Annie." he mumbled. "Din't know ye wuz in town." The door opened, closed, and he was gone. Annie turned her attention to getting out the front door. Pulling her hood up over her blond curls, she headed in that direction. She hadn't gone two steps before a shout of "Annie!" boomed out from behind the bar, followed by greetings and toasts from the tables nearby.

Reluctantly, Annie ambled her way over to the bar. Doffing her hood, she shook out her luxuriant locks and pasted a smile on her face. Halfway there, her hips began to sway.

When she reached the bar, the sea of bodies parted, and a tankard awaited her. She hoisted it to her lips, drained its contents, and wiped away the foam with the back of her hand.

"Howdy fellas." she said, eyes twinkling. Then she let loose with a dainty belch, followed by a titter.

The barman poured her another, then motioned for her to follow him to the quiet end of the bar. He leaned in close.

"Madam sent a runner over this mornin'. Said I was to send you to her straight away if you showed up. The fire din't reach as far as her place. ...a couple of blocks away but that's as close as it got. The fire's all out now."

The Madam was the only one in town who knew of Annie's true identity. Some years back she had saved a frightened and rather naïve young girl from a group of drunken outlanders intent on having a good time at her expense. The somewhat bruised and battered Annie had broken into tears and the truth poured out. Madam had cradled the young girl in her arms and a rather

strange friendship was formed. All these years she had kept Annie's confidence. Annie looked back to the barkeep.

"So how is Macy?" she asked.

"Wasn't Macy this time." he replied. "'Twas one of her other girls. The lil Chinee one."

'Strange' thought Annie. Macy usually did Madam's running for her. The other girls rarely ventured outside. At Madam's, everyone had their place, everyone knew their role. Even Annie.

The demure, deferring, lady-in-waiting they knew up the hill turned into an outgoing, extroverted life-of-the-party as soon as her secret door closed behind her. Though not technically one of Madam's girls, she was somehow the center of attention when she was there. During those evenings that Annie was "in town" the place was packed. Though no man had ever been seen going upstairs with her, there wasn't a man in town who didn't want to. It was even rumored that she was Madam's illegitimate daughter, a rumor neither of them did anything to dispel.

If Madam was sending for her urgently and Macy's whereabouts were unknown, then something was going on. Returning from her reverie, she could see the questions in the little barman's eyes. So she thanked him and gave him a peck on the cheek that flustered him. Then, drawing her cloak tight about her, she headed for the door.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

Macy had both hands up under her seaman's blouse, scratching away furiously.

"Cain't I take this dang thing off now." she squealed. "It itches something fierce."

Will couldn't help but smile at her exuberance. She touched him in a place he didn't know he had. She was just so full of life. But she wasn't going to like what he had to say.

"C'mere girl." he said, taking her by the hand and heading back down into the galley. After waiting half the afternoon, *The*

'nesses Revenge had finally been able to pull into a birth. The hunt for Arthur Camberly would resume as soon as he set things straight with his young charge. There was no hurry. Arthur's ship was berthed alongside *The 'nesses Revenge* and Will had already been told that the young noble and his entourage were two hours ahead of him on the road to ValleyHo.

Sitting her down on the bunk, he went back to the trunk at its foot and started rooting around.

"Now listen girl. We're not in Friston anymore. This is no place for a young girl. I argued with the Madam but she wouldn't listen. So now that you're here you're gonna have to do what I say."

Will gave her his sternest face. She responded with a pout.

"It's best you stay a boy until we've finished our business here. That crippled bastard will be the least of our worries once we get off this ship. Unnerstan'?"

Macy pouted some more and scratched furiously. Will peered over the trunk lid and smiled.

"Go ahead. Take that wrapping off and put it in that basin over there on the table. There's some salve in this trunk somewhere. We'll make it stop itching."

In the blink of an eye Macy had the blouse up over her head and was frantically unwrapping her chest. Before the last of the linen had fallen away, she was scratching again at the reddened flesh. Will peeked over the top of the trunk lid again.

"Here it is," he said, closing the lid and coming away with a jar of salve. Macy scratched as Will sat next to her on the bunk and gathered up the linen. That done, he grabbed her wrists before she scratched herself raw. Taking the lid off the salve, he held the jar out to her.

"Aw-w-w," she pouted. "I thought we were gonna make it stop itching." She batted her eyelashes seductively, raised her arms above her head, and turned her back to him. Will hesitated.

He had been with women before. But they had been hurried, drunken affairs with dockside, skirt-lifting doxies. He had

never touched, or been touched, by someone he actually cared for. His hand trembled as he dipped it into the salve.

Scooping out a palmful of the oily mixture, he began applying it in broad strokes across her shoulder blades. Macy purred contentedly and snuggled in closer. Dipping in for more salve, Will started working it into Macy's reddened sides. As he rubbed it over her skinny little ribs, she squealed, bounced out of his lap, and grabbed his wrists. Still laughing as she turned to face him, Will found himself eye level with her tiny little titties, perfect pink nipples threatening to poke him in the eyes.

Sensing his discomfort, Macy smiled, leaned foreword, and brushed them back and forth across his forehead. Will's lips moved but nothing came out.

"Whatsa matter Crazyboy? Ain't you never seen boobies before? They sure are itchy."

Still holding him by the wrists, she moved his hands until they hovered over her breasts, teasing her engorged nipples. Will shifted uncomfortably on the bunk.

Macy leaned forward, grinding her breasts into his salve-covered palms. When she let go of his wrists, his fingers closed, eyes mesmerized by the kneading of her tiny breasts.

"That's nice Crazyboy." she cooed. Will rubbed the rest of the salve down onto her flat belly and spread it out toward her sides, making sure to get it where the linen ended and her skin began. Then he reached up gave each little titty a squeeze, each little nipple a tweak, and guided her down onto his lap.

Will fidgeted uncomfortably. Macy smiled at him knowingly and reached down to rub the front of his pants. Slipping her shoes off, she brought her feet up and turned to face him. Will was virtually panting.

"Wanted do me now? ...Crazyboy?" she whispered in his ear, hand rubbing harder.

"S-s-sure I do." he croaked. When he stood, she wrapped her legs around him and held on tight, her eyes never leaving his.

Will leaned down, pecked her on the lips, then disentangled himself and set her on the bed. He stared into her eyes.

"I like you a whole lot," he began. "Sure I wanna *do you*. I wanna *do* everything. But I am old enough to be your... your... your big brother. I was on a mission to save the Lady Sara and you popped into my life. I don't know what to do about that. I care about you a whole lot. I like you a whole lot. But we don't have time to *do* anything but find Arthur Camberly."

She reached up from the bunk, took his big you hand in her to tiny ones, and squeezed it. "I unnerstan'. I really do. Sorry if I tease so much. It's just me. It's who I am. I like you a whole lot too. I don't want you to go away. When I'm with you I don't feel so all alone." Her eyes teared up. Will knelt down until they were face-to-face.

"I'm not going anywhere. We're in this together. Deal?"

She squeezed his hand, and looked him in the eye. "Deal." she replied. With that, Will reached for the linen. Macy raised her arms and he began transforming her into a boy once again.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

Callie leaned back and listened to the waves. Knowingly, Beck smiled at her from across the chessboard. They both knew that it wasn't the ocean that was responsible for the rushing water sound coming through the grate in the corner of Callie's room. It was just another of the Castle's undiscovered secrets, a shared lie turned into a truth by their childhood imaginations. Callie said it was the ocean. So it was the ocean. 'What harm did it do to pretend?'

Just as he was about to move his rook into position for checkmate, a piercing scream assaulted them from the courtyard below. Callie jumped up, bumping the board, and pieces flew everywhere. Beck grimaced and followed her to the window.

In the courtyard below was a line of peasants in shackles, guarded by a trio of whip-wielding monks from the Brotherhood.

"These vermin were caught looting down by the docks." said one of the Brothers, addressing the doorway below Callie's window. One of the peasants attempted to protest, but was cut short by the crack of a whip and another scream. Callie couldn't make out the soft-voiced reply coming from the doorway below, but the scent of rosewater caused her to reach out to Beck for reassurance.

Before she could avert her eyes, the peasant who'd attempted to protest was kicked to the ground and stomped. Cries of anguish went up from the others as Callie buried her face in Beck's chest.

"Let's get out of here." he said, steering her toward the door. Behind them, screams and the cracking of whips poured in through the window. The sounds followed them even as they closed the heavy wooden door behind them and hurried down the hallway.

As they neared the grand staircase leading down to the entry hall, they could hear the Baroness chattering her way up them, heels clicking on the polished oak. Having no desire to deal with either her or the Deacon again this afternoon, Callie grabbed Beck's arm and steered him toward the door leading out onto the castle's ramparts.

"C'mon. C'mon." she urged, closing the door behind them and hurrying off toward the first guardhouse. Passing through it, she hurried north along the wall. Gesturing for Beck to keep up with her, she entered a second guardhouse and exited it following the wall as it turned west. She headed toward Friston Cathedral with Beck close on her heels.

She stopped before a heavy wooden door leading to the Cathedral's bell tower. With Beck's help, they shouldered it open. Pushing it closed, Callie caught her breath and took a look at the staircase spiraling up to the belfry.

"Race ya." she squealed and took off, three steps at a time. Pausing to catch his breath, Beck smiled at her spirit and gave chase. Halfway, he caught up and goosed her to go faster. She looked back over her shoulder and stuck her tongue out at him.

Reaching the top, they collapsed, out of breath, on the platform surrounding the Cathedral bells.

"We haven't done that since we were kids." Beck said between panting breaths.

"You didn't have to let me win back then. I beat you fair and square." shot back Callie. They both smiled at the memory. It seemed like such a long time ago yet it also seemed like just yesterday.

"What are we gonna do?" asked Callie, bringing them back to the present.

"Do you think Annie will be able to do anything down in Friston?"

Beck just looked at her, not knowing what to say. He had always been the quieter, less adventurous of the two. Also the more studious. In the strange dynamics of the Castle he'd learned to listen a lot more than he talked. He'd learned to tiptoe lightly among the bombshell personalities of the court: The Baron. The Baroness. Owen Camberly. The Deacon. Callie, even.

Beck didn't want to be the Baron. He didn't have the temperament for it. But he didn't have much choice. In a couple weeks he would be Baron, no matter how much he hoped he wouldn't. He'd often thought it unfair that Callie had inherited all the fire in the family. She had have made a better Baron than he, he thought ruefully.

A touch on his cheek brought him out of his reverie and his eyes locked with those of his sister. The look she gave him let him know she understood everything he was thinking. She always had.

"Annie will figure out something." he mumbled, unconvinced.

"The real question is..." she said, looking into his eyes. "...when are you going to figure out Annie? You two have been making googly-eyes at each other since you were eight years old. If you don't stand up and do something about it now, you never will." Beck blushed and hung his head

Fearing she had gone too far, Callie jumped up and went to the belfry wall. Annie might like the terrace, looking out east over the Friston Enclave. But Callie liked it here, looking west, beyond the enclave, out over the wild lands to the ocean beyond.

Friston Cathedral served as the west wall of the Baronial Compound atop Noble Hill. Civilization ended at the enclave's walls. The Dark Times still existed in the desolation over which Callie now gazed. She shivered as she looked out at the human forms scurrying like rats amongst the rubble. With the exception of the enclaves, the Dark Times still ruled the lands around the bay.

The enclaves of Friston, Oakton, and Benton had been carved from the chaos by Callie's ancestors. Expeditions had set forth from Frismont, Calber, and Quenton castles into the wild lands, but few returned. The ones that did told tales of humanity reduced to living like animals. There hadn't been a major expedition beyond the Enclave's walls since before Callie was born.

When she was younger, she would come up here and stare for hours west to the ocean. The wild lands fascinated her, even though she had never, nor would ever step foot on them. Truth be told, she could count on one hand the number of times she had left Friston, and two hands the number of times she had even left the Baronial Compound. She had sailed the bay a few times and visited Calber Castle twice. She had never even been as far as Benton.

Callie turned to lean into him as Beck came up and put his arm around her shoulder.

"I hope you're not thinking about running away into the wild lands," he said, only half-jokingly. Callie shuddered, crossed herself, and snuggled in closer.

"No. Our answers are on this side of the wall," she said with more conviction than she felt. Beck just nodded his head.

"Annie will come through," he whispered.

Hawkins, Simon, Richmond, and Eric sat astride their mounts, off to the side of the road. For as far as the eye could see in both directions streamed the makings of war: mounted knights, men-at-arms, supply wagons, livestock herds, and camp followers. Two hours behind them lay Benton. An hour ahead lay ValleyHo and the shores of the Inland Sea.

Hawkins massaged his stunted leg while scanning the tents clustered around ValleyHo for the one holding Sir Edmund. He assumed the Camberly patriarch would be in camp already considering the time it took him and his little party to get here from Benton. But, with the sun beginning to set in the west, he couldn't see any sign of it.

ValleyHo stood on the eastern edge of the Barony and the Western shore of the Inland Sea. It served as a trade center for all enclaves east of the Barony and as a defensive strong point against the wild lands ringing the water.

The latter was evidenced by the multi-colored tents of the Baronial army camped just north of town. Their reason for being there was camped across a creek, just a little further north. For the past two weeks, the Unwashed from the wild lands had been gathering. Tomorrow the two armies would meet in battle.

Hawkins spurred his horse forward, eager to get to Sir Edmund before the festivities began. His three companions put the remains of their dinner away, the spurs to their horses, and followed.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

A single tear rolled down Annie's cheek, pausing momentarily before splashing into the blonde ringlets arrayed on the pillow below.

"It wasn't your fault." intoned Madam, hovering nearby.

Annie shrugged, tucked the coverlet in around the sleeping beauty, and quietly followed Madam out into the hallway. Shutting the door behind her, she followed the older woman down the

corridor to her office. Crossing the threshold, Annie went straight to the window. Closing the door behind her, Madam went straight to the dinner spread laid out on her desk.

Her back to the room, Annie looked out over the twilight-street, wiped her eyes and tried to compose herself. Madam might say it wasn't her fault, but it sure felt like it was. The doc had managed to stop the bleeding but Sara had yet to regain consciousness. 'Perhaps she never would.' Annie pulled a handkerchief from her pocket, snuffled into it, then turned around.

"Where do we go from here?" she asked. "I've had about all the bad news I can handle for one day." Madam dug into the dinner spread and avoided Annie's gaze. She gestured for Annie to sit, and Annie knew there was more bad news on the way. She began pacing. Grabbing an ember from the fireplace, she went around lighting the wall sconces. The quiet was broken only by the sound of Madam chomping.

With one last look out at the twilight, Annie took a seat across from Madam. Grabbing a piece of cheese, she rolled it up in a slice of roast beef and nibbled at it. She had no appetite but she needed to keep her hands busy.

"It is my fault. If I hadn't come to you with stories about the Deacon and the Baron's illness, Sara wouldn't be laying back there."

"Nonsense girl!" shot back Madam, slamming one bangled, hammy fist on the desk. "The problems in this Barony have been brewing for a long time. Sara knew what she was getting into. It was *her* decision."

Any choked down the last of her roast beef and poured herself a glass of wine. She avoided Madam's gaze.

"All I wanted to do was help Beck. We've all heard the rumors. I thought if we could make them up on the hill think that the first Baroness' child was still alive, it would give the Baron the courage to do something about the Deacon. But things got out of control. If only I hadn't been so selfish..."

Madam cut her off. "Don't put on airs girl. Quit being so self-centered. We all wanted to help Beck. We all wanted things

to change. You were a crazy young girl with a big idea in a moment of despair.”

Licking the last of her dinner from her fingers, Madam reached a meaty paw across the desk and grabbed Annie under the chin. She raised it until Annie’s brown eyes met hers.

“I was the one who took the rantings of a lovesick young girl to Sir Edmund. Does that make it my fault?”

She shook Annie’s head from side to side.

“Sir Edmund was the one who had the suit of red armor forged. He was the one who took the idea to the noble families in the outlying areas. Does that make it his fault?”

Again, she shook Annie’s head from side to side.

“Sara is a grown woman. And a smart one at that. Runs in the family. She knew what she was letting herself in for. Does that make it her fault?”

One last time, Madam shook Annie’s head from side to side. When she withdrew her hand, Annie broke eye contact, chin slumping to her chest.

“That doesn’t make it any easier.” she whispered. “It was all for nothing. Beck will be made Baron and the Deacon will still run things. He cows everyone but the Baroness. It was all for nothing.”

“Maybe not...” mumbled Madam.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

Macy grabbed Will’s sleeve and dragged him into the slipstream of the group of Knights who were thundering by. Both began coughing in the dust cloud kicked up by the pounding hooves. Between coughing fits Will looked inquisitively at his young companion. She pointed through the diminishing dust cloud to a group of riders re-entering the road just ahead of them. Sharing her alarm, he stooped low and the two of them scurried into the bushes at the side of the road.

"I doubt there'd recognize us." he said. "But it doesn't hurt to steer clear." He pulled his cap lower. Macy tugged self-consciously at her chest wrapping and looked around in wonder.

For someone who had never left Friston Enclave, this was almost more than she could handle. The road from Benton to ValleyHo was one of the few places in the Barony not protected from the Unwashed by walls. Grass covered hills rose to the left and the right. Here and there were small groves of magnificent oak trees, the likes of which Macy had never seen. She didn't want to think about what was looking back at them from those groves. She was glad they would make it to the camp in ValleyHo before nightfall.

Up ahead, the cripple and his companions topped a rise and descended from view. With a nervous look over her shoulder at a nearby grove of oaks, Macy tugged at Will's sleeve and hurried them back into the road. The sun was sinking in the west but the road was still clogged with the machinery of war headed toward the encampment north of ValleyHo.

When Macy reached the rise, she stopped dead in her tracks, Will bumping into her from behind. She turned to comment, her lips moved, but no sound came out. Will smiled. For the first time since he'd met her, Macy was speechless.

Spread out before them was the Sacton Valley, it's center dominated by the Inland Sea. The road leading down to ValleyHo was covered in a dust cloud kicked up by the thousands of feet and hooves headed for battle. Cooking fires from the camp north of town added to the haze. Boats criss-crossed the Inland Sea, most headed for the harbor at ValleyHo. The occasional trumpet could be heard on the wind.

Tomorrow was going to be the most exciting day of Macy's life. She could hardly wait. Grabbing Will's hand, she fell in behind a group of crossbowmen and headed down the hill.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

Movement out of the corner of his eye caught Eric's attention. He could have sworn that he was being watched, a feeling that had nagged at him all day. As he, his Da, and their companions waited for the mounted chivalry to ride by, he stared back into the dust cloud created by their passing. For a moment it seemed to like someone was pointing right at him. But when the dust cloud cleared, there was no one there. It must have been his imagination. He spurred his horse over the rise and hurried to catch up.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

"Maybe not." whispered the Madam.

Annie still wasn't convinced. Sara lay back there near death. The Deacon still controlled everything. And Beck, poor Beck. 'What would become of him?' She raised her head and made eye contact with Madam, waiting for more, hoping for hope.

In answer to the un-asked questions in Annie's eyes, Madam took her small hand in her two big ones and brought it to her lips.

"My dear," she began. "It has been quite a day for all of us. The Baron's death... The fire... Sara..." she sighed.

"But it's not all for nothing. It's not an end. It's a beginning. There are things you don't know. In the wee hours of this morning, Sir Edmund was here."

That got Annie's attention.

"But he hasn't..." Annie began, trailing off at the implications of Edmund being here on this of all days.

"But why..." she continued, trailing off again.

Madam shushed her to silence, took a sip of wine, and continued.

"Edmund saw the Baron afore he died. There were things he didn't tell even me. I've been in Friston all my life. ...long enough to remember the first Baroness. Long enough to remember when Sir Edmund was here all the time. Long enough

to remember that night. ...another one like last night: a night when everything changed.”

When Madam reached for her wine to wet her lips, Annie jumped up and went to the window.

“Nothing’s gonna change.” she challenged, her back to the seated Madam.

“It’s gonna change all right.” came the reply. “You see. There was a will. There is a new heir. That’s why Edmund hurried off to ValleyHo. He was trying to get to Arthur before Owen caught up to him. You see... There were twins. ...and they lived.”

Annie whirled around, mind racing. It was over. Beck wouldn’t end up the Deacon’s pawn. The Red Knight could fade into history. Sara could heal and go home. She hurried to the table and stood over Madam.

“I want to speak to my brother.” she said, seeing the life go out of Madam’s eyes even before the sentence was out.

With a bangled arm, Madam reached up and pulled Annie down to sit beside her. Avoiding eye contact, she whispered: “That’s gonna be a problem.”

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

Waldo was screaming like a thirteen year old girl, yet the sound didn’t reach his ears. He was choking on the acrid black smoke rushing past him, yet covering his mouth wasn’t an option. He was holding on with white-knuckled intensity because letting go would mean certain death. He was hurtling downward, hurtling toward Hell, and he was powerless to stop it.

Waldo had never been so terrified in all his life. Through cinder-teared eyes he stared into the orange flames of Hell. In between stood Owen Camberly who, every so often, turned and cackled in his direction.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

Beck and Callie crossed themselves, rose, sidled out of the pew, and headed for the doors at the back of the Cathedral. The Baron might have seemed a cold and distant character to the rest of the Barony, but to them he been a warm if somewhat aloof Papa. He would be sorely missed.

Closing the doors behind them, they stood at the top of the steps and looked out across the Baronial Compound to the Castle at the far end. In between was most of the world either of them had ever known. In the shadows of the southern wall lay he servants quarters, the kitchens, and the various maintenance shops which kept the compound running. Along the northern wall were the stables, the rookery, and the blacksmith's shop. The center was dominated by a jousting pitch which, on most days, served as a marketplace for those hawking their wares to the nobility.

With the sun low in the sky behind them, Beck and Callie descended into the chaos of day's end and headed across the compound. Both were eager to find out what Annie had discovered on her trip down into Friston.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

"A problem?" Annie squeaked. She had known that the bad news for the day wasn't over. Madam seemed to be fumbling for words so Annie braced herself for the worst.

"My brother?" she prodded as her eyes sought out those of the older woman.

"Your brother..." sighed Madam. "Your brother... Your brother is in a better place."

Annie broke into tears and buried her head in Madam's ample breasts. The older woman wrapped her fleshy, bangled arms around the girl she had come to view as a daughter. She waited until the sobbing subsided before continuing.

"The young man who brought Sara back here last night saw it. He was there. Your brother died in the fire. The Red Knight is

no more. Your brother is in a better place. Owen Camberly put him there.”

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

Eric could barely hold his head up. His belly was full. The campfire warmed him. In the background he could hear his father, Simon, and Richmond droning on about the Camberlys. It had been a long day.

As soon as they had set up camp north of ValleyHo, they had split up in search of Sir Edmund. They had hoped to find him before the battle commenced, but that wasn't looking likely now. All around them were the campfires of men heading into battle in the morning. For many of them, it would be the last campfire they ever shared. Eric shivered at the thought.

He drew his cloak tighter about him and hunkered down close to the fire. Just as he was falling asleep, he again had that unsettling feeling that he was being watched. It was his last thought as he drifted off to sleep, lulled by the droning voices of his Da and his companions.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

Macy glanced back over her shoulder at the crippled guy's campfire, before scurrying away to find Will. Threading her way through the encampment, her senses throbbed from the input.

When she found Will, he was bent over the fire, warming up the stew he'd bought earlier from one of the camp sutlers. He looked up and smiled in a way that warmed Macy's heart.

“Guess what?” she said, hunkering down next to him, nose pointed at the pot. Her mouth began to water in her belly rumbled. She looked at Will and giggled.

“That crippled guy is looking for Arthur Camberly, too.” she said, looking up, seeking Will's eyes. Will raised his eyebrows and looked back at her.

"Is he now?" he said. "Interesting. Maybe he's one of the good guys after all. Hmmmmh. What do you think?"

"Maybe." intoned Macy. Then she grinned. "Besides, that boy traveling with him is too cute to be a bad guy."

At that Will poked her in her bandaged ribs and she squealed, jumping up to go get the dinner utensils out of her pack.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

Owen was screaming back at him but Waldo couldn't hear. Following the monk's pointing finger, he saw a shovel but no way was he going to loosen his hold to reach for it. The wind rushed past his ears and the dirt in his eyes made it almost impossible to open them.

Waldo detected a change in the soot-filled smoke swirling around him. A luminescence appeared ahead of him where there was only darkness before. Owen continued pointing but Waldo continued to ignore him. The Lord's Prayer tumbled silently from his lips.

The luminescence grew stronger, the smoke cleared, and Waldo's world exploded with light. Waldo screamed for all he was worth, fainted, and splashed to the floor, prostrate at the feet of the mad Brother Owen. Ignoring the fat sea captain, Owen reached past him and grabbed the shovel himself.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

Beck hesitated at the top of the stairs, ears straining to hear the mumbled whisperings coming from below. He'd been on his way to say good night to Callie when he heard his mother summoned by the Deacon to the entryway below.

Beck recognized the voice of the Seneschal of the Flame. Looking out the window behind him, he could see a mounted troop of armored monks in the courtyard.

He could only pick up snippets of the conversation going on below. Obviously, the Brothers were headed off to battle the

Unwashed at ValleyHo. The Deacon had summoned them here about something concerning the Camberlys. He heard mention of a will, which brought forth a gasp from the Baroness.

As the door closed behind the departing Seneschal, Beck withdrew into the shadows. The clatter of boots from the courtyard below heralded the troops' departure. The clatter of heels on the staircase made escape impossible.

"I just don't understand it." warbled the Baroness. "Why kill Sir Edmund? Why not just destroy the will? You can control Beck. What makes you think you could possibly be better off by getting rid of him and setting up another puppet in his place?"

Beck went weak in the knees.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

"It was all my fault. ...and don't you dare try telling me any different." challenged Annie, her glare ensuring the Madam's silence.

"My brother wouldn't be dead if I'd just kept my mouth shut. I might have only met him a few times, but he was still my brother. If I hadn't talk to you... If you hadn't talked to Sir Edmund... If Sir Edmund hadn't talked to him..."

Anger spent, Annie sagged.

"He'd still be alive." she whispered. "It was all my fault. But I refuse to let him die for nothing. I refuse! We must continue to fight that little old bastard up on the hill. The Red Knight must live."

Annie jumped up and went again to the window. Grabbing her cloak from the settee, she headed for the door and bade the Madam to follow. Hurrying down the candle-lit hallway, she slipped into Sara's room and held the door for a huffin' and puffin' Madam.

Closing the door behind them, they went and knelt on either side of the bed, clasping hands, and lowering their heads in prayer. When done, Annie leaned over and kissed the still-unconscious beauty lightly on the lips. She then stood, wrap the

cloak around her shoulders, and headed for the door. Hand on the knob, she turned back to the still kneeling Madam.

“I’ve got to get back up the hill. Take good care of her. She’s the only sister I’ve got.”

With that, she pulled up her hood and disappeared through the doorway.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

Callie fumbled with the buttons on her bodice. She wasn’t used to undressing without Annie’s help. She wasn’t used to doing much of anything without Annie’s help. She glanced nervously out at the darkened sky and said a silent prayer for Annie’s safe return.

When her lady-in-waiting had left she and Beck earlier that afternoon, she wouldn’t tell them where she was going, only that it might help their situation. It had indeed been a strange day. With a final tug, Callie loosened the last button.

Going over to stand in front of the roaring fireplace, she unwrapped herself from the confining gown and stood before the fire. Grabbing a wet sponge from a soapy bucket left there earlier by one of the maidservants, she began to sponge herself off. Without Annie, a sponge bath would have to do.

She brought the sponge to the base of her throat and gave it a squeeze. She watched the firelit rivulets of soapy water as they funneled between her breasts, slowed down in the fiery red curls between her legs, then flowed down her legs, over her toes, and onto the hearth. She squeezed the sponge again, then replaced it in the bucket. Using her hands, she rubbed the soap into her breasts and under her arms, across her smooth belly, and down between her legs. Getting that far, she squatted down and slowed her strokes. Pausing only momentarily, she sighed then washed her legs and dainty feet. Reaching for a dipper of clear warm water from a second bucket, she splashed it over her shoulders until the soapy water ran from her tingling skin to sizzle in the embers of the fireplace. Soap gone, she stood up and

shook like a dog, red hair swirling, droplets of water flying. Turning her back to the fire, she rubbed her butt dry and closed her eyes to the ocean sounds coming through the grate accompanied by the crackling sounds coming from the hearth.

A knock at the door brought her out of her reverie with a “Just a minute!” and a naked, headlong dive into the down-quilted coverings of her big canopied bed. Burrowing down in and drawing the covers up to her chin, she called out:

“Come in.”

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

Belly full, Macy snuggled down into her bedroll and stared across the campfire at Will. All around them, others were settling in to what would likely be a restless night for most, a last night for many. Eerie drumbeats floated at them on the wind from the camp of the Unwashed. Tomorrow, many would die.

“Crazyboy, you sure got lots of muscles.” she teased the shirtless Will, who was hunkered down across from her, tending to the campfire. “And you sure got lots of scars for a ‘prentice. How come?” Will looked up at her and smiled.

“You sure do ask a lot of questions.” he replied. “The scars are old. I got them when I was a kid. My Da was a master armorer. I had better weapons training than most knights. I would pester every warrior who came to my Da’s forge to teach me something.”

“Then how didya end up on a boat?” asked the yawning Macy. This took the light out of Will’s eyes, sending him to a place even Macy dared not intrude upon. When he finally returned to the present and looked across the campfire to answer her question, he looked across at a Macy fast asleep.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

Annie closed the door behind her and crossed the room to the big canopied bed. With a sideways glance at the bucket-

strewn and puddled hearth, she sat on the bed next to Callie. One look into the big questioning green eyes and Annie lost whatever composure she had regained on her trek back up the hill. Avoiding Callie's un-asked questions, she stood and removed her heavy outer cloak. Sitting on the bed, she struggled to take off her boots.

Composing herself somewhat, she turned to face Callie. She didn't know where to begin but her eyes must have spoken volumes because Callie leaned forward, wrapped her arms about her, and cradled her head on her shoulder. Rocking gently, the usually fiery Callie was all softness and endearment.

Still rocking, she began unbuttoning Annie's blouse and whispering in her ear:

"Stay with me tonight. I don't want to be all alone. I don't want you to be alone."

Annie didn't resist as Callie removed her blouse, then stood her up to remove her skirts and petticoats. As a lady-in-waiting, Annie had seen Callie naked many times. But this was the first time that Callie had ever seen her.

"You are very beautiful." whispered the still-naked Callie as she sat on the edge of the bed, eye-level with Annie's smooth white belly. Annie smiled down at her friend and sister from between her full pointy breasts. When Callie reached out and grabbed her by the hips, something inside melted.

It wasn't something sexual. It wasn't the tingling in her loins that she felt when she was alone, late at night, thinking about Beck. It wasn't passionate and fiery. It was safe and warm. It was the end to what had been a long and troubling day.

Pulling aside the down comforters, Callie made room in the big feather bed for her lifelong friend and companion. It felt strange, this reversal of roles. Annie had spent a lifetime being therefore Callie. If felt wonderful to have Callie be there for her.

And so they lay there, wrapped in each other's arms, breast-to-breast, hip-to-hip, toes wiggling against toes. Through droopy eyelids they watched the firelight flicker off the ceiling. Through feather-swaddled ears they listened to the ocean sounds

coming through the grate. Just as they were about to drift off to sleep, there came a soft knock at the door.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

Waldo awoke to a pounding in his chest and a roaring in his ears. He shook his flabby jowls to clear the cobwebs and opened one eye, opening it just in time to see Brother Owen kick him in the ribs again. Groggily, he tried to roll out of reach of the flying boot, but yelped in pain as his backside was seared by the hot metal plate behind him. Mercifully, Owen turned away, giving the Cap'n time to right himself.

Rolling to a sitting position, Waldo stared up at a full moon splashed into the middle of a star-filled sky. Through a gap in the side of the iron wagon, he could see the forest rushing by. He had no idea where Owen was taking him. He was somewhat relieved that it wasn't Hell itself, but he doubted he was going to like their actual destination any better. He crossed himself, cursed brother Owen, and began the arduous task of standing up.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

Beck latched the door behind him and crossed to the big canopied bed. Covers up to her nose, Callie's big green eyes twinkled up at him from the feather pillow. Sitting on the edge of the bed, he reached out to brush the red curls from his sister's forehead. He didn't know where to begin. His heart was pounding. 'Was the Deacon really planning on 'doing away' with him?'

As he was working up the courage to share with Callie what he'd overheard, a giggle from under the covers startled him to silence. Just as he was about to ask whether Annie had returned, her blonde curls and blue eyes slid up onto the pillow next to Callie. Both girls smiled rather guiltily at him. Beck blushed a deep crimson. As usual words were hard to come by in Annie's presence. He decided to keep what he'd heard to himself.

"I asked Annie to stay with me tonight," said Callie. "She looked horrible when she got back and I couldn't bear the thought of her being alone. Besides..." Callie stopped and looked at both of them, then continued with a twinkle. "...I knew you wouldn't ask her to stay with you." It was Annie's turn to blush. Beck looked away, lips fluttering.

Callie barged ahead, taking control of the situation like she usually did. Grabbing Beck's hand, she guided him to the opposite side of the bed and sat him down so that Annie's head was cradled in his lap. Giving him a 'you know you want to' look, she even grabbed his hand and put it among Annie's ringlets.

"Why don't you tell us a bedtime story?" she implored in her best little girl voice. "Tell us my favorite. Pretty, pretty please."

Beck had to slow his racing heart. He didn't dare look down at the big round eyes staring up at him from his lap. His hand was noticeably shaking but, just as he was about to remove it from Annie's head, she reached up and held it tight. The movement caused one of her breasts to peek out from the coverlet and his heart raced even faster. Looking up at him, Annie sensed this and smiled. She then took his trembling hand from among her ringlets and cupped it over her breast to show him that her heart was beating just as fast as his.

"P-please..." she said, voice cracking. "Tell us a story." Callie snuggled closer and they both looked up, waiting for him to begin. They lay there in silence for a few minutes, Callie's head on Annie's shoulder, Annie breathing heavily to Beck's gentle rubbing of her breast, and Beck consumed by the sensations pouring forth from his fingertips. There was silence except for the crackling from the fireplace, the rushing waters from the grate, and the beating of their hearts. In time, Beck broke the silence.

"Long ago and far away, before the Dark Times, away from the Unwashed, there lived a beautiful Princess in a magical city on a hill. She lived in a glass Castle one hundred windows high that looked out onto a marble pyramid even higher. Bridges that took a whole day to cross spanned the water, and boats bigger than

islands sailed beneath them. There were even boats that flew among the clouds like birds.

“And when this Princess wanted fire all she had to do was say ‘fire’ and there was fire. And when she wanted water, all she had to do was say ‘water’ and there was water. And when she wanted to summon any of her subjects, all she had to do was say their name.

“Hers truly was a magical city. Hers truly was a magical time. It was a time of peace where women dressed like men and men acted like children. Leaders listened to their people and people respected their leaders. It was an innocent time.”

Beck paused to look down at the softly snoring Callie and an Annie fighting to keep her eyelids open. With a last little squeeze of her breast, he eased himself out from under Annie and placed her head softly on the pillow. When his eyes showed hesitation, she reached up and pulled him down to steal her first kiss. His, too.

He stood, ears burning, lips tingling, and fingers trembling. As he backed toward the door, he finished his story throatily.

“Long ago and far away there lived a beautiful princess in a magical city on a hill, a city they called Santon Francisco in the Barony of Callie ...fornia.”

When he closed the door behind him, both girls were sound asleep.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-
-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

-----Chapter Four-----
-----CONFRONTATIONS-----

Will awoke to the sounds of silence. The drums from the camp of the Unwashed, which had been beating all night, stopped just before dawn. He stretched, rubbed his eyes, leaned up on his elbow, and looked across the dying campfire at the still-sleeping Macy. He smiled.

Struggling to a sitting position, he drew his bedroll around him to ward off the morning chill. All about him the camp was coming to life. Will stoked the fire with the last of their wood and set the remains of last night's stew among the embers. Rising up, he went in search of a latrine.

That done, he decided to make a quick tour of the camp. With any luck he might be able to make contact with Arthur Camberly and get away with Macy before the battle began. He felt a twinge of guilt at this. The Unwashed were everyone's problem. If they ever managed to overrun the Enclaves, the Dark Times would descend again. And he had spent much of his youth dreaming of going into battle. But dreaming of it and actually doing it were two totally different things. At this, he felt a twinge of shame.

Two days ago he was a lowly ships apprentice. ...a lowly ships apprentice with some lofty ambitions, Waldo called them daydreams, but a lowly ships apprentice nonetheless. Cap'n Waldo used to tell him he ought to be careful about what he asked for. He didn't really understand that until just now, and just now he was in the thick of things and there would be no turning back.

Yesterday, as he sat across the table from Madam, he'd known he was being manipulated. Macy might not have been aware of what she was doing but the Madam certainly was. When he'd agreed to *borrow* Waldo's ship and head off in search of Arthur Camberly, it sure seemed like the right thing to do at the time. Assuming that Madam was telling the truth, Arthur Camberly would be the next Baron. Should anything happen to him, the title would pass to his brother, Owen. Will cringed. That could not be

allowed to happen. He had to make certain that Arthur survived this battle. Or even better, didn't participate in it at all.

Reaching the rise he'd been aiming for since leaving the latrine, Will stopped to look around. Behind him loomed the walls of the valleyHo Enclave. To his right, the Inland Sea stretched to the horizon. The ridgeline to the left was dotted with the tents of the nobility and the campfires of their followers. Stretching before him was a gently rolling, grassy valley that would from this day forward be remembered as a battlefield.

The valley was two full longbow shots in width and at least three in length. A ridgeline paralleled the one he stood upon, arising out of the Inland Sea, both ridges ending in the tree-covered uneven terrain off to his left. Out of this broken terrain flowed a stream, it's steep-sided, rock-strewn gully flowing along the base of the ridgeline opposite.

From where he stood, it looked to Will like the entire slope opposite was alive, so many were the scurrying Unwashed and so large was there camp. As Will watched, their drums began again, this time to be answered by pounded rhythms from his own side of the hill. Turning back, he could see a double line of drummers stretching into the distance along the base of the wall. Behind them stood a gaily-clad line of heralds, trumpets at the ready.

About a third of the way across the valley sat a stone farmhouse surrounded by tilled, fenced-in fields. As the drums behind him picked up their beat, Will watched a group of mounted nobles headed for the farmhouse. In their lead was the Gubnator of Sacton, his plate armor gleaming in the early morning sun, a purple pennant waving from his up raised lance. With him were the CeeEeeHo of San Hoton, the Seneschal of the Flame, and two others who made Will's heart sink a bit. Both wore surcoat's of green with white oaks upon them. It was Sir Edmund and Arthur.

Obviously there would be no easy answers today. Will turned around, steeled himself for battle, and hurried back down the hill toward Macy, breakfast, and his destiny.

Annie awoke to the sound of church bells. Disoriented, she blinked her eyes open and groggily groped her surroundings. Fingers finding flesh, she flashed back to the night before, and for a moment wondered how she'd come to be lying next to Beck. Realizing it was Callie she was caressing, she withdrew her fingers as though she'd been burnt.

It all came pouring back: The Baron's death. The Baroness' threats. Her trip into town. The Madam. Sara. Her brother. The twins. Callie's softness. And Beck. Most of all: Beck. Fully awake, yet not quite ready to confront the day, Annie lay there staring at the ceiling, consumed by the various smells which were Callie, soothed by the rhythms of her steady breathing.

Turning her head, Annie inhaled the red curls arrayed on the pillow just inches from the tip of her nose. 'Oh, Callie.' she thought. 'How different my life would have turned out if not for you.' Unconsciously, she raised her arm and brushed the back of her fingers along Callie's spine.

Today was going to be quite a day: A day of new beginnings. Most days one could just wake up and react to the events as they unfolded. This wasn't going to be one of those days thought Annie. This was going to be one of those days upon which the future was built. Annie could feel it in her bones.

Mindlessly, she continued to caress Callie's back. It was obvious that she was going to have to go down into Friston today, but dare she leave Callie and Beck to the mercy of the Deacon on this, of all days? With the Baron gone, whatever was going to happen was going to happen fast. A funeral needed to be planned. A coronation. A wedding, even. Annie shuddered at the thought.

She couldn't let it happen. She would have Owen Camberly killed before she'd let him touch the fiery little enchantress laying next to her. Beck might make a good Baron one of these days, but not with the Deacon looming over him and a threat of the twins in the background. It was insane to oppose the Deacon and Baroness, but what choice did she have?

Somehow, all roads led back to the Red Knight. She just knew it. Too much effort had been put into the illusion to let it die along with her brother. As long as the Red Knight existed in the hearts and minds of the people, the Deacon could not sleep soundly. Somehow, the illusion had to go on.

Just then, Callie snuffled and rolled towards Annie, placing a head on her shoulder and flopping a leg across her thigh. Snuffling again she snuggled in close to Annie, then resumed her steady breathing. Annie brought her arm up across the sleeping girl's shoulders and held her tight. Callie's hair smelled of smoke and berries.

That smell reminded Annie of Beck and she smiled to herself, again drawn to the magic of last night. Callie's soft breaths blew warm across Annie's nipple. Without even realizing it, she began massaging her other breast, the one attended to by Beck's trembling fingers the night before. Nipples engorged into perky pink points, Annie's breathing grew ragged.

Squeezing Callie tighter, her other hand roamed lower in an attempt to calm the butterflies in her stomach. Circular motions on her belly just seemed to bring Beck closer. Slender fingers probing the fine blonde hair below just seemed to bring him to life. When her fingers found the moistness there, it elicited an involuntary moan.

As her fingers rhythmically probed the noisy wetness, Annie cracked an eyelid and stole a glance at the still-sleeping Callie snuggled on her shoulder. She probed faster. Callie snuffled but stayed asleep. Annie found herself in a predicament. She couldn't stop. But she dared not continue. Her body started to stiffen. The fire in her belly began to spread. She clenched her teeth.

At just that moment, Callie snuffled herself awake and looked questioningly up at Annie. The leg which had been thrown across Annie's thigh began moving up. It stopped when her knee encountered Annie's squishy wetness. Annie grunted and looked down into Callie's uplifted eyes. Callie's eyes twinkled and held her gaze.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

Waldo awoke to the sound of prayer. His feet were on fire, his head was freezing, and every bone in his body ached. Forcing one crusty eye open, he could see that he was still aboard the iron wagon, whereas Brother Owen was on the ground, on his knees, deep in prayer.

The Cap'n struggled to sit up. Behind his head was the car that held the black fire rock. Off to either side were the steps leading to the ground. At his feet, the door to the fire pit stood open, it's inside still glowing orange. No wonder his feet felt burnt. He pulled them back from the doorway and sat with his back to one of the side walls. Grabbing a dipper of water from the fire bucket, he poured it over his shoes, watching the steam rise.

"Aaaah." he sighed, reaching for another dipper. Changing his mind, he grabbed the bucket and poured the whole thing over his still steaming dogs. Clattering the empty bucket into a corner caught the attention of the Paladin, who crossed himself, rose, and approached.

"Thought you were gonna sleep all day, fat man." he challenged. "Wouldn't wanna miss all the fun, now would ya?" With a sweeping gesture, he drew Waldo's gaze to the battle preparations occurring on the slope behind him. The Cap'n became aware of the sound of drums.

He rolled himself across the deck and down the steps to stand at the Paladin's side. Standing in the shade of the valley Ho Enclaves walls, they surveyed the valley stretched out before them, Inland Sea to their right, hilly, copse-covered terrain to their left. Waldo's jaw dropped when he saw the size of the Unwashed's camp stretched along the ridgeline opposite.

"The great Unwashed! Baaah!" growled the Paladin, spitting into the dust for emphasis.

"Every brickful of civilization the Enclaves represent was built with the mortar of thousands of their dead. Every day we

spend in the light is a struggle against being dragged back into their darkness.

“Look Cap’n Waldo. See Cap’n Waldo. The devil lives. Today we will see the Devil in the flesh. We know not how today will and. Today, we know only one thing.”

Brother Owen stopped, crossed himself, and looked to the heavens.

“Today we know only one thing: God is on our side!”

With that he turned on his heel and headed for the back of the iron wagon. Waldo crossed himself, gulped, and followed.

As far as he was concerned, the Unwashed *were* the Dark Times. As a child, he’d heard the stories of the Dark Times. ...of the days when there was no law, no history, no art, nor music. Only darkness. A time when men lived and died like animals. The Dark Times were every Enclave’s worst nightmare. Especially since they existed just beyond the walls and were there for all to see.

Waldo knew that there were times even before the Dark Times, but he knew nothing more than superstition and rumor about them. The iron wagons alone were proof enough of their existence. But like ants devouring a peach in the sun, the Unwashed had managed to use the Dark Times to remove all traces of any of the sweetness that may have existed before.

Waldo was sweating buckets and the sun was barely above the horizon. The time may come later today when he would be grateful for the chainmail shirt Owen forced on him, but it hadn’t come yet.

By the time he got to the back of the iron wagon, the Paladin had already supervised the unloading of the Brotherhood’s mounts. It was an impressive sight. Dozens upon dozens of warhorses were lined up, in full armor, festooned with the red and gold colors of the Barony. Similarly bedecked squires held each mount as their riders huddled around Brother Owen in conference.

All of a sudden the drums stopped. Waldo looked first to the silenced drums at the base of the wall, then towards and Unwashed camp that seemed to be flowing across the stream in

front of it and swarming onto the valley floor like a plague of locusts. Then the drums began again, only faster this time.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

Callie awoke to the sound of heavy breathing. Staying still, eyes closed, she held on to the tension-filled softness that was Annie. Peeking through closed eyelids, she could see one perfectly pointed nipple just inches from her eyes, vibrating in rhythm to the unseen caresses that were going on below. Tingling, she felt her own juices begin to flow.

Annie grunted softly, and the small spasms which wracked her body seemed to continue right on to the very core of Callie's being. So she snuffled and snuggled closer, pushing her knee forward until her now tingling mound was pressed tight against Annie's thigh. Callie had to be careful not to cry out herself.

So she lay there, held on tight, and listened to the ever-faster beating of Annie's heart. Every little grunt brought a smile to her lips. Every little spasm increased her own excitement. When it became too much to bear, Callie snuffled, yawned, and looked up into Annie's eyes.

Annie blushed and immediately stopped what she was doing. When she dropped a leg over the edge of the bed in an attempt to get away, Callie held on tighter and brought a knee up to softly rub against the wetness of Annie's now wide-spread legs. Annie's half-hearted struggles only caused Callie to hold on tighter and rub even harder.

Without a word, she reached for Annie's hand and cradled it in her own. While continuing to rub herself against Annie's thigh, she guided Annie's hand back to the warmth at the top of her legs and pressed down. When she started rubbing in a wet circular motion, both of their breathing became ragged again. Callie then looked into Annie's eyes, smiled, and snuggled back down onto her shoulder. When she leaned forward to peck a nipple, Annie jerked. When she removed her hand from Annie's, Annie continued the circular motions. When she raised her hand to

kneaded a breast in the way that Beck had done the night before, Annie started spasming uncontrollably.

Callie held on tight. Annie's cries seemed to scream between her own legs, which were rubbing for all they were worth against Annie's thigh. Eventually, the spasms racking Annie's body subsided and her cries were reduced to moans. She clutched Callie tightly and buried her face in the red tresses on her shoulder. Callie continued to rub lightly against her as Annie's breathing slowly returned to normal.

With a kiss on top the head, Annie pushed the still-panting Callie off her shoulder and over onto her back. She could feel the cool wetness running down her thigh from where Callie's heat had just been. With a whispered "thank you", she exchanged positions, placing her head on Callie's shoulder, dropping her leg across Callie's thigh, and grabbing the other thigh to open her legs wider.

She looked up into the panting eyes of her friend, smiled, and whispered throatily.

"I've done just about everything else there is to do for you. I guess I can do this, too. Now shush. Close your eyes and lay back."

With that, Annie settled back down upon her shoulder and snuggled her still sensitive, sopping-wet mound gently up against Callie's thigh.

Annie's fingers trembled a bit as they traced their way along Callie's damp thigh, headed toward the wet mound of fiery red curls at the top. Her nostrils were assaulted by the primal smells pouring from the both of them.

"Can you make what happened to you, happen to me?" croaked Callie. Taken aback, Annie's hand stopped traveling up Callie's thigh.

"You mean you've never..." she asked, trailing off. She could sense a shaking of the head as her hand continued its journey northward.

"I'll try," she answered as her fingers encountered the wet folds of Callie's femininity. With renewed purpose and distraction

a smile on her lips, she began her ministrations.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

Macy awoke to the sound of dogs: Thousands of dogs. Dogs of war. A chill ran up her spine. If there was one thing the citizens of the Enclaves feared even more than the Unwashed, it was their dogs.

Even Macy remembered the childhood stories of the heroes who first cleared the Enclaves of the packs of dogs which had ruled during the Dark Times. Dogs were the Enclaves' worst nightmare. Any dog seen inside an Enclave was killed on sight. The barking of dogs instilled a special kind of primal fear in all Enclavers. Unfortunately, the Unwashed knew this all too well.

In response, the drums along the wall beat louder. Pushing her fear of dogs aside, Macy sat up, eyes drawn immediately to the pot of stew warming in the embers. The smell made her mouth water. She looked around for Will. Not seeing him she went over and lifted the lid.

All around her men were preparing for battle. The effect of the howling dogs was evident in their eyes as they quietly went about their business. Swords were being sharpened, bows strung, and armor donned. The drums beat faster.

As Macy was stirring the stew, Will appeared over the rise, lugging armor and weapons. Approaching the campfire, he dropped it in a pile and stuck his nose in the pot.

"I'm starving," he said, reaching for a bowl. Macy scooped a portion out for each of them and started jabbering between mouthfuls, big eyes roaming.

"Will you look at this! Can you believe it! Wait'll I tell Madam. Wait'll I tell Annie. They'll nebber believe me! I'm gonna be in a battle. Even I don't believe it! Bring on those dirty old Unwashed."

Will shook his head, caught up in her enthusiasm, yet all too aware of the realities of the situation. Finishing the last of his

stew, he packed up their campsite and went over to the pile of weapons and armor.

“C’mere Macy.” he called over his shoulder. When she approached, he handed her some leather armor, a metal, pointed helm, and a small dagger.

“Wow!” she exclaimed reverently. “For me?”

“Not unless you see another skinny midget standing here.” Will teased. She slapped him on the top of the head with the flat of her dagger.

Will donned a chainmail shirt and a pointed helm similar to the one he’d given Macy. Lastly he strapped on a scabbard and inserted in it a rather plain but deadly looking short sword. When he turned around, there stood Macy, all decked out and doing her best to look fierce. He went over and knelt down in front of her.

“Listen to me good.” he began solemnly.

“We are here for one reason, and one reason only. We are here to get a message to Arthur Camberly. If we can get to him before the battle begins, all the better. If not we need to do our best to see to it that he makes it through the day alive. He needs to know what happened to Sara and you-know-who.

“He and Sir Edmund need to get back to Friston as soon as possible. Passing that message along is why we’re here. Do you understand?”

Will wasn’t reassured by the fire he saw in Macy’s darting eyes. “Do you understand?” he repeated.

Macy’s said she did but he wasn’t convinced. He didn’t know how to communicate to her the life-and-death nature of what they’d face today. He wasn’t sure how he was going to handle what they’d face today. He would have tried to send her back, away from the battlefield, but he knew she wouldn’t have listened. They’d just have to make do.

“So what’s the plan?” she asked, virtually quivering with excitement.

“C’mon, I’ll show you.” he said, heading to the top of the hill, Macy babbling the whole way. She shut up in mid-sentence upon reaching it, the battlefield spread out before them. Will was

surprised to see that, in the few minutes he'd been over the rise, virtually the entire Unwashed camp had poured across the stream to line up on the other side of the valley. The howling dogs put Will's teeth on edge.

All along Will's side of the valley, the Enclave forces were moving forward, lining up on either side of the stone farmhouse. The left flank, snug up against the broken ground at the end of the valley, was held by the troops of the CeeEeeHo of San Hoton, black and turquoise banners fluttering. San Hoton was famous for its archers and light troops, who could be seen in and among the trees to the left of the line of mounted knights

Will scanned the red and gold clad chivalry lining up to the left of the farmhouse. He could pick out the gaudily-clad Seneschal of the Flame, but he couldn't make out Brother Owen from among the rest of the fighting monks. To the far right, flush up against the Inland Sea, waited the formidable mounted knights of the Gubnator of Sacton, each with a lance held high, purple pennant flapping in the breeze off the water.

Will focused his attention to the right of the farmhouse. There lined up the green and white surcoated troops from Marinwood. No sooner had he turned his gaze in their direction, than did Sir Edmund and Arthur separate from the pack, swords raised, to ride along the front exhorting their troops. At the same time the Gubnator, the CeeEeeHo, and the Seneschal did the same. A mighty roar went up all along the line.

When Will turned around to beckon Macy to follow him down the hill after Arthur, she was staring back into the camp. Just as he reached out to get her attention, the heralds picked up their horns and trumpeted the battle's beginning. .

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

Eric awoke to the sound of trumpets. He jerked awake and sat up quickly. His Da was nowhere in sight, but Richmond and Simon could be seen across the campfire, reloading their saddlebags. 'How could he have slept so late?'

Just as he was about to call out to Richmond, he had that funny feeling again, the feeling that he was being watched. He glanced to the top of the rise just in time to see a tall, chainmail clad warrior and his shorter leather-armored companion disappear over the rise. He could have sworn the shorter one had been looking at him. But it was probably just his imagination. He was jumpy, that's all.

Climbing out of his bedroll, he strapped it up and took it over to his horse, which had already been saddled. When he found out that his father had gone off to see some business associates, he took the opportunity to go to the top of the rise and check out the situation on the other side.

What he saw there made his heart race. It was as though the entire field in front of him were alive. All along the ridge below him were the forces from the Enclaves. Charging at them from the other side of the field were hordes of screaming Unwashed and their howling dogs. The sky between was filled with enough arrows to block out the sun. As he watched, the Gubnator's troops on the right and the CeeEeeHo's troops on the left, cantered forward. The middle held its ground around the stone farmhouse.

Eric could see Sir Edmund and Arthur on horseback in front of the farmhouse conferring with the Seneschal. Just then, Richmond strode up.

"Your Da's back. It's time to get down there. C'mon now."

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

Beck awoke to the sound of knocking. Before he could reply, even before he could re-arrange the morning wood, the door burst open and in barged his mother. Uncomfortably, he sat up and re-arranged the covers.

"Get up! Get up! Get up! Daylights-a-wastin'." she singsonged as she swept into the room, followed by her retinue. She looked disapprovingly at the covers as Beck looked with longing at the chamber pot.

The Baroness and her minions filled the room before Beck managed to get in word one. She went straight to his wardrobe and began tossing his clothes over her shoulder to the trailing servants.

“Mother! What are you doing?” croaked Beck, still wiping the crust out of his eyes. “My clothes!”

With a dismissive wave of her hand, she turned to him and harrumphed:

“While these things may have been good enough for a boy running around the Castle, they just won’t do for someone who will become Baron in a few weeks.”

When she turned away to hand-off one final armload, Beck took the opportunity to bound out of bed and head for the chamber pot. The tittering that caused behind him was brutally silenced by his mother.

“Let’s get serious here!” she barked, shoving the remaining servants out the door ahead of her.

“I’ll send the tailor up after I’ve spoken with the Deacon.” she barked at Beck as he finished up at the chamber pot.

“He’s headed over to his library on Pelican Island and won’t be back until late tonight. We have a funeral to plan. A coronation. A wedding, even.”

At this, Beck twirled around.

“You can’t!” he shot back.

“Don’t tell me what I can’t, young man. With someone as weak as you representing the family name, we’re going to need the backbone Owen Camberly will bring to us.”

“But he’s a monk.” whined Beck.

“That’s what I’m going to speak with the Deacon about right now. Owen will be leaving the Brotherhood. He’ll make a fine husband for Callie. That girl needs some of her spirit tamed anyway.

“We have decided to do everything at once. As soon as all this unpleasantness is complete over in ValleyHo, we’ll send out the announcements.”

“Announcements?” questioned Beck, as he lowered himself back down onto the bed.

“Yes. Announcements.” she answered, hand on the door. “The Deacon had the wonderful idea of declaring a weeklong holiday. Feasts. Tournaments. The funeral. The crowning. ... and a wedding!

“Come now. Get dressed. I need to go roust that lazy sister of yours out of bed. Come now.”

With that, she closed the door behind her and was gone. Beck sat on the edge of the bed, in shock.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

Eric wasn't happy with being told to remain behind with the horses. Truth be told, he wasn't too happy with anything having to do with this trip. Two days ago, he'd been asleep in his big warm bed when a ruckus outside his door awakened him.

Jumping out of bed, he'd gone outside and talked himself into being taken along on the quest to find Edmund Camberly. Why all this interest in the Camberlys he wasn't certain. No one told him anything. That was why he was in such a foul mood. That, and not getting to go down the hill into the thick of things.

From where he stood holding the reins, he could see Sir Edmund and Arthur out in front of their troops. Unlike the Seneschal's lines, the Unwashed had yet to reach them. He could even see his Da, Simon, and Richmond making their way through the green and white clad troops toward the front line. It was hard to miss Simon. Even from this distance, he seemed twice as big as everyone else.

On the other side of the farmhouse, the Unwashed and their dogs had already reached the Brotherhood's lines. Even up here, Eric could hear the dogs' screams of pain as the Brotherhood lashed into them. On the flanks, the CeeEeeHo and Gubnator were moving forward.

One moment, Eric was squinting into the sunlight, the next he was in shadow with a chill washing over him. His horse snorted and shied away, feeling it too.

Regaining control, he looked over his right shoulder and into the burning eyes of the shadowed warrior looming over him. It was Arthur's brother, the Paladin of the Flame. Before Eric could bring himself to speak, the heavily-armored, red-surcoated warrior spurred his mount foreword and headed down the hill.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

"There... There... Don't stop!" panted Callie. Annie stopped and Callie groaned.

"You're mean." she squeaked, spasming as Annie started in again. "Ooooh, that's nice."

Annie smiled, leaned forward, and nibbled at Callie's hard little nipple. Callie squirmed beneath her and Annie held on tight. She had to admit to herself that she had wanted to do this for a very long time. The two of them had shared everything else. ...all the bath she had given. ...their awakening sexuality. ...her feelings for Beck. Callie was a being of passion and it was hard not to get caught up in her aura.

So, as Annie lay there, in control of the heat building within Callie, she felt as if her own body was on fire. She continued to rub gingerly up against Callie's thigh. Her fingers continued to probe Callie's wetness.

"Are you getting close." she whispered. "Close to what?" croaked Callie. Annie smiled as she felt Callie's body stiffen. She could hear her breath catch in ragged bursts. She could smell the juices flowing between her fingers. 'Uh-huh, she was getting close.'

There was a loud commotion. It took Annie a moment or two to realize it wasn't coming from within. It was coming from just outside the door! Callie groaned.

Annie quit what she was doing and plastered herself tight to Callie's body, even as her still trembling friend sat up and brought

the covers to her chin. She tried to still the pounding of her own heart as Callie panted out: “C-come in.”

The door burst open and Annie could hear the Baroness chattering at the servants accompanying her. She could hear Callie try to slow her breathing and smiled in spite of herself. She hoped that the overpowering aroma of what they’d been doing wouldn’t be obvious. She held her breath.

“Oh, good. You were up.” said the Baroness, seemingly unaware of Annie’s presence among the coverlets.

“Are you okay, my girl? You look a bit flushed.” Annie heard her approach the bed as Callie replied.

“N-n-no. I was j-just having a b-bad dream, thassall. Is breakfast r-ready?? I’m starved.” She clutched the covers tighter about herself. “Let me get dressed. I’ll be right down.”

“Alright.” replied the Baroness, steps retreating.

“I need to go see that Annie anyway. It’s time for her to go back to her own people. Never did like her. I need to tell her that her services are no longer needed here. Now get up.”

With that, Annie heard the door close and moved aside so Callie could lay back down, still breathing heavily.

“C-can we finish?” she asked. After what the Baroness just said, Annie’s mind was in a thousand different places, but she too wanted to finish. Despite the passions that were being shared, she felt an overwhelming sadness, a sadness for the times that were over, times that would be no more once she crawled out of bed.

So she snuggled back down onto Callie’s shoulder in an attempt to block out what was coming, even if for only a few minutes more. She threw the covers aside so that she could watch as her fingers again sought the fine red curls at the base of Callie’s belly. When Callie brought her leg up, Annie’s hand moved down into the wetness again. Callie moaned.

This time her other hand snaked its way down between herself and Callie’s thigh until she was able to do for herself what she was doing for Callie. After a few strokes she was able to

coordinate her movements until both bodies were tensing in unison. She was close. Callie was close. Almost there.

“Ooooooh, that’s it.” cooed Callie. “Yaaaah.” replied Annie. A little harder. A little faster. Stop. Then continue. Almost there.

“There... There... Don’t stop!” squealed Callie. The bed was bucking. “Oh my... Oh my... Oh myyyyy...!”

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

Waldo was ecstatic at being told to remain behind with the iron wagon. To tell the truth, he was happy for the first time since he met that crazy Paladin. As he looked out over all the mayhem going on in front of him, he was wicked glad he wasn’t part of it.

“Want me to guard your damn iron wagon?” he muttered. “Glad to do your bidding. ...you maniac.” Waldo chuckled. “Yessir... Yessir... Yessir...” He rubbed his hands together and looked around. There would be some profit here today if he played his cards right. The fact that there would be a valley littered with bodies was of little consequence. But the possibility that the Paladin might be one of them was.

As he watched the young Camberly ride down the hill, it was obvious the Enclaves had their hands full. All along the line, the Unwashed pressed forward, the howls of their dogs chilling the fat man to the bone. To his right, the Gubnator’s Knight’s left bloody carnage in their wake as they advanced forward supported by bowman from the ships lining the Inland Sea. To the left, CeeEeeHo’s troops were similarly advancing, supported by light troops harassing from the broken terrain.

It was in the middle that things were interesting. On both sides of the farmhouse, the Unwashed were holding their own. Waldo could see the Seneschal of the Flame out in front of his warriors, hacking away, body parts flying in all directions. Waldo grimaced at the war dogs ripping at the exposed flesh of the Seneschal’s steed.

It was on the other side of the farmhouse that things were really, really interesting. The Camberly’s green and white clad

Marinwood troops were being pushed back by the Unwashed and their dogs. Waldo could no longer pick out Edmund and Arthur from among their troops. But he could pick out the red and gold clad Brother Owen, who had made his way toward the Marinwood troops rather than those of the Brotherhood.

Just as he was about to turn away, another movement caught his eye. 'It was that damn cripple and his two mangy companions.' They were off to the right of the Paladin, surrounded by swarms of the Unwashed and their dogs. A small force of Marinwooders were fighting their way to the rescue. Waldo had to give it to him. 'That was one persistent gimp.'

That made two assholes Waldo's black little heart hoped wouldn't make it through the day. Rubbing his greedy little paws together in glee, he turned his attention to the iron wagon and the plundering possibilities it represented.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

It seemed like a good idea at the time. Eric had rarely disobeyed his Da, but staying up on the hill holding the horses when history was happening down here in the valley just seemed wrong. When he had seen his Da, Richmond, and Simon get cut off by the latest surge of the Unwashed, he'd tied off the reins and charged headlong down the hill. What seemed like a good idea at the time was looking more and more like sheer insanity every minute.

Back up against the farmhouse wall, he reviewed his options. Up ahead to his left was where he last saw his Da, surrounded by the Unwashed and their dogs. All around him dismounted Marinwood knights were hacking and slashing as wave after wave of unarmored Unwashed assaulted them. Body parts were knee deep in some places and the blood flowed in rivers at their feet. Eric tried hard not to be sick.

Inching along the wall, he headed in the general direction where his Da had been when he'd seen him from atop the hill. Reaching the front edge of the farmhouse, he peered around the

corner. A line of knights two deep were holding their ground, swords swinging against the onslaught. In the narrow space between them and the wall milled their squires, replacement weapons at the ready.

Zippering around the corner, he threw himself headfirst through the window and into the farmhouse. He landed hard on the earthen floor, helmet flying off and rolling to the far wall. He could hear the tinkling of armor and the murmur of voices. Lifting his head, he could see that the room was full of warriors. One of them grabbed him by the scruff of his neck and hauled him to his feet.

"Eric? Eric Hawkins?" he hears, and turns to look up into the kindly old face of Edmund Camberly.

"Sir Edmund." he replies in confirmation, bowing his head.

"What are you doing here, my boy?" asks the warrior.

Eric explains to him that he and his Da had been searching for him for two days. He told of their troubles in Friston, their journey from Benton, and how he'd been told to wait up on the hill with the horses. When he explained his reason for coming down the hill and the danger his Da was in, Edmund flew into action, a look of concern on his face.

Until that moment, Eric didn't realize that Arthur Camberly was in the room too. As he looked on, Edmund organized a group of knights and men-at-arms to go out and rescue his Da. While they were forming up, he dragged Arthur aside and handed him some papers. They seemed to argue quietly among themselves, but Eric couldn't make out what they were saying.

When they were done, Arthur stomped off into the back room, and Sir Edmund came over to him.

"I'm gonna go out and do my best to make sure your Da is safe." He winked. "While I'm gone you stay here and make sure my son is safe." He gestured toward the back room. "Deal?"

Eric's eyes darted to the back room, then to the serious faces of the warriors making ready around him.

"Deal?" repeated Sir Edmund.

“Deal.” mumbled Eric. As he watched the green and white surcoated warriors pour through the door on their mission to rescue his Da, the hair stood up on the back of his neck. He whirled toward the window, just in time to see the residue of what was no longer there. ‘Was someone watching him... Or was he just losing his mind?’ He shrugged and headed off into the back room.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

“What do you see?” whispered Will from around the corner. Macy turned away from the window and held a finger to her lips. She turned back just as Eric whirled around. She dropped below the window sill just in time, and crawled forward toward the door. When Will attempted to follow, she motioned for him to stay where he was.

Just as she was passing the door, it flew open, flinging her into the line of squires. Looking up, she saw Sir Edmund come flying through the door at the head of a force of screaming warriors. As they surged forward, she got caught up amongst them and found herself being propelled toward the Unwashed lines.

Having lost sight of Will, and unable to go back against the surging tide, she turned to face forward and drew her dagger. Her heart was beating fast and her mouth was dry. The smell of blood was everywhere. Her feet seemed to be moving of their own accord, moving faster and faster until she found herself running.

The Unwashed fell back in the face of Edmund’s charge. Seeing a small mace on the ground in front of her, she sheathed her dagger and picked it up. Seconds later, a growling war dog broke through the line of knights in front of her and lunged. Heart racing, she swung the mace with both hands, tearing off half of the dog’s face. What was left of it lay whimpering on the ground behind her as she was forced forward.

She stumbled to her knees in the gore and spewed up her breakfast stew. The hacked-off body parts and rivers of entrails

she knelt in kept her heaving long after everything was up and out. Shouts of “Get up, boy!” rung in her ears as she was passed by the others. Wiping her mouth with the back of a hand, she clutched her mace, staggered to her feet, and pressed forward.

Her ears rang with the wails of the dying and the sickening impact of weapons on flesh. In a daze she swung her mace at anything in front of her that moved. She looked into eyes that she knew she would carry with her the rest of her life.

After what seemed like forever, the advance slowed, then stopped. Macy pressed forward against the unmoving wall of knights in front of her. Amidst all the wailing, it took her a moment to realize that their war cries had been replaced with a reverent silence. Parting the bodies in front of her, she could see Sir Edmund on the ground, blood pouring from various wounds, leg twisted unnaturally beneath him.

Surprisingly, he was speaking to the crippled guy from Friston. She watched as the dying warrior brought the other's hand to his lips and kissed it. When he let go and pointed a finger back toward the farmhouse, the cripple lifted his head and looked right through her. Macy did her best to go invisible and wondered how she was ever going to find Will in all this mess. When she looked back, Edmund was alone and the cripple had blended into the crowd.

Turning around, she steeled herself to retrace her steps across the blood-strewn battlefield. She froze. Striding towards her, seemingly oblivious to the pain and gore around him, was an imposing figure in red and gold. It was Owen Camberly. The Paladin stomped up to her, whacked her aside, and headed for Sir Edmund. Macy scrambled to her feet and took off running.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

Annie slid out from beneath the covers and stood naked to the early morning chill. Her legs trembled with muscle memory from what she had so recently shared. She turned back to smiled down at Callie, still tangled among the bedclothes.

"I never imagined... That was beautiful." whispered the reclining beauty. Annie just shook her head, her smile saying all that needed said. She gathered up her clothes and sat back down on the bed. Callie reached out and grabbed her breast, giggling as she gave it a tweak.

"I like your boobs. Mine are so small." Annie blushed.

"Well mine aren't exactly big. We've got to find you a man." At that they both laughed.

As Annie started pulling on her clothes, the mood turned somber as conversation turned to Owen Camberly.

"The battle has probably started out in ValleyHo. Maybe he won't come back." said Annie hopefully.

"I should be so lucky." sighed Callie. "No. I don't think getting out of marrying him will be that easy." She paused. "Maybe I could lure him to my bed and poison him."

Annie shook her head as she pulled on stockings.

"I don't think so. Something tells me that even you couldn't entice the holier-than-thou Owen Camberly into your bed before the vows were said. Something tells me it won't be easy, even after the vows. He is a strange bird, that one. ...a strange bird indeed." At this they both shared an uneasy laugh.

"What are we going to do?" wailed Callie, flopping back.

"That's what I'm headed down the hill to find out." replied Annie, pulling her dress over her blond curls.

"I've got it go down into town and talk to some people. Everything depends on getting the people behind the Red Knight and spreading the news that the twins live."

"But what if Owen...?"

"Don't even think that!" Annie shot back. "Once Sir Edmund returns, he'll get things straightened out."

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

"Where is it, old man!"

Will looked on in horror as Owen Camberly seemingly shook what little life was left out of Sir Edmund. The father looked

into the hate-filled eyes of the son with the peace of one who knew he wasn't long for this world.

Will could see Sir Edmund shake his head, but when he opened his mouth to speak, nothing but blood came out. The Paladin, realizing he wasn't going to get an answer to his question, threw the old man back down into the dirt and turned away in disgust. Will could have sworn he saw a smile crossed the old knight's lips. The Paladin stood still, head down. There was a bristling among the encircling warriors, but none dared speak.

Will scanned the vicinity for signs of Macy. Not seeing her, he reluctantly looked back across the body-strewn battlefield. His heart sank. 'He made her feel safe. Haah!'

When Macy got swept up by Sir Edmund's charge, Will did his best to follow. When the tide turned and the Unwashed started retreating, it seemed to energize this whole section of the battlefield. Men-at-arms swarmed around the corner of the farmhouse and surged forward, battle cries on their lips. Will joined them and followed in Edmund's, and Macy's, wake. The adrenaline surge which had brought him this far was spent. Dejected, he looked around.

He couldn't afford to waste much time looking for Macy. Since Arthur wasn't here among the charging troops, he figured he must be back at the farmhouse.

Reluctantly, he turned and started walking back toward the house. He scanned the ground in front of him, praying he wouldn't find what he was looking for. His heart ached for all those he couldn't help. His eyes avoided the worst of what he saw. His ears were numb.

Behind him he could hear yet another surge by the Unwashed. Thankfully, most of their dogs were already dead, so those sounds didn't assault his ears. But looking back over his shoulder, he could see that the Enclavers still had their hands full. The spot where Sir Edmund had lain was once again behind enemy lines. Brother Owen could be seen rallying the Marinwooders to hold their ground.

When he turned back to the farmhouse, his pulse quickened. There was Arthur, probably Sir Arthur by now, and he was leading a troop of mounted knights from around the side of the house. Will angled himself to cut them off.

As they approached, Will managed to flag them down by nearly throwing himself in front of Arthur's horse. It was only by pulling out one of Sara's red silk scarves and invoking her name that he managed to divert the young noble's attention. After explaining the Red Knight's death and Sara's condition, Will waited as Arthur processed the information. Seeming to have come to a conclusion, he turned back to Will.

"Do you know of Richard Hawkins?" he asked.

"No, M'Lord." replied Will.

"A cripple. You've not seen him?" persisted Arthur. Will bobbed his head.

"The one in the fancy coat? Yeah... Yeah... I seen him. I seen him earlier today. He's here."

"Good. Good." replied Arthur. "I need you to do something for me. It is very important. It is very, very important. I need you to get these papers to him." With that, he reached into his pocket, withdrew a sheaf of papers, and handed them off to Will. Then continued.

"I need you to find him. Give him these papers. And keep him safe."

Will solemnly shook his head. Arthur motioned his men forward and yelled back over his shoulder.

"As soon as I take care of this, I'll meet you back at the farmhouse. Good luck and Godspeed."

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

'This wasn't turning out to be a very good day,' thought young Eric Hawkins. First, his Da left him atop the ridge minding the horses and now Arthur Camberly left him behind as he went charging off to save Sir Edmund. He kicked at a horse turd lying

in the courtyard and sent it flying into the wall. He punched at a fence post and came away yelping and holding his fist.

He wasn't immune to the gory sights laid out before him, nor the wails of the injured littering the battlefield. He was mad at being left behind but also somewhat relieved. His stomach flip-flopped at the thought of being out there amongst the carnage.

Eric climbed up the fence to get a better view of Arthur and his knights as they crashed into the Unwashed's lines. It was obvious that the fighting was fierce. Thank goodness most of the dogs were dead. They had been getting on his nerves.

Between the front line and where he was perched on the fence, there was no grass to be seen. Bodies of the Unwashed, their dogs, and Enclavers seemed to cover every square inch of ground. The injured and maimed limped back toward him, hacking at any Unwashed that still moved. The stench was overpowering. Flies were everywhere. The sun beat down.

So numerous were the sights and sounds assaulting him that he didn't notice his Da, Simon, and Richmond until they were almost upon him. Just as he readied to jump down and go to them, that feeling of being watched washed over him again. He shook it off and jumped down from the fence.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

There was that boy again, up on the fence. Turning away, Macy raced over to the trough which sat in shadow against a wall. She was so thirsty. But when she looked in, she couldn't bring herself to drink from it. Like everything else here today, it seemed to be covered in a layer of blood.

She plopped down against the wall, put her head in her hands, and fought the urge to cry. When she looked up, a canteen had miraculously appeared at the tip of her nose. She took it and drank greedily.

Looking up a second time, she found herself staring into the sad, tired eyes of an old soldier propped up against the wall behind her. Upon closer inspection, she saw that he was missing

half an arm, blood oozing out of a tied-off stump. He placed the canteen between his knees, capped it off, and put it inside his jacket.

"What's a pretty little thing like you doing in a place like this?" he wheezed. A protest fluttered to her lips, then died as she followed his eyes to the slash in her shirt, one tiny breast peeking out from among the tatters. Her heart skipped a beat as her eyes traced the gash which had cut her shirt, her wrapping, and drew a trickle of blood down her chest. For the first time in her life, she was glad her breasts were so tiny. If they were any bigger, she might be looking down at only one.

Eyes wide and movements hurried, she reached down to re-arrange the fabric and re-cover her chest. The old soldier chuckled, coughed, and spit up some blood.

"Don't worry now. Yer secrets safe with me." He winked at her. "You won't be the first to go off to battle pretendin' to be something ye ain't." He coughed again. "Ye won't be the last." Spent, he lay back against the wall and closed his eyes.

Just as she was about to get up and go in search of Will, that boy came around the corner with the cripple, the big guy, and the dark one. Macy settled back down, brought her knees up, and rested her head on her arms.

"Arthur left just before you got back." she heard the boys say.

"Damn! Damn! Damn!" was the reply. As she listened, she heard them argue amongst themselves as to whether they ought to wait for Arthur to return or head off to the front in search of him. Whatever the case, it was obvious that their purpose for being here was to find Arthur and get him off the battlefield in one piece.

Having made their decision, she peeked an eye open, and watched as they trudged off to the front in search of Arthur. Relying herself to follow, she reached over to thank the old soldier. Her secret was safe. His eyes were still closed and he wouldn't be opening them again. He was dead. Macy jumped up and took off running.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

Beck hurried to dress himself in one of the few outfits left him. He wanted to get out of here before the tailor arrived. He was in no mood for that prissy little man at the moment.

He was torn between the magic of what happened last night and the stark realities of what the Deacon and Baroness were planning. Thoughts of Annie made his heart flip-flop and his fingertips tingle. Thinking of her sharing Callie's big featherbed made the flip-flop move lower and the tingle spread.

Having finished dressing, he went to the door, opened it, and looked both ways. Seeing no one, he stepped into the corridor and closed the door behind him. As he rounded the corner to Callie's room, he could hear the soft voice of the Deacon floating up the stairwell.

Hurrying across the hallway, he let himself into Callie's room and quietly closed the door behind him. He turned, happy to see Callie still tangled in the covers, unhappy to see that Annie had already gone. He went over and sat on the bed. He tried to speak but didn't know where to start.

"You're welcome." she said, looking up at him with her big green eyes. He shook his head and blushed, knowing what she meant.

"I love her." he whispered.

"Of course you do." she replied.

"What am I going to do about that?" he asked.

"I honestly don't know." she answered.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

After all that, it wasn't her. Having turned to watch Arthur and his knights ride to battle, he thought he'd seen Macy off to the left, up at the front. Weighing the promise he'd made to Arthur, he turned back toward the farmhouse, then thought better of it and went forward in search of Macy. The cripple could wait. But now,

having slogged all the way back to the front, he found out that it wasn't her after all.

He reached into his pocket and patted the papers that were hidden there. He'd get them to the crippled guy but he couldn't live with himself if anything happened to Macy. As he was deciding what to do next, a fresh wave of Unwashed slammed into the line behind him. His decision made for him, he turned forward and drew his sword.

Will found himself standing behind a line of knights. None of the Unwashed were getting through, but the occasional body part came flying his way. He roamed up and down the line, stabbing at what he could reach from between the Camberly warriors. He was covered in blood. It was running out of his hair and his jersey was soaked. The clank of metal and screams of the maimed rang in his ears. He hacked left. Hacked right. Stabbed straight ahead.

Eventually, the latest surge subsided, and what was left of it retreated across the battlefield. All around him spent warriors leaned on their weapons or dropped to their knees. As soon as the action stopped, hordes of flies descended. The Enclave's wounded were tended to. The Unwashed's wounded were dispatched with.

Will gasped for air and attempted to wipe off the worst of the blood. He swatted at the flies. He hawked up the nastiness in his mouth and spat.

A commotion off to his right caught his attention. The sound of raised voices propelled him forward. Identifying those voices made him stop.

He found himself at the back of a circle of knights. In the middle, the brothers Arthur and Owen were going at it nose-to-nose. It took a minute or two for Will to understand what they were arguing about. By the time he did, they were rolling around on the ground, trading blows.

Obviously, Owen wanted the papers that Arthur had entrusted with him. When he had heard the word 'will' his head jerked up. But after a moment it was obvious that they were

talking about 'will' as in 'Last Will and Testament', not 'will' as in 'Will Sutter'. Whew!

Then the enormity of it hit him. Reverently, he touched the papers in his pocket. ...a will. ...the Baron's will. Twins... He looked back to the scrapping brothers, looked back just in time to hear a roar erupt from across the battlefield. Looking toward the Unwashed's camp, he could see thousands of dogs pour from the ravine in front of it, obviously saved for just such a moment. Unwashed warriors were right behind them.

When he looked back to the brothers, they had picked themselves up, dusted themselves off, and were preparing to meet the latest onslaught. A chill went up Will's spine and he crossed himself. He wasn't sure if it was because of the dogs or because of the look that passed between the brothers before they turned their attention to the dogs bearing down on them.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

A roar from down below caught Waldo unawares, and he jerked his head up, banging it into the lantern hanging there. With a keening wail, he reached up to grab his head, lost his footing, and plunged through the open doorway, splashing onto the ground below.

Waldo groaned, spat the dirt out of his mouth, and rolled over. Grabbing onto the steps of the iron wagon, he dragged himself to his feet. In disgust, he tugged at the chainmail shirt Owen had given him, untying it and throwing it off.

When he looked up and saw what was happening down in the valley, he wondered whether taking off his shirt had been such a good idea. All along the line, the Unwashed pressed forward. To the left of the farmhouse, the Brotherhood was taking a mauling. The Unwashed were in the farmer's field, pressing the attack.

When he looked to the right of the farm, the Cap'n's heart skipped a beat. A small force of Marinwood knights appears to have been cut off. They were surrounded by the Unwashed and

their dogs. And there, smack dab in the middle of them, all done up in his High Holy, red and gold, finest was none other than that maniac, Owen Camberly.

Waldo whistled softly, clasped his hands together, and did a little jig. 'Good riddance to holy rubbish.' With that, he turned his attention back to the iron wagon and anything lootable that wasn't tied down.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

Annie sat across the desk from Madam. Her trip down the hill had been uneventful. There was a somber hush hanging over the town, a hush that said many of its sons wouldn't be coming home tonight.

As soon as she had arrived, she rushed in to see Sara. She was unchanged but the Doc had told her not to worry, that it was in God's hands now. She stopped at a little altar that had been set up to light a candle for her brother, then was brought here to Madam's office.

Over a supper of bread, cheese, and wine, she relayed to the Madam the intrigues that were going on up the hill. They discussed what role she might play if she were kicked out of the Castle. They discussed ways they might foil Callie's proposed marriage to Owen. By her second glass of wine, Annie was blubbing her love for Beck on Madam's sympathetic shoulder.

"There. There." consoled the older woman. "I've known Sir Edmund for a long time. He is a wise man. He assured me that the will that he got the Baron to sign will make everything right. Everything. You hear me girl? You hear me...?"

"Mmmh - Hmmmh." snuffled Annie. She's snuggled in closer and allowed herself to be held as she hadn't been held since she was a little girl.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

Will could barely hold his arm up but he dared not let it down. They kept coming. He kept hacking and slashing. They kept dying. They kept coming. He kept sending them to Hell.

The small group of Marinwooders around him kept getting smaller. He could see the chimney of the farmhouse off behind him, but there were now Unwashed in that direction, too. They were surrounded. There would be no quarter. They were fighting for their lives.

The dogs were the worst part. He could handle the Unwashed, but there was just something about those damned dogs. He could see it in the eyes of those around him, too. All except Owen. The dogs didn't seem to faze him. His eyes seemed to blaze with a certain something that none of the others saw. A certain something that seemed to direct all of its ill will at Arthur.

Will could hear trumpets off to his left. Looking in that direction, he could see mounted knights wearing the Gubnator's colors, fighting their way toward them. With renewed vigor he turned back to the fray.

First, the warrior on his right went down. Then the one on his left. Will stepped back and the circle tightened. Behind him, he could hear Owen singing hymns at the top of his lungs, punctuated by grunts every time his flail sent another Unwashed to the Great Beyond. A quick glance over his shoulder told him the Gubnator's men were getting close. They might make it after all.

He turned back just in time to swat aside a dog lunging for his throat. As it tumbled to the ground, he grabbed a hind leg and used his sword to run it through from scrotum to neck. It's death growl burbled blood as he stepped on it to pull out his sword.

As he was leaning over, he took a whack to the back of the head that made him see stars and keel over into the dog's entrails. Dazed, he tried to clear his head and stand up. He slipped in the gore and went back down.

The circle had dissolved. All around him, Marinwooders were fighting individual battles against swarms of the Unwashed.

At least most of the dogs were gone. The trumpets sounded very close now.

Will blinked his eyes against the double-vision and tried to re-focus them. He attempted to stand but his body didn't seem to want to listen to him. He slumped back down and gulped in air.

When he re-opened his eyes, he could see that the Gubnator's men had made it to the fringes of their position. 'Yep. They just might make it after all.' His ears were ringing, all sound from far away. But he could still hear Brother Owen singing to the heavens.

When he turned in that direction, he could see two Brother Owens. He blinked to turn them into one. He tried to sit up but his muscles still wouldn't obey. As he fought against the double vision, he saw the Paladin draw a dagger and angle up behind Arthur.

His mouth moved but no words came out. Arthur was unaware of his brother behind him, still focused on the Unwashed in front of him. Just before the Gubnator's troops reach them, Owen slipped the dagger between Arthur's helm and chain mail shirt. Pulling it out, the Paladin pushed his brother toward the oncoming Unwashed and turned toward the mounted Gubnator's knights. As Will watched in horror, Arthur was hacked to death while Owen mounted up and rode to safety.

Will blinked to clear his head. When he opened his eyes, some time must have passed, for things were quiet around him. He looked over to where Arthur's body lay and, 'yep', it was still there.

When he urged his body to move, it listened. Head throbbing, vision blurred, he crawled toward the fallen Arthur. He crawled over bodies and through entrails, flies attacking in force. Halfway there, his palm slipped out from under him and he splashed forward, face-first, into the gore. Lifting himself up, he saw that the papers he'd been entrusted with were now laying in the muck. Grabbing them tightly in his fist, he crawled forward. Not far now.

His head throbbed. His eyes blurred. He kept crawling. 'Almost there.' He clutched the papers tighter and forced himself forward. There was a ringing in his ears.

As he reached the body of the fallen Camberly brother, he heard a commotion behind him. He turned in time to see a war club arcing through the air towards his head. He brought his arms up but knew he was too late. That was his last thought. Then there was blackness. Then there was nothing. As the Last Will and Testament of the Baron of Friston floated off across the battlefield, Will Sutter was no more.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-
-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

-----Chapter Five-----
-----REFLECTIONS-----

The mood at Madam's was much more subdued than usual. Many regulars were missing. Some wouldn't be back at all. Friston held its collective breath, awaiting the results from ValleyHo.

Annie flitted among the girls, offering a word of encouragement here, a pat on the back there. Though they were working girls, most of them had their favorites. A few even had hopes of being whisked away from the life by the proverbial knight-in-shining-armor: Shining armor that was at that very moment fighting for its life on a plain north of ValleyHo.

Tensions ran high. And they weren't helped by Geary O'Farrell and his two nitwit sons. Annie couldn't recall their names, but she had always just thought of them as dumb and dumber. O'Farrell captained a garbage scow of a boat held together by barnacles and bilge rot. He and his sons had been running afoul of the authorities for years, but they had a certain value all their own so the charges never stuck. They were one of the few Bay crews courageous, or stupid, enough to venture out into the Great Western Ocean.

As Annie moved about the room, she kept an uncomfortable eye on the alcove the trio had occupied since oozing their way into the place about an hour ago. They seemed to be throwing money around with more abandon than usual, but that made Annie feel no less sorry for the girls dragged into the alcove with them: Especially Lily, the little oriental beauty. She always seemed to come away from her encounters with them black and blue and a bit worse for the wear.

With a final glance at Lily, and a weak smile in return, Annie went off in search of Madam. It was getting late and she had to get back up the hill in time to get ready for the Midnight Mass being held in the Baron's honor. After looking in on an unchanged Sara and lighting another candle for her brother, she was surprised to find Madam's office empty. Finally, she tracked her

down at the loading dock in the back, off the kitchen. Hands on ample hips, Madam was staring into the fruit cellar, an empty wagon testament to the load just stored there. Turning around, she hustled over to Annie, put an arm around her shoulders, and steered her back toward the kitchen.

"I was just coming to look for you," she said, sitting Annie down and fussing about the kitchen. Returning with a tray of sweets and a pitcher of milk, she sat down opposite. Her overly made-up eyes avoided Annie's for about two cookies and a half a glass of milk. Finally she focused and reached across the table to take Annie's hands in hers. Annie looked down at the red nailed, ring-encrusted fingers, then up into her eyes.

"We've got him." Madam began slowly. "His remains were pulled from the ruined warehouse. They were badly burned. But he rests in the cellar below for now. God rest his soul." She crossed herself. "I can make arrangements to have the casket taken back to your parents, if you'd like?"

Annie hesitated before replying.

"No... No... I think I had better take him back myself. I need to talk to Doc. Sara needs to go home too. As soon as she is well enough to travel..." She left the thought unfinished. Understanding, Madam nodded slowly. She squeezed tighter the hands she held. They shared the moment quietly.

Needing to be alone with her thoughts, Annie stood and went to the window. The cellar door was closed and the wagon was gone. She closed her eyes against the confusion in her mind. So many people depended on her right now. So much rode on the decisions she must make. Her brother needed buried and her sister needed to be taken home. But dare she leave Beck and Callie to the scheming going on up the hill? She turned back to Madam and opened her eyes.

"One more thing," said the waiting Madam. Swallowing the rest of her cookie, she continued.

"We found the armor, too. All the red plating was burned off, but it was all there. We need to get it back to Hawkins. It's in the casket, too."

Annie nodded, one more thing to worry about. Before she had a chance to add this new information to her pile of worries, the door opened and Lily walked in. She padded across the floor, faced them both, and bowed slightly in that certain way she had.

Annie winced, seeing the torn kimono and purplish bruises on her arms. Indignant, she raced over. Lily shook her head to say she was okay. Reaching into her pocket, she pulled out a big handful of coins and lay them on the table in front of Madam.

"It not hurt much." she said, rubbing her arm. "They not too bad today. They very happy. Very generous." She pointed to the pile. "I must get back before missed."

Bowing again, she addressed Madam. "I think you should know. They have much more gold than this. They say they get more tonight. They spend morning getting junk boat ready to sail. Collect gold. Two cries after Baron's Mass, they supposed to be at Castle's stable gate. With wagon. Get big package. Get more gold. Then sail." She shrugged her shoulders. "I get back now."

Annie and Madam were quiet until the door closed behind the exotic beauty. Madam looked at her and shrugged. Annie shrugged back, then voiced her thoughts aloud: "What kind of package could those scoundrels be picking up at the Castle? And where would they be taking it? The Great Western Ocean? I need to get back and talk... to... Oh, my God! ...Beck!"

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

"Beck!" bristled the Baroness. "Be quiet! I will not sit here and listen to you talk nonsense. I don't care what you *think* you heard. The Deacon doesn't have plans to *do away* with you. Get real. Think it through."

With shaking hand, he set down his fork and glanced across at Callie. He knew he'd made a big mistake. He should never have brought it up. 'Did he think she was just going to admit it to him?' But he knew what he heard. They were plotting against him. They were indeed conspiring to *do away* with him and turn power over to Owen Camberly. He'd heard them. At least now he

knew where his mother's loyalties lie. It was unthinkable. It was a nightmare. But he could feel in his bones that it was true. The question is 'what was he going to do about it?'

He took a deep breath and wiped his lips. Looking across the table, he caught Callie's eye and imperceptibly shook his head. It wasn't time to bring up the subject of Annie. The Baroness seemed to have already moved on, fussing as she was over the game bird that had been placed before her.

Beck caught Callie's eye and motioned toward the terrace. When she started to speak, he shook his head and nodded toward her plate. Picking up his fork, he dug in while keeping an eye on his mother. He wolfed down the rest of his dinner, excused himself, and headed for the terrace.

Standing at the railing, he took a deep breath and tried to slow his pounding heart. He looked down at his still-trembling hands, then down at the lights just winking on in Friston. What he could see was all he had ever known. Now he would either have to fight for it, or run away from it.

He heard Callie approach from behind. He could smell her before he could see her. She threw her arms around him and lay her head on his shoulder. Together, they looked out over the only world either of them had ever known.

Annie was down there somewhere. It had hit them both today just how much they had come to depend on her. They were in this together, that was obvious. Beck sighed, thinking about last night. Callie was the first to speak.

"You're absolutely sure?" she said, more statement than question. "Then you have to go. That's obvious. You can't stay here. You can't be here when Owen Camberly gets back. Maybe the Unwashed got him. Maybe he's dead already. But if not... You can't be here when he gets back. You have to go. Find the Red Knight. As long as you are alive, you are Baron."

"I can't leave you." Beck croaked.

"Nonsense!" she shot back. "I'm in no danger. They need me. They need a brood mare. Without me, Owen is not

legitimate. I'll be okay. ...for now. I need you to save me. You can't do that here."

Beck didn't know where to begin. He had rarely ventured beyond these walls. Now he was expected to go 'out there' so that he could return and claim his Barony. Ridiculous. The whole thing seemed hopeless.

"But what if the rumor about the twins is true? Then Arthur will be Baron," he whispered.

"That works," his sister replied. "But you have to stay out of the Deacon's clutches between now and then."

Beck was beginning to see the logic of it, if not the logistics. 'How does one just disappear from everything they know and survive on their own in a world totally foreign to them?' Good question. But it was a question he needed to answer soon. Staying at the Castle wasn't an option.

Turning around, he took Callie's hand in his, and stared into her big green eyes.

"First things first," he said. "I'm not going anywhere before father's Mass. Everyone of importance still left in Friston will be there. Combining father's Mass with a prayer for ValleyHo's dead makes it doubly important that I'm there. We need to wait until Annie gets back before we can do anything anyway. We can wait until tomorrow. That will be soon enough. Annie will know what to do. Let's get ready."

Pushing Callie ahead of him, he headed for the door back into the dining hall. The servants were still cleaning up and the Baroness was nowhere in sight. Crossing the entry Hall, they spied her through the open doorway, huddled in conversation with the stablemaster, a severe man both of them had avoided all their lives. They raced up the grand staircase and headed for Callie's room.

Closing the door behind them, they hurried toward the window overlooking the courtyard. They got there just in time to see two of the stablemaster's men set down a large ornate chest before the Baroness. She seemed to take measure of it with her hands, then nodded in the affirmative and closed the lid. The

stablemaster locked it and handed her the key as the two workmen hoisted it up and headed for the Cathedral.

From among the folds of his cloak, the stablemaster produced a goatskin of God-knows-what and gave it to the Baroness. Holding it away from her body in obvious distaste, she turned on her heel and disappeared inside. As soon as the door slammed shut, the stablemaster looked up at the window, cast them a chilly smile, then turned and followed his workmen toward the Cathedral.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

One foot in front of the other. Eyes straight ahead. Off to the left, a raven grabbed an upper lip in its beak and ripped off half a face. To his right, an armless torso lay in the mud, muttering a death rattle. Flocks of birds rained from the skies. Swarms of insects hung like a fog. If anything could possibly be worse than a battle, thought Eric, it had to be the aftermath of a battle. One foot in front of the other. Eyes straight ahead.

"I don't know," he responded to the back of Richmond, trotting through the mire ahead of him. "I'm not sure. I'd recognize the gold-threaded surcoat. ...the copper-flamed helm. ... The golden acorn on the pommel of his sword. But his face...?"

Eric was the only one of them who had ever been face-to-face with Arthur Camberly. But that was only for a moment, in a darkened room, in the heat of battle. He was tall and blonde but, beyond that, Eric couldn't be sure of anything.

He trudged on. One foot in front of the other. Eyes straight ahead. He, his Da, Simon and Richmond had been searching the field for the Camberlys ever since the Unwashed fled northward. Eric looked west toward the setting sun. If they didn't find them before dark, he feared they never would. He glanced uneasily back over his shoulder at another group of scavengers descending on the battlefield. Townspeople and camp followers were methodically making their way across the battlefield, leaving

nothing but naked carcasses in their wake. If they didn't find Edmund and Arthur before those locusts got to them... Oh, well. They were still on the other side of the farmhouse so they probably wouldn't make it this far until after dark. Thank God for small favors. One foot in front of the other. Eyes straight ahead.

Eric looked to the top of the far ridge at the mounted group of Knights gathered there. The harsh late day sun glinted off metal of every variety and lit up banners of every color. He could make out the Gubnator and the Seneschal among their respective troops. Only one color was conspicuously absent, that being the green and white of the Camberlys.

The Marinwooders had borne the brunt of the Unwashed's final attack, not very far from where Eric now trudged. All around him Unwashed, their dogs, Marinwooders, and horses lay, piled as high as his chest in some places. The carnage here was testament to the fierce fighting that occurred in the last hour of the battle.

When the Unwashed made their final surge toward the farmhouse, the Enclavers attacked on the flanks and encircled them in their trap. The Gubnator on the right and the CeeEeeHo on the left closed in the circle and massacred the Unwashed between them. They chased down what was left into the ravine at the base of the far ridge.

Eric didn't want to think about the carnage that lay in the gully. He remembered a tide of Unwashed being swept into the gully by the mounted Enclave knights, yet only a trickle emerged from the other side to retreat up and over the ridge. They were probably still running northward. The Gubnator had stopped the pursuit at the top of the ridge. He sat there still, astride his huge warhorses, looking back over the field of battle which would forever be associated with his name.

One foot in front of the other. Eyes straight ahead. Eric did his best to not show weakness in front of his Da and his men. Simon looked at him knowingly, but Simon didn't talk. Simon's next word would be his first. Simon was mute. One foot in front of the other. Eyes straight ahead.

Lost in thought and keeping tight rein on his churning stomach, Eric almost bumped into Richmond. Snapping out of it, he had that feeling again of being watched. And it wasn't just because his three companions had turned around and formed a semi-circle facing him.

"Well," began his Da, looking around, then back at the farmhouse, measuring distance. "This looks like where Edmund drove them back to save me. When Arthur later counterattacked this is where the lines would have clashed."

Hawkins rubbed his leg, which was throbbing with a life all its own. Simon hovered protectively nearby. Richmond kept a wary eye on the dead and dying dogs strewn about. His reverie broken, Eric was assaulted by the sounds of the dying, overlaid by his Da's voice.

"If he's here, we need to find him. If he's dead we need to know. If he's alive we need to get him to safety." He glanced back toward the farmhouse. "We need to do it before those scavengers get here. Let's split up. Eric. You go with Simon. Richmond and I will go this way. Look for the flaming helm.... The acorn pommel. Those ought to be the easiest things to spot. If we find him, dead or alive, we've got to get him back aboard the *Siarra's Mist*."

Eric set off with Simon, the back of his neck tingling again. He knew one thing. He'd be glad to get off this battlefield before dark. One foot in front of the other. Eyes scanning left and right.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

Macy was all cried out. Some big tough soldier she made. This morning everything was bugles, banners, and bravado. By evening that had been replaced with death, dirt, and doubt. Macy had known a lot of bad days in her short life, but today had been, by far, the worst. She had changed. Her world had changed.

A last tear made its way down her dirt-streaked face, pausing momentarily before raining down onto the fallen warrior cradled in her arms. In Macy's life, nothing ever lasted. In Macy's

life, she was on her own. She leaned down and kissed her fallen warrior goodbye.

Looking up, she watched as the cripple and his party split up in their search for Arthur Camberly. She too had seen Arthur ride off to battle. He'd made a dashing figure. But, like the boy, she hadn't seen his face.

With Will dead, her next worry was how she was going to get back to Friston. 'Did she even want to go back?' Yeah, it was all she had ever known. Maybe she could sneak aboard the cripple's ship. But she wasn't sure it would even be going back to Friston. She'd get there somehow. She would find a way.

Exhausted, she closed her eyes and laid back down on Will's chest. She needed to clear her head. She needed to think. She needed to make a decision about the crippled guy.

'If he was looking to save Arthur Camberly, he couldn't be all bad, could he?' Macy had often heard Madam speak glowingly of the Camberlys. 'If the enemy of my enemy is my friend, isn't the friend of my friend my friend, too?' It was all so confusing.

Macy's head hurt. She was tired. She hadn't had anything to eat since this morning's stew, and she vaguely remembered barfing that up. Her last drink was from that old soldier's canteen back at the farmhouse. Starbursts danced behind closed eyelids. She was lightheaded and reeling from the bombardment of sight and sound. She squeezed her eyes tighter in an attempt to block it all out.

For what seemed like the longest time, she just lay there listening. Mind blank, she heard the moans, the cries, the shouts. She could hear the flapping of birds' wings and their cries. The worst were the sounds of the not-yet-dead dogs.

She tried to put into perspective the events of the day. She smiled thinking about breakfast with Will.... And the boy who rode with the crippled guy. ...the feelings of victory that consumed her as the last of the Unwashed were chased over the ridge. These memories were tempered by the blood and gore. ...the dogs. ... the old soldier with the missing arm.

The elation she'd felt at victory felt so pale when compared to the vivid pain she'd felt upon finding Will, his head a purplish mass of oozing blood. He was barely recognizable. His hair was bright red with blood and the left side of his face was twice the size of the right. She squeezed her eyes even tighter in an attempt to conjure up his handsome, smiling face. She snuffled and took a big breath, looking for the courage to open her eyes and get on with her life.

When eventually she did open her eyes, stars still danced before them. Among the stars floated an acorn, looking both familiar and surreal at the same time. When she groggily reached for it, her fingers encircled its solidity. It was real. But it wouldn't move.

Eyes focusing, she could see the hilt of the sword peeking out from beneath Will. She blinked a couple of times to clear her vision and looked again. She wasn't hallucinating. Will was lying on top of Arthur's sword. 'There couldn't be two swords with acorn pommel's around here, could there?'

She sat up for the first time since coming upon Will's body. She studied her surroundings and took a peek at the cripple and his companions, receding in opposite directions. Spying a half-full goatskin, she raised it to her nose. She took a small taste. It was fortified wine, but it was wet. She drank greedily.

Head spinning, she took in her immediate surroundings. With a start, she recognized Arthur Camberly's helm and surcoat on a fallen warrior tangled up with Will's legs.

She glanced furtively toward the retreating cripple, then back to the fallen Arthur.

Crawling over Will, she examined the fallen Camberly for wounds. Seeing the blood coagulated in his hair, she was quick to find the stab wound in the back of his neck. 'Arthur Camberly wouldn't be getting saved by the crippled guy today.' She looked back over to Will. Then to the cripple. Then to the giant and the boy. If nothing else it was probably her ticket back to Friston.

First things first. She had to roll Will off the sword. When she stood, everything started spinning and she pitched forward

across Will. From far off, she heard a sputtering grunt. 'Whoaaaah!' She'd drunk wine before but it hadn't hit her like this. When the spinning stopped, she reached out and clawed herself into a sitting position.

When she reached out to roll Will off the sword, her head started spinning again. She shook it to clear it. She could have sworn that the eye that wasn't swelled shut just winked at her. She burped and reached under the body to roll it over, arms under him, butt in the air. That's when she heard the sweetest sounding word ever to grace her ears. It was just her name: "Macy." But it came from Will's lips. He was alive!

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

Callie was furious. She slammed the door behind Beck, raced across the room, and launched herself at the bed, splashing down among the pillows. Pounding away with hands and feet, she buried her face in the bedding and screamed in frustration. She loved Beck more than anything in the world, but sometimes he just infuriated her.

It wasn't like she knew what to do about things. But doing nothing was the wrong thing. Sometimes you had to do something, even if it was wrong. This was one of those times.

She knew that part of her anger towards Beck was misdirected concern for Annie. Whatever was she going to do without the faithful Annie? There was absolutely no way she was going to marry that monster, Owen Camberly. But first things first. Beck's life was in danger and he had to do something about it, preferably before Owen Camberly returned from ValleyHo.

There was another something she had to admit to herself, too. She was jealous, jealous and afraid. She dreamed of having someone look at her the way Beck looked at Annie. 'What girl didn't dream of being looked at in that way?' But she was afraid of being left out. ...of being alone. All their lives the three of them had done everything together. Those days were over.

Beck had better find some spine. The next few weeks around here are going to lay the foundation for the future of the Barony, not to mention the rest of their lives. Beck had better find some spine or they would lose everything.

Callie's fury had yet to abate whenever door was flung open and the Baroness glided in, accompanied by the usual fawning herd.

"Lazy, lazy girl. Tsk, tsk, tsk." she mocked. "Come now. Come now. Get your lazybones off that bed and start getting ready. You want to look your dazzling best for tonight. *Everyone* will be there." She headed for her daughter's wardrobe and started fingering through Callie's gowns

Callie rolled over and stared daggers into her mother's back. She considered asking about the chest and the goatskin but she restrained herself. All she would get would be lies anyway. 'Why bother?' How could she have been so wrong about this woman? They had never been close, but as long as her father was nearby, there had been an uneasy truce. That truce appears to have been broken.

By the time the Baroness pulled her head out of the wardrobe, Callie's face was a blank mask. She didn't even respond when a gown was thrown on the bed, accompanied by all the reasons it would be 'perfect' for tonight's Mass.

That done, the Baroness headed back for the door, sweeping her retinue in front of her. Hand on the door latch she turned back and addressed Callie over the tip of her nose.

"Oh. And by the way. For your safety I've decided to assign a couple of men to stand guard outside your door. They will keep you safe and accompany you to Mass. You have about an hour."

Two armed men appeared over her mother's shoulder. Callie grimaced, seeing that they were the stablemaster's men, the same two who had carried the chest to the Cathedral. They looked in and smiled at her with stained, broken teeth.

Before the door even clicked shut behind her mother, Callie felt as though she had aged years. In an instant she had grown up. She had left childhood behind. She could sense the enormity of the stakes for which they now played.

Composing herself, she decided to head for Beck's room to apologize for her earlier outburst and plan for the coming days. When she opened the door, the stablemaster's men turned toward her and blocked her way. The one with the bad teeth smiled and held up a filthy hand.

"M'Lady sez we wuz to keep you safe here until da Mass." he drawled, eyes roaming her body. "Now you be a good girl and go an' git ready now."

"Out of my way!" Callie screamed. "...or I'll have you whipped!"

He just laughed.

"Now. Now. Miz Callie. Da Baroness'll have us killed." he chuckled, reaching toward her. When she recoiled and stepped back, he just reached past her, grabbed the door latch and pulled it closed. Callie stood there in shock, a prisoner in her own room.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

Macy started to cry again. It wasn't her imagination. She wasn't crazy. She heard him say her name. She saw him wink. Yet despite her every effort she could get no further sign of life out of Will. In frustration, she pounded on his chest. With a sputter, he coughed up a big ball of bloody sputum. Macy let out a sigh of relief.

With his airway cleared, Will came around to a state of semi-delirium. He looked at Macy through glassy eyes. He seemed to be trying to speak, but said nothing. Macy trickled some of the wine onto his parched lips.

Will was alive, but it was obvious he needed tended to, not unlike thousands of others strewn all around him. Macy despaired. 'How would she ever get him help?' What a tragedy it would be for him to survive the battle, only to die now for lack of

care. Macy took another big swig of the wine for herself. Then a thought crossed her mind like lightning streaking across the sky.

She looked left towards the cripple, then right towards the other two. Then down at Will. Her eyes darted around, making mental calculations. It was crazy but it might just work.

Jumping up, she fought the nausea, burped, and scanned about for a loose sword. Finding one, she wedged it under Will and used it to roll him off of Arthur's sword. Macy jumped when Will yelped as his bruised and battered head banged into a piece of plate armor. She rushed over and eased off the helm which hadn't given him much protection and placed a bloody, greaved calf under his head for support.

With Will out of the way, she turned her attention to the fallen Arthur. She picked up the acorn-pommeled sword and laid it beside Will. She wrestled off Arthur's copper-flamed helm and dented it with a rock on the same side as Will's swelling. She even took off the silver spurs and placed them over Will's less-than-noble boots.

There was nothing she could do about the obvious lack of quality evident in Will's chainmail shirt. But, by taking handfuls of the blood puddled everywhere, she was able to douse and disguise somewhat his boots and other clothing.

With a nervous glance over her shoulder at the now converging members of the cripple's party, she went back to Arthur. With no little effort, she managed to get the gold-threaded surcoat off of the dead Camberly and onto the still-delirious Will. Another glance told her that she had only a few moments more before the arrival of the others.

Glancing about, she was able to find a smaller sized green and white Camberly surcoat, which she slipped over her head and cinched with a belt. She was also able to upgrade her helm and dagger with better quality ones.

She was almost ready. She looked at Will. Check. She looked down at herself. Check. She looked at Arthur's body and decided she should roll it over and blended it in with the other bodies lying around.

As she was doing this, she noticed a big gold Signet ring, bearing the oak tree family crest, adorning his finger. But, try as she might, she couldn't pull it off of his bloody, mangled finger. The others were close enough that she could hear the boy and the cripple shouting across to each other. With barely a second thought, she pulled her dagger out, cut Arthur's finger off, and palmed the heavy ring.

Rolling over and staying low, she slipped it on Will's thankfully smaller finger. That done, she pecked Will on the cheek, made sure her boobies weren't showing, and whispered "Wish me luck."

Jumping up, she burped, fought the urge to barf, and brought the dizziness under control. Stumbling forward, she did her best to affect the haughty swagger of nobility and called out:

"I say there boy! I need some help over here. Now!"

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

Annie closed the door quietly behind her, careful to conceal its presence here in the dark recesses of the stables basement. She paused to catch her breath, winded from the long tunnel climb up from the port. Her ears strained to make out the voices floating at her from the stable floor above. It sounded like the stablemaster barking out orders but she couldn't make sense out of any of the other voices.

Creeping closer to the stairs, Annie could make out snatches of the conversation. It seemed the stablemaster was expecting a trunk to be delivered to him here sometime after the Baron's Mass. That must be the large package that O'Farrell and his boys had been contracted to haul away. Staring up through the opening she could see more gold being exchanged. Curiouser and curiouser. She needed to get to Beck. And soon.

Something furry skittered across her foot, and she jumped back, knocking over a pitchfork. It got quiet upstairs. When she heard the stablemaster order one of the men down the stairs to

check it out, she slowly backed up toward the hole in the wall that led to the basement of the rookery.

By the time the stablemaster's flunky reached the bottom of the stairs, she was through the hole and halfway across the adjoining basement. At the far end she eased a door opened as quietly as she could and let herself into the sub-levels of the Castle itself. Securing the door behind her, she headed for the servants stairs that led up to the storeroom above. Once there, she cleaned herself up and hurried off in search of Beck and Callie.

Rounding the corner to the family quarters, she came up short at the sight of guards posted outside Callie and Beck's rooms. They didn't look like the normal Castle guards. Most of those would be over in ValleyHo. No. They looked like more of the stablemaster's men. That couldn't be a good thing. No. Not at all.

Annie withdrew into the shadows for a moment to think. She needed to get in to talk to Beck but she wasn't at all certain that they would let her. They must be on guard for a reason. A frontal assault on the door probably wasn't in her best interests right now. No. This was a situation that called for the old end around. Retreating around the corner, she headed back to the servants storeroom. She was still in servants dress from her trip down the Hill, so all it took was tucking her hair up under a scarf and grabbing an arm load of towels to turn her into a servant. No one paid servants much mind, always coming and going. Rerounding the corner, she held the stack of towels up high, did her best to affect a subservient servant shuffle, and headed for Beck's room.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

One foot in front of the other. Eyes scanning left and...

"I say there boy. I need some help over here. Now!"

Eric stopped short and focused on the apparition stumbling toward him. A blood-drenched young boy dressed in Camberly

colors was weaving his way toward them. Simon looked down at him and shrugged his shoulders. Eric shrugged the back, then went to meet the apparition halfway.

Drawing close, he could swear there was something familiar about the boy, something that caused the hair to stand up on the back of his neck. He couldn't quite place it. But it seemed rather obvious that the boy was drunk. Eric doubted that the goatskin over his shoulder was filled with water.

Despite the dirty disheveled appearance, Eric couldn't help but notice the classic beauty of the pageboy-framed features. The tear-streaked tracks down the grimy face struck him as somewhat odd, too. It had been a long hard day for everybody. Obviously.

Over the boy's shoulder, he could see his Da and Richmond hurrying toward them. As they converged, the boy darted away from them and began pointing. Following his finger, Eric's eyes came to rest on a fallen warrior in Camberly colors. It took a moment for his brain to register the fine surcoat. ...the adjacent flaming helm. ...the acorn sword.

Eric's heart soared. Truth be told, he didn't care one way or the other about Arthur Camberly. But here in front of him lay his ticket for getting off this damn battlefield. He knelt down next to the wounded warrior as his Da and Richmond hurried up, chattering to each other.

The wounded warrior was babbling, obviously delirious. Richmond bent down and trickled water over his lips. Simon helped him up to a sitting position. He opened his eyes but they didn't seem to focus on anything. Eric could hear his Da talking to the boy.

"What's your name boy?" he heard.

"M-uuh-Mace..." was the answer, trailing off. "I'm Arthur's Squire."

"I thought Arthur's Squire was Blackwood?"

"Uh- uh. Yeah. That's it. Mace Blackwood. Uh... Uh... Are we going to stand here all day talking, or are we going to help him?" the Squire shot back. As if to emphasize the point, he bent down and picked up the sword and helm.

“Let’s go. Let’s get out of here before dark.”

Sensing the urgency, Simon picked up the fallen knight and, between he and Richmond, helped him to his feet. They each took an arm across the shoulders and looked to Hawkins to lead the way.

He pointed towards the Inland Sea, where the *Siarra’s Mist* lay at anchor, then strode off, leading the way. Simon and Richmond followed, Arthur slung between them. Eric and ‘Mace’ took up the rear.

After they’d gone a ways, Eric turned to his somewhat shorter companion.

“I just can’t get over this feeling that we’ve met before.”

‘Mace’ did his best to assume the haughty air necessary when speaking to an inferior of non-noble birth.

“If I’d have seen your raggedy ass, I’m sure I’d have remembered it.” Mace replied with a glance to the rear. Suitably chastised, Eric shut up and trudged forward, feeling for pretty much the first time since he’d embarked in Benton, that he wasn’t being spied upon from afar. One foot in front of the other. Eyes straight ahead.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

“Dat bastard got ta be half-cripple, half-cockroach!” muttered Waldo as he watched Hawkins and his party escort the wounded Camberly toward the Inland Sea. He looked longingly at the copper-flamed helm being held aloft by the acorn sword. Those would indeed have fetched a good price.

Waldo was itching to head down into the carnage to do a little shopping for himself. but Owen had told him to stay with the iron wagon and one steely eyed look from that asshole was powerful inducement indeed. Before greed could get the better of him, Waldo’s heart sank as he spied the Paladin heading up the hill leading a troop of mounted Brothers.

Reining in just short of the fat Cap’n, Owen jumped off his horse and handed it off to a waiting Squire. Eyes still blazing with

battle lust, he zeroed in on the fat man. Unbuckling his sword, he threw that too to a waiting Squire.

“Cap’n Waldo! Cap’n Waldo! My fat little good luck charm. What a glorious day it has been. God was on our side today. The Unwashed are on their way back to the Hell that spawned them.”

Waldo stared at the blood-drenched Owen, unsure of what to say or do. He decided to go with his strength and be his usual smarmy self. A bit of congrats here. A little ego stroking there.

“Yes sir. Yes sir. ‘tis God’s will you’ve come out whole. Yes sir. Yes sir. ‘tis testament to the favor God holds the Camberly family in. I trust you got to speak to the good Sir Arthur?”

Waldo saw an opening here. Gold danced in his eyes.

“If not, I could go down there.” he pointed. “...and relay a message to ‘im afore ‘e gits on that ship.”

The Paladin whirled around, squinting in the direction of Waldo’s pointed finger. He zeroed in on the Camberly surcoat and copper helm. His mouth hung open.

“That can’t be. He’s de... Come on. Let’s get this iron wagon back to Benton. If I’m not mistaken, you’re the Cap’n of a ship anchored there. Come. Let’s get rolling! Now!”

Waldo sighed, took one last look at the lost profits represented by the battlefield, hung his head, and followed.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

One foot in front of the other. Eyes straight ahead. Eric was doing his damndest to ignore the insufferable young squire marching drunkenly at his side. ‘Raggedy ass’ indeed! It had been a long, long day and Eric would be glad to be back aboard he *Siarra’s Mist*. He’d head straight for his cabin, wash some of the blood off, eat until he burst, and hit his bunk until this day was far, far behind him. One foot in front of the other. Eyes straight...

“So, boy. Is there anyone aboard that...that...boat with any medical training?” When he was slow to answer, there was a wrapping of knuckles on the side of his helm. “Hellooo! Anybody in there? I’m talkin’ to youuuu!”

Eric wanted to lash out, but a glance back from his Da stifled the urge. His Da answered for him.

“Richmond here has more than a little experience patching up battle wounds. He’s no doctor but he’ll keep him alive ‘til we get him to one.”

Hawkins quickened his pace even as he continued talking over his shoulder.

“So tell me Mace. What happened back there? Did you see Arthur go down?”

Macy wasn’t sure how to answer. The real Arthur died from a dagger wound to the back of the neck. That was as likely to have calm from an Enclaver as it was from one of the Unwashed. Perhaps even more likely. While she didn’t think any of these four were responsible, it did seem to suggest that Arthur had some powerful enemies out there. She didn’t want to endanger Will with a careless statement.

“No. No.” she answered. “I came upon him after he was down. We got separated when the Unwashed attacked that last time. I was beside him... fighting off the dogs, yeah. Yeah. I was fighting off the dogs. I got... I got driven back when the Gubnator crashed into us. Yeahh... That’s when I lost sight of him.”

Macy glanced sideways to make sure Eric wasn’t suspicious of her story. He was marching: ‘One foot in front of the other. Eyes straight ahead.’ Emboldened, she finished answering his father’s question.

“I’d been looking for him since the battle ended. I found him just before you showed up. Uuuh. Uuuh. Can we quit all this talking and get aboard the ship. My throat is parched.”

She took another swig from the goatskin, belched a big one, then held it out to Eric.

“Here boy. Want a swig?” she slurred. He reached for it, took a big pull, and choked it up, coughing. Macy laughed uproariously and pounded him on the back. Ears reddening, Eric righted himself and moved forward just as she slapped him on the butt. Simon looked back with a knowing smile. Macy continued to needle.

“That’s okay boy. I’m sure there’ll be some sody pop on the ship. I used to like that when I was a kid.”

Eric seethed. Macy continued.

“By the way. Arthur and I will share a cabin when we get aboard ship so that I can be there to look after him.” She looked at Eric.

“You must have a nice cabin. I’m sure that’ll do. You won’t mind bunking somewhere else, will you? No. Of course you won’t. How nice of you.”

Eric seethed. Macy started whistling. Simon looked over his shoulder and grinned. One foot in front of the other. Eyes straight ahead.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

“Just set them on the chair.” Beck barked over his shoulder to the servant girl who had just entered with an armload of towels. Curtseying, she mumbled a reply and clicked the door shut behind her. Modestly, Beck sunk down lower in the tub.

Having set down the towels, she kept her back to him and went to get the kettle of hot water heating in the fireplace. Gliding around behind him, she slowly and carefully added it to the tub. When some of it splashed onto the back of his neck, he yelped and sat up. The girl mumbled apologies and reached down for handfuls of cool or water to splash on the affected area.

Wiping away the sting turned into a massaging of the shoulders. Beck meant to protest but never quite got around to it. When she reached for the soap and began scrubbing his back, he just went with it. The tension seemed to melt into the water along with the grime. When she began washing his hair, he just closed his eyes and purred.

With a head and eyes full of soap, he could hear her shoes drop to the floor. Then her stockings came off. Next thing he knew, she had stepped into the water behind him and sat on the edge of the tub. She pulled him back to lean against her legs and returned to kneading his soapy scalp. When her toes started

burrowing bum, he became all too aware of a stirring in the water in front of him.

Soap still in his eyes, he groped for the suds to cover his predicament. He heard a giggle behind him. When he leaned forward, she took hands full of water and poured it over his soapy head. He could feel her feet walk up his back until her toes were kneading the back of his neck. Beck groaned in ecstasy. He heard another giggle.

When he felt her hands on his shoulders to turn him around, he summoned every bit of willpower he could muster and reached up to grab her wrists.

"I-I-I-can't," he croaked. "I just can't. It's not r-right. I'm sorry. You have to leave. I'm expecting someone else."

With a last tickling of the toes marching down his back, Beck heard her step out of the water. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw her reach for a towel and retreat to dry her legs and put her shoes on.

Returning to the towels, she grabbed one, threw it over his head, and vigorously began drying off his hair. When the towel was removed, he felt a light kiss on the top of his head. Then he felt a squeeze around the shoulders and a whispering in his ear that said "I love you."

Beck froze as footsteps retreated for the door. When he whirled around in the tub he was looking at the prettiest bath attendant he could ever hope to see. He was looking at Annie. When she threw him a towel and he reached up to grab it she tittered: "Is that your rubber ducky in the water or were you just happy to see me? Get dressed. I'll be right back." With that she was gone.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

Callie crossed herself and knelt before the small altar. With trembling fingers she lit a candle. Bowing her head and clasping her hands before her, she took a moment to acknowledge just how desperate she must be. She hadn't done much praying in her life.

She just never seemed to find the time. Nor could she seem to sit still for very long. She figured that if God really had something to say to her, he would find her in church on Sunday morning.

But these weren't normal times. Callie's nicely ordered little world was crumbling around her. Her father was dead. And before she'd even had a chance to mourn him, everything else changed too. Beck's life was in danger. Annie was being banished. Her mother was obviously scheming against all of them. And lurking in the background: the ever-present Owen Camberly.

And now, to top things off, she was a prisoner in her own room. The thought made her furious. Then it made her sob softly. It was just too much. She felt so all alone. Her whole life had been full of people telling her what to do and servants waiting on her hand and foot. The biggest decision she'd had to make was which dress to wear to dinner. Orders were orders. She obeyed the ones she was given and others obeyed the ones she dished out. It was a nice orderly world. It was the past. Following orders now would be sheer suicide. Sobs subsiding, Callie smiled. Truth be told, the rebellious streak in her had been waiting her whole life for days such as these. Focusing, she began her prayers.

"Dear God. I don't say my prayers as often as I should. But maybe that's because I don't want to waste your time with the little things. It doesn't mean I don't appreciate the incredible gifts that you endowed me with. It's just that, after giving me so much, I feel kind of selfish asking you for anything more. I figure that you figure I ought to be smart enough to find my own way with what you've already given me.

"The world I was born to is indeed a paradise. Every sunset, every songbird, every shared supper is a testament to your benevolence and your glory. The laughs and lives that we, your creations, share are proof enough that we ought to stay out of your way and let you work your magic.

"I have faith in the wisdom of your plan for me and those I love. I also have faith that you have a plan for those yet untouched by your glory. I will try to do my best to not interfere

with that plan and let your magic work in its mysterious ways even when, no, especially when, those ways are ways my humble soul cannot understand. Nor at times, accept.

“That said, I am reaching out to you today in the hope that talking with you will ease my troubled soul. I don’t expect answers, but I hope to get up from here knowing that, at the very least I brought my concerns to your attention. I will know that I have done all I can do in the spiritual realm before attacking these self-same quandaries here on the physical plane.

“I have concern for Beck, my brother and my friend. I fear that he is too good a person to overcome the challenges with which he will soon be faced. I have concern for Annie, my sister in everything but birth. I fear that she will come out the loser in the lifelong fight that has been brewing between her and my mother. I have concern for the love shared by Beck and Annie. I fear that the greatest love I have ever been witness to will be torn asunder, tearing from me in the process whatever dreams I may still cherish of finding such a love for myself.

“Dear God... I trust that you are working your magic and that good is winning its battle with the forces of evil. If you get the chance, look in on the people I love and keep them safe. Oh, and by the way, your servant Owen Camberly professes a deep and abiding love for you, claiming that the wide swath he’s cut in this world has been cut in your name. I don’t lay any claim to being well-versed in what you want from us as we walk through your world, but it seems that Owen Camberly has, just maybe, misinterpreted one or two or a dozen of your teachings. So, should you feel a need to call him back to you for a refresher... I just wanted to let you know that we can make do down here just fine without him. Just thought you ought to know. Thank you God. Amen.”

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

Macy felt a little guilty and a lot nauseous. She chuckled to herself. She’d been riding Eric pretty hard, but more than a little of

that was the wine talking. He probably wanted to kill her and she wouldn't blame him.

Here she sat, in his cabin, probably just having polished off his dinner. She burped. The sausage and potatoes had helped. The spinning finally stopped. She looked at the goatskin hanging from the back of the door and grimaced. All that remained was a bit of a throbbing behind the eyes. Her belly would be okay by morning.

Unable to resist one more dig, she poked her head out the door and hollered:

"Hey boy! The dishes are ready to be cleared." She chuckled, closing the door. It felt good to be waited upon for once in her life. She'd get found out soon enough so she might as well take advantage of it while she could.

Will was softly mumbling, still delirious. There was some method to her madness. The more attention she drew to herself, the less likely someone would realize that it wasn't Arthur Camberly laying there. She squeezed his hand. He squeezed back. When they'd first boarded, the others scurried about making preparations to sail while she and Eric wrestled off Will's armor and bloodied blouse. From a barrel of fresh water, they cleansed his wounds and did their best to get him to drink. Richmond disappeared below and returned with a first aid kit.

Richmond checked him over and seemed to know what he was doing. There didn't appear to be any broken bones. No stab wounds. Some cuts and scrapes were all. His scars certainly seemed to say 'warrior', rather than 'ship's apprentice'. Macy detected no suspicion.

Just when she was sure she had gotten away with her deception, she looked behind her to see Eric stripping off his blood-stained, grimy clothes. When Richmond went over and began priming a hand pump, looking at her with a 'get on with it' look in his eyes, she knew she was trapped.

Hesitating only momentarily, she raced over and pushed the half-naked Eric overboard. She jumped after him, letting loose a blood-curdling scream in the process. When they bobbed to the

surface there was a frantic look in his eyes. He hurried for the rigging on the side of the boat, urging her to follow.

When they were back aboard ship, dripping water all over the deck, he turned on her, fury in his eyes.

"Never do that again!" he seethed. "Men have died for less." He turned around and stomped below. Everyone else was staring at her in shock. Not sure of what she had done, she turned around and followed him below. At the foot of the stairs, she saw him staring into her and Will's cabin. She could hear voices coming from inside.

When she approached, he glared at her and disappeared inside. He returned a moment later and threw some towels and dry clothes at her. Over his shoulder she could see Richmond putting Will to bed.

"Go in there." said Eric, pointing to what looked like a privy. "Take all those wet clothes off and throw them through the porthole. Everything!" he emphasized.

Turning his back on her, he stomped off into the bowels of the ship. Richmond looked up at her with concern on his face. Pointing, he said:

"Do as he says. And be quick about it. Dry off good."

When she had finished, she found Will in the room alone, and a steaming plate of potatoes and sausage awaiting her.

Her reverie was broken by a knock at the door.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

Annie closed the door behind her and came up short at a sight she thought she'd never see. Callie was kneeling at the altar in the corner of her room, deep in prayer. Of all the members of the household, Callie was the least pious. Her fiery, hands-on approach to life didn't seem to translate too well to the spiritual realm.

When Callie paid her no mind, she went over to the wardrobe and started pulling out clothes for attending tonight's

Mass. The lukewarm tub, wet hearth, and towels strewn about testified to the bath already completed.

After pulling out a slate colored silk gown and black velvet bodice for Callie, Annie rooted around to find something for herself. With guards standing outside, it didn't seem like a good idea to return to her room before attending the Mass. She would head straight for the Cathedral with Beck and Callie. Finally she settled on a forest green velvet gown that she had always loved on Callie.

From the jewelry box hidden in a secret door of the wardrobe, she withdrew everything. She selected a gray pearl necklace and bracelet for Callie. She chose an emerald pendant and ring for herself. The rest she carefully wrapped up in a velvet bag and slipped in her pocket.

Hearing a mumbled "amen" from the kneeling Callie, she went over to start helping her get dressed. It took Callie a moment to register that the 'servant girl' was Annie. When she did, she yelped and threw her arms around her.

"How'd it go down there? Is Sara okay? When did you get back? How'd you get past the guards? Are you going to the Mass?"

The questions poured forth, leaving Annie no time in between for answers. So she waited for the flood to abate, then did her best to fill Callie in on what had happened since they'd parted. A reference to their rather intimate parting that morning made the both of them blush a bit.

Annie explained that Beck was, at that very moment, readying for the services and that it would be best if they all attended together. Nodding in agreement, Callie slipped off her dressing gown and allowed herself to be helped into the charcoal silk gown. When she went to slip into some dainty dress slippers, Annie suggested that she choose some sturdier ones "just in case".

When Annie attempted to help button Callie's black bodice, she shoo'd her away and told her to start putting on the green gown if they were going to get ready on time. After stripping out of

the servant's clothes, Annie reached for the gown, but was stopped by Callie.

Pushing up the sleeves of her silk gown, Callie went over and grabbed a sponge from the still-warm bath and returned to the now naked, shivering Annie.

"My turn," she said. "...to bathe you. But we don't have much time." Quickly she sponged Annie off and towel dried her vigorously. Then they finished dressing, each choosing a pair of shoes good for walking. Then Annie put on Callie's pearls. Callie clasped Annie's emerald pendant. They fussed with each other's hair until they were satisfied. Finished, Callie turned to Annie and smiled.

"C'mon. Beck is waiting."

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

Eric stood at the rail, fuming. 'Boy this' and 'Boy that'. Dammit! He had a name. Having grown up on the shores of the Inland Sea, he'd had very little contact with nobility in his life. And now this pretty-boy, no-nothing of a squire was ordering him around like a slave. Getting pushed into the Inland Sea was the final straw. If not for a serious dressing down by his Da, he would probably have punched the insufferable Mace Blackwood right in the nose.

Yet he had to smile. Mace was a character all right. He never shut up, asked way too many questions, and had a passion for life that Eric had to admire. And he had saved his Liege Lord's life. That was surely to be admired. And, despite appearances, Eric couldn't help but sense a twinkle behind all the ordering of him about. The young squire seemed to find great humor in Eric's anger at his subservient situation, but not in a bad way. Mace Blackwood was indeed a riddle, wrapped in an enigma, surrounded by contradiction.

Eric felt a hand on his shoulder, turned around and looked up, way up, into the kindly face of the gentle giant, Simon of Berkton. In many ways, Simon was more of a father to him than

his Da, Richard Hawkins, would ever be. Eric had only been nine years old when his natural parents died in an Unwashed raid along the eastern shore of the Inland Sea. Hawkins had been a business partner of their fathers. When he showed up and offered to marry his older sister Siarra, and adopt him, they jumped at the offer.

From the first day they met, Eric seemed to share a special, unspoken bond with the gentle giant. He wasn't fooled by the baldhead, single gold earring, or huge handlebar mustache. To Eric, the barrel-sized chest and ham-like fists weren't intimidating. They were just Simon. For someone a full head taller than anyone else Eric had ever met, he detected no menace.

Simon didn't speak. But with a look he said more than most men did with a speech. So, with a final pat on the shoulder and a wink that said he knew of the turmoil in Eric's mind, Simon padded off, leaving Eric alone at the rail with his thoughts.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

With a last look at Annie, Callie braced herself, assumed her hardest air, and jerked the door opened. She swept between her so-called guardians, Annie on her heels. Clicking a finger, she called over her shoulder.

"Come! We must pick up Beck before heading to the Chapel."

When the stablemaster's men scrambled to catch up, she stopped abruptly and turned, causing them to bang into each other. Before they could open their mouths, she maintained the initiative and advanced on them. Annie melted into the background.

"While my mother may have assigned vermin like you to be my watchdogs, she did not assign you the task of addressing me. If you ever, ever, speak to me in the manner you spoke to me earlier, I'll have you whipped to within an inch of your life. Do you understand?"

She advanced on them until she was inches from the one who had spoken earlier. He backed up a step.

“Do you understand?” she repeated. He nodded. When he opened his mouth to reply, she turned on her heel and hurried off in the direction of Beck’s room. Striding up to his door, she parted his guards with a glare and rapped three times. Channeling the happier times of their childhood, she sing-songed:

“Hey, hey, in their I say. Can Beck, can Beck come out to play?”

Hearing a muffled reply and a clatter, she retreated across the hall to wait with Annie. The door opened and Beck stood there, sartorially splendid and looking every bit the young Baron-to-be. The illusion was destroyed when he stepped through, flinching at the guards stationed on either side. Callie winced. Annie sighed. They were doomed.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

Eric stood at the rail, lost in thought. A tap on the shoulder caught him by surprise. Thinking Simon had returned, he turned and looked up. Instead, he had to look down. Standing there, big brown eyes staring through him, was Mace. Inwardly, he groaned.

The young squire just stood there, hand on his shoulder, twinkle in his eye, smile on his lips. Eric returned his gaze to the water flowing past and waited. Out of the corner of his eye, he watched the moonlight play off Mace’s pale, almost effeminate, features. He prepared his ears as he saw the lips fluttered into action.

“So...” he heard, a note of reconciliation in the tone. “I just wanted to thank you for letting W... uh... Arthur and and me use your cabin. He’s sleeping now.”

Eric looked back and mumbled a “’twas nothing”. Just moments ago he was fighting mad. Yet in Mace’s presence he seemed to get all flustered. Those big brown eyes just seemed to drain all the anger out of him. Eric was so confused. Mace continued.

“...’men have died for less.’ Those are some pretty big words. Can you back them up?” Eric felt a poke in the ribs.

Flustered, Eric sputtered a reply.

“I wasn’t... wasn’t threatening you. No... No... You misunderstand. Men have died after swimming in the Inland Sea. That’s what I meant. The Inland Sea is dead. No fish. No plants. There are places where you can see buildings sticking up out of the water that are from before the Dark Times. Honest. Before the Dark Times people lived down there. Really! Now it’s just a big lake of poison.”

Eric saw the squire looked down at the water and shiver.

“Then I guess I ought to apologize for pushing you in. ... and thank you for saving my life.”

Eric looked into Mace’s eyes. Mace looked back.

“I’m sorry if I’ve been rude to you. It was the wine talking on an empty belly. Can we start over? Hi there, I’m Mace. And what might your name be. ...boy?”

He looked down at the outstretched hand of the squire then up into the laughing eyes, twinkling back at him.

“I’m Eric.” he managed, taking the outstretched hand in both of his.

“Then Eric it is and Eric from now on be.” came the reply. That resolved, the moment grew awkward. So, lost in thought, they turned shoulder-to-shoulder at the rail and watched the moonlit sea flow by.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

Annie crossed the compound on the heels of Callie and Beck, their watchdogs close behind. She could see the Cathedral’s belltower framed in the moonlight in front of them, its large circular stained-glass window sparkling from the light within.

Lights also poured forth from the stable on her right. Attendants could be seen stabling the horses of the affluent who had ridden up the hill from Friston. A steady stream of furs,

feathers, and jewels poured from the stable and up the wide steps into the Cathedral. It was going to be a packed house.

As they got closer, some of the mourners peeled away to come over and offer condolences to Callie and Beck. From minor nobles to wealthy merchants, they were doing their smarmy best to suck up to Beck, even though every last one of them knew where the real power lay. The Deacon was due back in time to deliver the eulogy and it was he who truly commanded the townspeople's fear and respect.

Climbing the steps, they entered the open double doorway. In the vestibule Callie turned, parted their little coterie of syncophants, and addressed the stablemaster's men.

"Those of your, um, ilk are not permitted into the Cathedral proper. Thank goodness." A titter went up among the crowd. Pointing to a stairway off to the side, she continued.

"You may wait down there. ...with the rest of the servants."

The gathered finery and uppity stares brooked no protest so, without a word, the stablemaster's men followed her pointing finger, and descended the stairwell. Turning back, Callie and Beck led their little entourage into the incense and organ music filled Cathedral.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

Just before Callie had turned back to enter the Cathedral, Annie had winked at her as if to say 'That's the way to show them'. It made her smile. With a sideways glance she looked at Beck and silently prayed. She hoped he realized just how important tonight was going to be. It would be a night of first impressions.

It would be the first time that the movers and shakers from Friston would look at him with the word 'Baron' on their minds. They would be comparing him to his father and pitting that impression against the Deacon. For the most part Beck was well-liked and they would want to give him the benefit of the doubt. But not even she gave him much of a chance against the wily old Deacon.

‘And what of the twins?’ She’d been hearing rumors of their existence her whole life. Like most myths, they cast a large shadow. Over time, myths achieved a perfection that the living could never hope to equal.

As they strode between the pews, Callie could feel every eye upon them. She said a silent prayer for the strength to get through this, not just for herself, but for Beck. Halfway down the aisle, the crowd parted and she caught a glimpse of her father’s casket. She felt Beck hesitate a barely perceptible half-step so she reached out and took his hand.

As they neared the casket, she could feel the dead man’s presence, sense the turmoil of unfinished business. It was a time of change. She knelt down and hung her head in prayer. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Beck kneel, but not before taking Annie’s hand and inviting her to join them. Callie smiled. There just might be some hope after all.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

Beck crossed himself, clasped the hand on either side of him, and hung his head in prayer over the Baron’s casket. He could feel every eye in the Cathedral on him. He could feel the weight of expectations crashing down upon his shoulders. Just when it seemed that the weight would be too much to bear, a simultaneous squeeze from the two women in his life gave him the strength he needed.

Standing, he offered an arm to each of the women in turn, and they headed for a side altar to light candles for those fallen at ValleyHo. Through an open doorway into the rectory, he spied his mother deep in conversation with the stablemaster. And there was that damn trunk again. Atop it sat a silver tray with wineglasses. In her hand, the Baroness held the goatskin she’d been given earlier in the courtyard. As they passed the open doorway, Beck was surprised to hear the Deacon’s sudden sonorous tones. He hadn’t thought he churchmen had returned yet from his library on Pelican Island. Obviously, he had.

As he, Callie, and Annie lit candles for the war dead, the looks that passed between them told Beck that the goings on in the rectory hadn't gone unnoticed. The furrowed brows looking back at him only heightened his sense of alarm. He wished they could talk, but there were too many people around.

Upon leaving the alcove, Beck was surprised to be accosted by his mother, bearing the silver tray. In a voice loud enough for all to hear and imperious enough to leave no room for dispute, she proposed a toast

"To my dear departed husband, may he find the peace in Heaven that so eluded him here on earth."

Beck stared at the single glass of wine remaining in the center of the silver tray. The Baroness continued.

"To my dear precocious son..." Her smile chilled him. "May he find the strength of a man inside the trappings of the boy." Every eye in the Cathedral was zeroed in on the wineglass held before him. The hand at his side trembled. Callie's lips move but no sound came out.

Before anyone could react, and with all eyes on Beck, Annie reached out, grabbed the glass, hoisted it high, downed it in one swallow, and threw it toward the fireplace.

"Hear! Hear!" she cried. "To Beck!" The others drank, cheered, and heaved their glasses toward the fireplace. Amid the uproar, the look that passed between Annie and the Baroness went unnoticed. It was a look that said only one of them would be left standing when all was said and done.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

The two of them stood at the rail in silence for what seemed like forever. For once in her life, Macy was at a loss for words. Out of the corner of her eye, she could see that she wasn't the only one. After the day the two of them had been through, words seemed so inadequate.

"So... boy... sorry... Eric." said Macy, breaking the spell. "Where are we headed?"

"Home." he replied, smiling inwardly at the apology. "We're headed to Sacton and should be there before first light."

"This sure is a fast ship."

"Yeah. It is a privateer. Da patrols the Inland Sea under charter from the Gubnator. The *Siarra's Mist* is probably the fastest thing there is on these waters.

"So you're a pirate." came the reply, the awe obvious in her voice.

"Well-I-I..." came the answer, leaving much unsaid.

"There!" said Eric suddenly, pointing toward the Western horizon. "See the moonlight glinting there?" Macy squinted and followed his finger to a line of what looked like T-shaped scaffolds sticking out of the water. As they got closer, she could see heavy rope or cable strung between them, but also that it was down in many places.

As they neared it, the ship heeled to the right and followed the line made by the unusual structures.

"What is it?" asked Macy.

"They are all over the Inland Sea. And since they all point to Sacton, and Saxton is where the power is, we call them 'power lines'.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

Callie locked the door to the women's privy behind her and assisted Annie over to the sink. With a finger down the throat, she forced the contents of Annie's stomach up, out, and into the bowl. Annie came up sputtering and Callie reached for a towel to wipe her mouth dry.

"Thass wuzsh disgushting." muttered Annie, shaking her head to clear her eyes. Callie helped her over to the window seat and sat her down. Sitting next to her, Callie looked deeply into her eyes to assess the damage.

"You're gonna be okay. Breathe deep. The wine was obviously drugged but it wasn't poisoned."

“Sezzh Yhuu.” countered Annie. “Oh Beckhh. Poor Beckhh.” She put her head in her hands. Callie put an arm around her shoulders and held on tight.

“Come now. We’ve got to get back out there. Beck needs us.”

“Oh Beckhh. Poor Beckhh.” repeated Annie.

“Get a grip.” yelled Callie, shaking her by the shoulders. Standing up, she put an arm out and helped Annie to stand. In the background, the organ music came to an abrupt end.

“Let’s do this.” said Callie.

“Lesssh do thish.” mimicked Annie. Callie rolled her eyes and opened the door.

“Hold on tight,” hissed Callie under her breath. “...and let’s get to our seats without making a spectacle of ourselves.”

When Annie opened her mouth to reply, Callie shushed her quiet and started down the aisle just as Father Tom ascended the pulpit.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

Having packed Eric off to bed, Macy decided to stay on deck for a while before heading below. Curling up on a coil of rope, she drew a tarp over herself and looked up at the stars. It had been, by far, the most magical day of her life and, despite heavy eyelids, she didn’t want to see it end.

She wondered how long it would be before Will was found out and what would happen when he was. He didn’t seem to be hurt too badly. She had been there when Richmond and Eric’s Da examined him. The blood he’d been covered in hadn’t been his. The only real damage seemed to be the God-awful lump on the side of his head. Will was still delirious but that would pass, or so said Richmond.

As she lay there looking up at the stars, she heard footsteps approaching from the bow of the boat. The uneven gait told her that one of them was Hawkins. He intimidated her a bit so she

hunkered down and drew the tarp up over her head. She heard Richmond's buttery voice first.

"...for a couple of days, a week, a month. There's no way to tell with a head injury like that. Time will tell. We just have to wait for the swelling to go down and hope for the best."

"He's more scarred up than I would have thought from what I know about his past."

"They are not battle scars. Just normal practice scars. And the hands have known work. My guess is he knows how to handle himself pretty well. ...for a sissy-fied noble type anyway."

"You didn't find the will, did you?" asked Hawkins, the disappointment thick in his voice.

"No." came the reply. "Do you think the squire might have it?"

"It's possible, but I doubt it. Edmund had it when he left Friston. Madam told me so. He would've entrusted it to no one else but Arthur. And the wound tells me that he wouldn't have had time to pass it along before he was knocked unconscious. Nope. I fear the will is gone forever. If he didn't destroy it, the Deacon has one but that's not going to help us much. I fear our cause is lost."

"But it is him. Right?" Macy's ears perked up.

"Oh, yeah. It's him. The only thing I know with absolute certainty in all this is that the man lying down there with his head bashed in is Arthur Camberly. He has the mark. He's one of the Friston twins. Oh, yeah. It's Arthur Camberly lying down there. ...for all the good it's gonna do us."

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

Father Tom droned on as Callie assisted the still wobbly Annie up the aisle toward their seats. Through the rectory door, she could see her mother whispering to someone in the shadows behind her, probably the Deacon. At their noisy approach, Beck turned and gave them a weak smile. Father Tom droned on.

“...gathered here tonight on this, hiccup, solemn occasion to pay respects to our dearly departed Liege Lord. A great battle has been fought this day and the irony of this confluence of events can't be lost upon...”

Beck jumped up and helped Annie and Callie into the pew before settling back down into the aisle seat. Between the two of them they managed to keep Annie propped up. Callie caught a look of concern and gratitude pass between the other two. Her heart melted at the gesture of Annie drinking what had been meant for Beck.

“...who better to encapsulize what his life meant to all of us here. Who better to, hiccup, guide us through the uncertain times ahead. Who better to...”

Father Tom glanced towards the rectory door, the eyes of the congregation following him. A vague shadow appeared behind the Baroness. An expectant murmur rippled through the crowd. Callie glanced toward Beck, whose eyes remained fixed on Father Tom.

“...so let us welcome to the podium the face of our future, the guiding force for Friston prosperity. So, without, hiccup, further ado, let's have a big hand for...uuh, Beck?”

Callie looked from the face of an obviously distraught Baroness to the back of her brother striding up the aisle toward the podium. She watched as he mounted the steps, nodded toward Father Tom, turned around, and gripped the podium. She hoped she was the only one who noticed the slight tremor. Clearing his throat, Beck looked out across the congregation.

“Father. Family. Friends. Friston.” He paused for effect. “We are gathered here today to pay tribute to my father and give thanks to those who gave their lives in ValleyHo so that we may live free. It is with heavy heart that I address you tonight.

“The coming days will not be easy ones for the Barony. We need to strengthen our friendships, be on guard against our enemies, and know the difference between the two. We need to...”

Callie's mouth hung open. 'Where did this Beck come from?' From up there on the rostrum he radiated a confidence she had never seen before. It wasn't easy for him, which was obvious from his white-knuckle grip on the podium. But he was pulling it off.

"...a learning process. In a few weeks time I will walk down this very aisle to be crowned with the responsibilities and burdens my father shouldered for more than three decades. I can only hope to..."

Callie's wasn't the only mouth hanging open. Out of the corner of her eye, she could see that those around her were as taken aback as she was. Even her mother seemed mesmerized by Beck's performance.

"...Father's reign began grounded in love. All my life I have heard the rumor and innuendo. My father's first wife sounds like a woman I would have been proud to call 'Mother'. The twins she bore sound like older brothers to whom I'd like to have foisted upon the burdens I will shortly assume."

Beck paused as a self-conscious titter rippled through the crowd. Callie looked at Annie, still tipsy but swelled up with pride. Annie looked back, confused but expectant.

Titter having ended, a pin drop could have been heard in the Cathedral. The congregation waited with collective bated breath. Beck filled the silence.

"Father. Family. Friends. Friston. We are gathered here tonight to celebrate the past and pray for the future. To that effect, as future Baron of Friston, I have two announcements to make, announcements that will affect our future. ... all of our futures..."

An expectant murmur arose from the crowd. The Baroness was apoplectic. Callie looked to Annie, but she seemed as in-the-dark as everyone else. Beck waited for the murmur to pass.

"First," he continued. "I would like to follow in my father's precedent-setting footsteps and begin my reign as Baron by setting a personal example of my commitment to the values which will make us strong."

With a glance, he brought every eye in the house to the casket sitting on the floor before him. Looking up, he caught Annie's eye and smiled.

"Annie... Annie... You all know Annie of Pleasanton. And I'd like to think you all hold her in the same high esteem that I do."

A murmur of assent arose. Callie looked at Annie, who looked back and shrugged her shoulders.

Perhaps 'high-esteem' is too fancy a word. My feelings for Annie have to be the worst-kept secret in all of Friston. I have been following her around with googily-eyes since we were both old enough to walk."

Beck paused to let that sink in. His mother looked like she was going to have a stroke. Annie was blushing redder by the syllable. Callie saw it coming and smiled.

"So here, before all of you, in this House of God, I invite you to assist me in asking her to be my wife and your next Baro...."

Before he could finish, the congregation erupted, scrambling to get closer to Annie, engulfing her with their answer. Annie was dumbfounded to tears by their reaction. At Beck's urging, and with Callie's help, she was herded toward the podium, shaking her head 'yes' in the only answer she could manage. She was thrust into Beck's arms and they kissed as the crowd went wild. The more they kissed, the wilder the crowd cheered.

With one arm holding Annie up, Beck used the other to silence the crowd. She burped and held on tight. It wasn't until Beck dropped to a knee in front of her that the congregation settled down.

"Will you be my wife?" he asked. "Yesssh." she answered. The crowd erupted again. Many minutes later, Beck managed to silence them again.

"I can't very well get married without properly asking the father-of-the-bride for her hand in marriage. Nor can I, in good conscience, assume my Baronial duties having seen almost nothing of the world beyond Friston's walls."

As he spoke, Beck took good hold of Annie and started down the aisle toward the back of the Cathedral. Callie looked

from her mother to the double doors in back. At her urging, those around her hurried to the far aisle to block the Baroness heading them off. Others retreated to the back vestibule as Beck continued to cast his spell over them.

“Annie and I will be leaving for Pleasanton to meet with her family. Along the way we will visit the battlefield in ValleyHo and the Gubnator in Sacton.”

He looked in Callie’s direction and winked.

“I trust that Callie and my mother will handle the arrangements on this end. We will be in touch and return in time for the festivities.”

As they neared them, the double doors swung open. Passing through the vestibule, Callie could see the watchdogs assigned to them by their mother stuck at the top of the steps by the logjam of people. The Baroness was virtually vibrating with anger but she, too, couldn’t make her way through the throng.

Having just passed through, while still framed by the doorway, Beck swept his bride to be off her feet with one last passionate kiss. Then the door closed behind them and they were gone into the night.

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-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

-----Chapter Six-----
-----**RECUPERATIONS**-----

Macy woke up shivering to the first luminescence of morning playing off the fog billowing across the deck. The power lines off the starboard side caught the occasional ray as they receded into the distance. Macy hugged herself to get the blood flowing and sat up.

The Inland Sea sure was eerie, unlike anything she'd known in Friston. There the water was alive, the waves splashing on rocks teeming with fish. Here, the water was silent, black, and smooth as glass. It gave Macy the creeps. The thought that people used to live down there made her shiver even more.

Quietly moving the tarp aside, she surveyed her surroundings and saw no one else here in the stern of the boat. From the coil of rope she was curled up on, she could see the closed door to the room where Will lay. She hadn't meant to fall asleep out here but, after the day she had yesterday, sleep had hit hard.

Berating herself for having left Will alone all night, she hurried below and slipped quietly into his room. He had kicked the covers off in the night and, despite the early morning chill, he was covered in sweat. But she was relieved to see that he was sleeping soundly. Some of the swelling had gone down, but the side of his head was still a mass of purple and yellow bruises. Poor Will. Poor the both of them if they were found out.

Grabbing a bucket out of the corner, she went back up on deck to fill it with fresh, cool water from the barrel. Returning below, she located a sponge, dipped it, and used it to wipe the sweat from Will's brow, dabbing lightly the area around the swelling. Starting at his shoulders she gently wiped him down, fingers reverently tracing his many scars. Having finished, she pulled the covers up to his waist and fluff the pillows behind his head.

By now the sun was fully up and the first rays of it were streaming through the porthole above Will's head. Cupping her

hands, she dipped them in the bucket and splashed water on her face. She brushed her fingers through her hair and did her best to make herself presentable. She checked to make sure her chest wrappings were still tight and headed for the door.

Before she got there, the door swung open and in clumped Hawkins. Taken aback, Macy retreated to the opposite side of the bed, mumbling a greeting along the way. Ignoring her, he went to the bed and examined Will's bruises. With a sigh, he sat on the edge of the bed and focused his sad eyes on Macy.

She was surprised to see that, close-up, he was much younger than she had first thought. The pain that was evident when he walked had etched lines in his face that belied his age. The leathery texture of his seaman's face had aged him even further. Up close, Macy guessed that he wasn't much older than Will. Finally, he broke the silence.

"So, Squire Blackwood. I hope your rope-coil bed was comfortable enough. We could have done better you know."

"How... How." flustered Macy.

"I'm this ship's captain." he replied. "It's my job to know everything. ...everything."

That thought unsettled Macy, but the twinkle in his eyes as he said it melted some of her resistance. Despite her initial misgivings, she felt herself begin to warm up to this rather distant and intimidating man. 'The friend of my friend is my friend, right?'

"So Mace... May I call you Mace?" he continued, Macy shaking her head 'yes'. "I've worked for Sir Edmund for many years. God rest his soul. He was a great man. My allegiance now lies with his son." His eyes flickered to the bed. Macy's followed.

"Sir Edmund summoned me to meet him in Friston before the battle. Obviously that didn't happen. I was supposed to have... This has to stay between us..." Macy nodded. "...for Arthur's safety." Macy nodded again.

"I was supposed to have met him at a...a... a gentleman's club. But the Madam in charge there..." Macy's ears perked up.

“...told me he had hurried off to ValleyHo in search of Arthur over there.”

Macy’s head spun toward the bed.

“I have a question for you: A very, very important one. Please trust me and tell me the truth. The whole future of the Barony depends on it. ...maybe even Arthur’s life.” He paused for effect. “Do you have.....or was Arthur in possession of a sheaf of papers when you found him?” Solemnly, Macy shook her head ‘no’.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

Callie woke up all alone. Could it have been only yesterday that she awoke to Annie’s orgasmic shuddering beneath her? She, Annie, and Beck had been inseparable since their nursery days. Now she was all alone.

Never had the problems facing her been so great. Never had the dangers confronting her been so close to home. First it was her father. Then her mother showed her true colors. Now Beck and Annie were gone. It would have been enough to bring her to despair if she weren’t absolutely sure she was up to the task.

And up to the task she was. In many ways she was the safest person in the whole Barony. Without her, they couldn’t legitimize Owen Camberly. Bring it on, she thought, popping out of bed.

Prancing over to the window, she shielded her eyes against the bright rays of the early morning sun. Looking down on Friston, she wondered where Beck and Annie were this morning. She’d had her suspicions for a long time that Annie had a secret life. Hopefully that secret life would serve her and Beck well now, in their time of need. She had no doubt that her mother and the Deacon were tearing the town apart searching for them.

“Beck, oh Beck: I always knew you had it in you.” she muttered proudly. But she had to admit that she was as surprised as everyone else in the Cathedral last night when he whisked

Annie away right under the Deacon's nose. No doubt it would be the stuff of legend by tomorrow.

Looking down on the harbor, Callie could see the ships jockeying for berth space. The bay was filled with the sails of the army returning from ValleyHo. That the Enclaves would win the battle had never been in doubt. They had never lost a battle to the Unwashed. The only question was who would, and who wouldn't, return.

So, as she watched the festivities down by the docks, Callie couldn't help but hope that she'd seen the last of Owen Camberly. She didn't see any of the Camberly ships berthed below but there were a few from the Brotherhood and those are what he would have probably returned on anyway.

With a last little prayer for Beck and Annie, she turned away from the window and started getting ready for what would likely be a long and harrowing day. She chose an immodest light blue dress with peasant sleeves that her father had given her and she knew her mother hated. Owen would hate it too. The dark blue silk bodice would push even her small breasts up tight and together.

When she reached into the secret compartment for her jewelry box, she was surprised to find that it was gone. She considered raising an alarm, but common sense told her that Annie had taken it. She had to settle for the pearl necklace she had thrown on the table after returning the night before.

After dabbing some rose scented perfume between her breasts and behind her ears, she picked up her brush and began stroking her long fiery locks. She looked in the mirror and smiled.

"Bring it on, old woman," she muttered under her breath. No sooner had the words escaped her lips than her door crashed back on its hinges. In marched her mother and her minions. Callie move toward them, stopping the Baroness in her tracks, minions piling up behind.

"What do you want, old woman?" spat Callie, moving even closer. Her mother, taken aback at Callie's unprecedented aggressiveness, just sputtered. Her retinue looked on with mouths

hanging open. The stablemaster's men stationed outside her door, peered over the top to try to see what was happening.

When the Baroness took a half step backward, Callie pressed forward. With the Baroness unable to find her tongue, Callie filled the void.

"You better be careful what you ask for... Mother! If all of your devious plans come to pass, I'll be the Baroness of this Castle and you'll be... Let's see... Just an old widow, a dried up crone of a thing."

Callie took another step forward, crowding her mother's space. Still speechless, the Baroness retreated another step. Callie continued.

"I'm sure Owen and I will find a very nice convent for you to wile away your dotage in. It'll help tame some of your spirit. Yeah... You'll look good in a wimple."

Callie laughed a 'bring-it-on' laugh and took another step forward. The Baroness retreated through the doorway.

"Be careful what you ask for old woman. Your days of telling me what I will and won't do are over! Don't forget that I am your daughter. You've taught me well, you old witch.

"I'm younger, smarter, and prettier than you. You are the past. I am the future. Now get out of my face! And next time... Knock!"

With that she slammed the door in their startled faces.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

Waldo woke up hungry. But then again, when didn't Waldo wake up hungry? At least he'd woken up in his own bed, safely ensconced aboard *The 'nesses Revenge*. They had berthed in the middle of the night and Brother Owen had hurried off to take care of some business, or so he said

Waldo chuckled and tinkled together the fistful of gold coins he had slept with. It was the least that damn holy roller could do, considering the Hell he'd put Waldo through. Breakfast was going to be a good one. Waldo's mouth watered at the thought.

Propping himself up on an elbow, the Cap'n stared out at the bustle of activity going on along the Friston waterfront. From joyous reunions to wailing laments for the dead, the scene seemed to cover the entire gamut of human emotion. It meant nothing to him. Cap'n Waldo was alive and that was all that mattered to Cap'n Waldo.

Rolling out of bed, he pocketed the coins and went in search of the hair of the dog. He'd been nipping at the bottle the whole way back from ValleyHo and had been thoroughly sloshed by the time he bid Owen farewell and passed out in bed. He threw three empty bottles through the porthole before finding a full one wedged into an old boot.

Pulling the cork, he took a long pull and wiped his mouth with the back of a hand. A loud belch made his head throb and he winced. He took a second big pull, mumbled something about "mother's milk" and headed for the cabin door.

Up on deck, he paused to survey the scene. Ships were stacked up out into the bay waiting for berths. That's one good thing about coming into port with that crazy Paladin. The harbormaster wasn't going to be pestering him to leave anytime soon. People tended to avoid anything having to do with the mad Brother Owen, even harbormasters. Waldo chuckled and headed for the gangplank.

With thoughts of breakfast on his mind, and the hair of the dog kicking in, Waldo rolled across the crowded quay like a bowling ball through duckpins. Ignoring the occasional yelp left in his wake, he headed for a familiar sidestreet and rapped the secret knock on its familiar door. It opened wide and he rolled on through.

He stopped in his tracks at the cacophony of sights and sounds. Half naked girls were everywhere with a few naked ones sprinkled in. Every pair of lips that wasn't sucking on a naked girl seemed to be sucking on a bottle. Those that weren't shouting were crying. Madam flitted about with a grace that belied her size, seemingly everywhere at once. Upon seeing him, she pasted a big smile on her face, and waddled over.

“Cap’n Waldo!” she exclaimed, launching her bulk at him. “For an old sea dog, you sure seem to have the nine lives of a cat. Can I buy an old pirate a drink?”

After an “I thought you’d never ask”, she placed a sloppy, lipstick-staining kiss on either cheek and herded him toward the bar. Waldo yelped as her long nailed fingers grabbed an ample handful of butt-cheek in the process.

Waldo and Madam went way back, back to the days when he was a svelte young seaman and she was the most sought after, yet unattainable employee, of the very establishment she now owned.

Over the years, their paths had crossed on scheme after scheme. But the physical relationship they once shared ended many years and many pounds in the past. The Cap’n still frequented her establishment and it was there that he satisfied his need for female companionship. He always had his pick of the girls because, despite the gruff exterior he showed to the outside world, they knew he was a pussycat once they got him behind closed doors. He was a gentleman and a generous tipper and that never hurt.

So, as he and Madam shared a drink at the bar, he surveyed the available girls and set his breakfast order straight in his mind. ‘Eggs, lots of them. A slab of beefsteak. A mountain of fried potatoes. A bucket of beer. Mmmmh. That would do for a start. His mouth started watering. He was so caught up in his breakfast dreams that he had tuned Madam out, nodding occasionally when it seemed appropriate.

He came back to the present only after she called over Ellaye, one of his favorites, to escort him upstairs. ‘Ellaye, goody!’ That meant a nun and naughty schoolboy morning lie ahead. Waldo’s bum tingled at the thought.

Ellaye was tall, thin, and rather severe looking. But she sure spanked a mean bum. Waldo felt a stirring as she strode toward him, robe parting, humongous breasts and big black bush teasing. Madam continued to chatter in his ear, but Waldo heard nothing.

The words 'special surprise' caught his attention as the statuesque Amazon came up and buried the much shorter Cap'n's head between her pendulous breasts. As she grabbed him by an ear lobe to lead him upstairs, he felt a tap on the shoulder.

"Noon?" intoned the Madam. "You'll be ready to sail by noon? Good. Good. Now go enjoy your 'breakfast' Cap'n. I'll make the arrangements."

It wasn't until he was halfway up the stairs, being expertly guided by a firm grip on the 'lil Cap'n', that he even wondered about what Madam had said. A firm squeeze saw to it that the thought was but fleeting.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

Eric woke up stiff and sore. He'd slept curled up on the floor at the foot of Simon's bunk. Breakfast smells assaulted him from the open door to the passageway. A quick peek told him that Simon was already up and about his day.

Clambering to his feet, he went over to the bucket sitting under the table to splash some water on his face. He looked about for a brush before catching himself, realizing how futile that quest would be here in the bald Simon's cabin. He had to settle for wetting his hair down and using his fingers to tame the blonde cowlicks.

It bothered him a bit that he was worrying about his appearance. It was that damn Mace. Arthur's squire had gotten under his skin in ways he couldn't understand and didn't even want to contemplate. Pushing those thoughts aside, he followed the smell of breakfast to the galley.

"Aah, there you is." chuckled Cookie as he juggled pots and pans on the stove. "We thought you wuz dead."

"Dyin' of hunger, Cookie. Thassall." replied Eric, mouth watering.

"C'mere then'n help me. Flip those fried taters. Then bring me that tray. The big one. No. No. That one. Grab some plates and forks. That pot'a tea's fer youse. I gots enough flapjacks,

eggs, an' bacon here for da botha ya and enuf for Arthur if'n he can get anything down yet. Here. Put the tray down here."

"Do I have to?" whined Eric. "Am I a serving boy now? I wanted to eat up on deck."

"Take it up wid yer Da. He's da one came in and tol' me to get a hurry on, then wake you up if'n youse wasn't up already. So. Chop. Chop. Git a move on. There it is an' it's gittin' cold."

With a reluctant heart and an eager stomach, he picked up the tray and headed for his commandeered cabin. Banging the door opened with the tray, he entered. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Mace, back to him, hurrying to replace the linen seaman's shirt he'd lent him the night before.

"Did you hurt your ribs?" he called out over his shoulder as he set the tray down on the shelf by the bed.

"No. No." he heard in reply as Mace came up behind him.

"Then how come you got them all wrapped up?"

"Wha... Oh, that. Uh... Uh... It's a.. It's a poultice. Yeah. I've been fighting a chest cold."

"Well. Here's breakfast. How's he doing?" asked Eric, nodding to the slightly snoring warrior who lay between them.

"He still hasn't woken up. So I guess it's just me and you for breakfast. Sure smells good."

Eric was already heaping a plate full of the breakfast bounty by the time Mace pulled up a stool on the opposite side of the bed. There was an awkward moment before chivalry won out over hunger and he handed the plate across. By the time he was done filling one for himself, the other was half empty. 'For a skinny little sissified noble, that Mace could put down some groceries.' Eric shook his head and smiled.

While he tucked into his plate, he listened to an incessant babble coming from the now full-bellied squire: '...hadn't been afraid yesterday. There was lots more blood than he would have thought. He thought the Gubnator cut a dashing figure. He was worried about Arthur there for a while. He was sure glad they had come along when they did. He was really, really sorry for the way he'd bossed Eric around the day before. Yada-yada-yada.'

By the time he gathered up the breakfast dishes, Eric hadn't gotten a word in edgewise for the past fifteen minutes. Macy didn't seem to even notice. But Eric didn't care. It was nice to be the center of someone's attention for a change. In the adult-dominated world he lived in, he often felt overlooked and taken for granted.

Mace was a nice change of pace, an adventure waiting to happen. That gave him an idea. With a raised eyebrow and a finger to his lips, he let Mace know he'd been rambling on. With a guilty look and a bit of a blush, the squire's lips stumbled to silence. Eric filled the void.

"I got an idea. Let's get these dishes back to the galley. We ought to be in Sacton within the hour. How'd you like to watch us pull in from up in the crow's nest?"

"Cool." said Mace as they quietly closed the door on the sleeping Arthur and headed for the galley.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

Annie woke up a fiancé. The thought made her smile. The smile made her head throb. The after-effects of the witch's brew the Baroness had concocted for Beck still coursed through her veins. 'To Hell with that old witch.' They'd made it. They were safe, at least for the moment.

She struggled up onto one elbow and reached for the pitcher of orange juice which sat on the nightstand. Her head throbbed as she poured herself a glass. Her stomach boiled but she forced herself to drink it down. Spent, she dropped back onto the pillows.

'Aaah, Beck.' She was so proud of him. After the chapel doors closed last night, he half-carried, half-dragged her across the compound toward the Castle. Even through her haze she was able to direct him through the servants quarters, down the stairs, through the rookery, and into the tunnel. With everyone focused on the Mass in the Cathedral, they got away undetected.

Annie had no doubt they were tearing the town apart this very moment in search of them. But she felt safe here at Madam's, in her secret room up under the eaves. Beck was safe too, sequestered just across the hallway.

They'd stumbled their way down the tunnel late last night, emerging onto the deserted streets of Friston. She managed to guide them to Madam's back door, where a key she had carried around her neck for years gained them entry.

Madam had settled them in up here in her secret rooms just in case anyone came looking for them. While Beck would obviously stand out down here, Madam didn't think anyone would confuse the noble Annie from up on the hill with the common Annie who frequented her establishment.

She struggled to a sitting position and flopped her feet over the side of the bed. She smiled seeing Callie's dark green gown hung carefully on the back of the door. She vaguely remembered entrusting Madam with Callie's velvet jewelry bag. She reached for a plain, but pretty, sky blue dress hanging over the back of a chair. She slipped it on then put her feet into the peasant's slippers that accompanied it.

Heading for the door, she slipped through, then peeked in across the hall at Beck. He was still fast asleep, so she headed for the stairs. At the bottom she looked through the peephole to make sure the coast was clear, then quietly let herself into Madam's office. When she closed the door behind her, it transformed into just another section of wood-paneled wall with a painting of You Seem Mighty Valley on it.

Hurrying down the hallway, she let herself into Sara's room, coming up short at the assemblage huddled over the bed. Madam broke away and waddled over to her, prattling on about how she was feeling this morning. Annie shushed her and headed for the bed.

Her heart leapt when she saw her sister's eyes opened, then crashed when she saw no life in them. Doc reached over and closed them. The parish priest made the sign of the cross and knelt in prayer. The others joined in. All except Annie. She

was making her own pact with God, a pact that would see Owen Camberly in Hell.

A blubbing Madam and a silently weeping Lily led the steely-eyed Annie from the room and steered her back toward the office. Her mind raged but her feet didn't protest. Back in Madam's office, she went to the window to watch the hustle and bustle of the port. Hate eased her pain.

Finally she turned and went to sit across the desk from Madam. While she had been staring out the window into the abyss, Lily had left and breakfast had miraculously appeared. In silence, Madam forced into her still raw stomach an assortment of breads, fruit butters, and jams. By the time she finished, she was feeling much better, the after effects of last night now more mental than physical.

Having accomplished that, Madam launched into the plans she'd been making while Beck and Annie were asleep. Annie was only half-listening. She approved when Madam said they'd be leaving by noon, but didn't really start paying attention until she heard the words 'special surprise'.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

He woke up disoriented. He was in an unfamiliar bed in an unfamiliar room. The rocking motion told him he was on a boat. It also made the side of his head hurt like Hell. Reaching up gingerly, he sure hoped it didn't look as bad as it felt.

He struggled up onto his elbows to look around. Behind him, through a porthole, he could see the flat calm waters of the Inland Sea stretching to the horizon. The long shadows told him it was early morning. The power lines gliding past told him they were headed toward Sacton. ...or away from it.

Spying a pitcher of water on the nightstand, he realized just how thirsty he was. He downed two full glasses, then looked around unsuccessfully for something to soothe the rumblings in his belly. He thought to call out, then thought better of it.

He didn't know where he was, nor who was on the other side of the door. 'How did he get here?' He again touched the side of his head. Looking down, he could see no other wounds though there were healed scars aplenty. He vaguely remembered being in battle. He remembered blood, lots of blood. He shuddered at the memory of dogs.

The face of a young girl popped into his mind. He smiled. Macy was her name. A fat face with droopy eyes popped up. He frowned. Maybe he was on Cap'n Waldo's ship. No. That didn't feel right. As the kaleidoscope of images slowed down in his mind, he had another realization. He didn't know his own name. He didn't know who he was.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

Beck woke up shaking. He'd done it. He still couldn't believe it. Last night had been the most exhilarating night of his whole life. Also the most frightening. There was no turning back now. He had drawn a line in the sand and would now have to live with the consequences. The fact that Annie was on this side of the line with him was cause of both great comfort and great concern.

The clearing of a throat just behind him nearly made him jump out of his skin. Whirling around, he found himself under the critical gaze of the bigger-than-life character introduced to him late last night as 'Madam'.

She just sat there, overflowing a chair, decked out in all her gaudy finery. Maroon combs and jeweled tiaras graced her big silver hairdo. She was swathed in yards and yards of maroon silk trimmed in black fringe and tassels. Bangles rose up each arm nearly to the elbow. Rings fought for space on every one of her fat little painted fingers. She smiled down at him from the middle of a face full of makeup.

"Well. Well." she muttered, shaking her head. "So this is what has my little Annie all worked up into a lather. You ain't too hard to look at, I'll give you that. And you got balls. Last night

proves that. But as for being man enough to be Annie's man? Well..."

Before Beck could protest, a ring-encrusted paw shot out and pinched his cheek. While 'welcoming him to the family', her other hand grabbed a bell off the nightstand and gave it a vigorous ring.

The door crashed back and his mouth hung open as a troop of half naked girls entered the room. There was a small Chinese girl carrying a tray with tea and pastries. There was a statuesque pig-tailed blonde with towels and a bucket full of soapy water. There was a dark-skinned girl carrying an arm load of clothes. Two or three others squeezed through the doorway before closing it behind them.

Beck felt at a disadvantage as they all stared at him with knowing smiles and tittered among themselves. The pastries were set on the nightstand between he and the still-seated Madam. Before he could reach for one he was grabbed from behind and dragged out of bed. Amidst sputtering protests, his nightshirt was pulled off and the girls were jockeying for position to sponge him down.

The reaction this brought forth turned the tittering up a notch. Between mouthfuls, Madam grunted, seemingly impressed. Beck stood there in joyous agony as each girl, in turn, ran her soapy hands all over his body. Each seemed to take special delight in teasing him until he groaned. Finally, with a bangle-clattering clap of her hands, Madam brought the torturous process to an end.

"Dry him off and get him dressed." she admonished the girls. "He's as clean as we dare get him without Annie's help." Then to Beck: "Now get that thing under control and let's get on with it. We have much to do."

She winked. Beck blushed, groaned again, then struggled into the trousers held out to him. Eventually his predicament subsided. Between mouthfuls, Madam continued.

"We are going to have to do something about that flaming mop of yours if you and Annie are going to have any chance of

avoiding your mother's clutches. Half the town is looking for you. It's even being rumored there's a reward out."

From an inner pocket the little Chinese girl produced two small bottles, one filled with dark liquid, the other with clear. With a gentle touch, she motioned for him to sit on the edge of the bed, then climbed up behind him. Madam explained as she began her ministrations.

"The dark bottle will tinge your hair black. Just brush it in and let it dry. Be careful not to get it on your skin. Your hair will stay black, even in water, until you use the clear bottle. When you're ready to go back to being a redhead, brush the clear liquid in and wait about fifteen minutes. Then wash it out with soap and water."

Beck closed his eyes and surrendered himself to the process. He listened as Madam prattled on about the arrangements she had made to get them out of Friston and over to Sacton. He was glad they were leaving soon, the sooner the better as far as he was concerned. Then it hit him: 'Where was Annie?' When he asked, he was told that she was, at that very moment, making final arrangements with the boat's captain. That put his mind at ease.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

Annie smiled, even as she vowed revenge on Madam. She adjusted the white fishnet stockings and laced up the thigh-high white suede boots. "The things we do for love," she muttered into the mirror, not sure whether she was talking about herself or Madam.

"Special surprise, my ass!" she uttered, turning and wiggling hers. She was in the girls' dressing room, off the secret back hallway, on the second floor of Madam's establishment. She pranced back and forth in front of the mirror and wondered what Beck would think if he could see her now. The thought made her nipples harden. Grabbing a small breast in either hand, she gyrated and meowed at the mirror.

Standing there in only boots and stockings, Annie couldn't help but wonder about the many girls who had stood in front of that mirror over the years. She'd seen many of them, having been some sort of an unofficial 'mascot', some would say 'good-luck charm', of the house for many years. Many the girl she'd helped dress, then sent off down the hallway behind her. Now it was her turn, even if it wasn't quite the same.

She owed the Madam one..., in both a good and a bad way. Transportation to Sacton could have been arranged without a 'special surprise' for Cap'n Waldo. But she had to give Madam credit. This would certainly ensure his silence. ...and put him in Madam's debt. The old broad could wheel and deal with the best of them. Annie had to give her that.

It was too late to back out now. If she was going to do this thing, she was going to give it her all. So she reached for a bottle of musky lilac scent and splashed it on. She put on makeup to almost comic excess.

From a rack against the far wall, she chose a semi--see-through, mini-skirted, white lace number with small wings attached. Then she rouged her light pink nipples, the better to be seen through the diaphanous material. Lastly, she reached for a simulated halo headdress and eye mask.

She satisfied herself with a last look in the mirror. She giggled, got her mind right, and with a "That oughta do, I even turn myself on", turned on her heel and headed down the hallway.

Halfway down, she put her eye to a peephole that looked in on the room being shared by the Cap'n and Ellaye. Waldo was in a grotesquely huge schoolboy's sailor suit, complete with knee socks and little red tie. The little sailor's cap looked ridiculous, dwarfed as it was by the Cap'n's big bald fleshy head. The sailor's shorts looked even more ridiculous, gathered as they were around his ankles.

Staring back at Annie was, by far, the biggest bum she had ever seen, red-striped and awaiting more punishment. Moaning softly, the Cap'n was standing, legs spread wide, and bent over a teacher's desk. Hovering above him in a black, see-through, mini-

skirted nun's habit, was Ellaye, whip in hand. Annie took a deep breath, steeled herself, and turned the knob.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

"Look! Look! Look!" squealed Mace. "I can see the masts." Eric smiled. He too could see the grouping of ships' masts up ahead at the place where the power lines ended. He could also see the power lines coming from other parts of the Inland Sea, all converging just ahead. He smiled, knowing that the biggest surprise awaiting Mace was still too far off to be seen.

He clung precariously to the crows nest railing, feet fighting for space on a platform made for one. He looked at the young squire who was virtually vibrating with excitement, then to the place where the power lines met. 'Home.' 'Sacton.'

As far as he was concerned, it was the most interesting and unique city in all the world. It was the only place he knew of that had a history dating back into the Dark Times. Because of its unique levee system and location in the middle of the Inland Sea, it had been cut off from the mayhem and pillage which had defined the Dark Times along the shores of the Inland Sea and Friston Bay.

Ruled as it was by the steady hand of the Gubnator's ancestors, it had managed to maintain a semblance of civilization amid the darkness and chaos. The current Gubnator was the latest in a long unbroken succession of bigger-than-life characters that rumor had it pre-dated even the Dark Times.

Indeed, Sacton was unique. Built as it was in the middle of the graveyard of ancient civilization, it was able to salvage from under the waters of the Inland Sea many advances and technologies beneficial to a once-again Feudal humanity. There was still much to salvage beneath those dead, calm waters. The toxicity with which he'd berated Mace was more superstition than reality these days. It kept the peasants in their boats and that suited the Gubnator and the ruling class of Sacton. They wanted to make sure that whatever riches still lurked below the surface

were theirs and theirs alone. In fact, they were not all that dissimilar to the ruling classes which had ruled humanity since the dawn of time.

A reverent “wow!” brought Eric out of his reverie and back to the present. Mace stood next to him googily-eyed and mouth agape. Eric’s heart fluttered as they approached Sacton harbor, perhaps the most unique harbor in the world. Just beyond the ships’ masts, he could see what looked like a huge hole in the sea, broken only by the occasional church steeple and grain elevator.

Sacton was built on the sea floor of the Inland Sea, water held back by a series of dikes and levees with sturdy buildings built flush up against them. Atop the levee was a boardwalk circling the city. On its waterside were piers extending into the sea with ships docked alongside. Along the inside were warehouses with cranes and hoists poking up through holes in the roof.

As the *Siarra’s Mist* pulled into its berth, Eric filled with pride at the city stretched out below them. His city: The marble-looking buildings of the Gubnator’s palace surrounded by green lawns and citrus trees. The main thoroughfare between there and the open air market place. The barracks for the Gubnator’s famed mounted corps and its ramp up to the levee road. The smoking chimneys of the citizens’ homes. The impressive belltowers of Sacton’s many churches.

The site never failed to choked him up, each time bringing on flashbacks to the first time Hawkins had brought Eric and his new wife, Siarra, home. With a sideways glance, he couldn’t help but see his own wonder reflected in Mace’s eyes upon seeing Sacton for the first time.

“C’mon,” he said, tugging at the Squire’s sleeve and heading for the rigging. “Let’s get down there.”

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

“Sister Ellaye, Plea-a-ase!” squealed the fat Captain as the birch rod whirled through the air to again stripe his fat ass.

"You been a bad boy, Waldo." intoned the mini-skirted Amazon of a nun who towered over him. Waldo clutched the desk and yelped as the birch rod raised yet another welt. He gritted his teeth and fought back the tears as the rod landed again. ...and again. ...and again. Cap'n Waldo wouldn't be sitting for a while.

"Please Sister Ellaye. I promise to be good." he whimpered.

"You don't know how to be good, Cap'n Waldo" came an ethereal yet familiar voice from in front of him. ...a familiar voice he couldn't quite place. He blanked to clear the tears and fought to focus.

When he did, he found himself staring into a sea of white lace inches from his nose. A white riding crop slid between his chin and the desk, tilting his head up until he found himself staring into the face of an angel. She licked her lips, then smiled.

"Well. Well. Cap'n Waldo. What are we going to do with you? Spare the rod and spoil the child, as they say."

She motioned to 'Sister' Ellaye and the birch rod sang through the air again, followed by a yelp. The riding crop was removed and Waldo's chin again sagged to the desk. The angel slowly knelt, her lace clad body scrolling down past the Cap'n's eyes.

"Ann... Yeooow!" began the Cap'n before the birch rod again assailed his welt-filled bum. The angel put a finger to his lips and shook her head.

"No. No." the vision whispered. "I am your guardian angel, or maybe just a figment of your imagination. You've been a bad, bad boy and I'm trying to save you from the flames of Hell."

Now Waldo wasn't the most religious of men, but he had just enough conscience to make his actions burdensome at times. Having spent yesterday traipsing through Hell with Brother Owen didn't help. The Angel continued.

"Madam has asked you to go on a mission of mercy and secrecy. Keeping your agreement and acting honorably for a change just might enable me to put in a good word for your eternal soul."

"What does she want of me?"

“Have the *Siarra’s Mist* ready at noon. Make the trip to Sacton. And keep your mouth shut for a change. Think you can handle that?”

As she finished, she moved closer and started to stand, her lace covered body trawling over Waldo’s face as it hung over the desk. Standing, her milky-white, fishnet-clad thighs just inches from the Cap’n’s eyes, she repeated her question.

“Think you can handle that?”

“Yes! Yes! Yes!” screamed the Cap’n as a barrage of birch strokes brought tears to his eyes. When they cleared, she was gone. Turning and craning his neck, he looked up at the severe, nun-habited ‘Sister’ Ellaye.

“Where did she go?” he wailed.

“Where did who go?” was the reply, as the birch rod arced through the air yet again.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

Callie marched into the dining hall and stopped dead in her tracks. Through the open doors to the terrace she could see the broad back of the CeeEeeHo of San Hoton who was gesturing wildly to a Deacon seated beyond. Over near the table the ever felicitous father Tom was conspiring with the suddenly ubiquitous stablemaster.

Striding toward her from the head of the table was her mother, a smug look of victory upon her face. Trailing in her wake was a nervous looking Owen Camberly. For someone who struck fear into the hearts of almost everyone who knew him, Brother Owen had always been putty in Callie’s hands. That he loved her in his own demented way had never been in doubt.

Steeling herself to take advantage of this, Callie pasted a smile on her face and strode forward. Eyes locked on Owen’s, she headed straight toward her mother, pretending that she wasn’t there, acting out a game of chicken. When the Baroness flinched and stumbled aside, her daughter marched right up to the Paladin, curtsied, and held out a graceful hand for him to kiss.

“Why Brother Owen, you can’t know what joy it brings me to see that you emerged from yesterday on the right side of the ‘kill or be killed’ equation. I trust you did us proud and sent many, many Unwashed on their journey up the River Styx. I love it so when a man is good at what he does.”

She batted her eyebrows and, with him still at a loss for words, she took him by the elbow, turned them away from her mother, and headed toward the table. Taking up a position where they could survey the room but not be easily approached, she watched as the servants laid on lunch.

The stablemaster was still babbling, but Father Tom’s eyes were on the venison, sea bass, and trimmings that were being laid out. The creepy stableman cast his sober eyes her way as Father Tom drained what looked like far from his first glass of wine of the day.

“M-Miss Callie,” started Owen, finding his tongue. “T-that was the nicest thing you ever said to me.” Callie reached for his upper arm with the bandage obvious beneath it, and gave it a squeeze. He winced. She pinched his cheek until the sutures separated from the patched-up scar under his chin. He winced again.

“Oh, Owen. I can be awful flighty at times. I can be so childish. But...” she winked and raised her voice so that her mother could overhear. “...with the likely possibility of my soon becoming lady of this Castle, it’s high time I grow up.” She squeezed his bandaged arm again. He winced again.

As the dinner bell rung for lunch, she steered him toward the head of the table and the unused place setting which had been being ceremoniously laid out for the Baron since his death.

“Sit down and see how it feels.” she said, seeing the unconscious smile that spread across his face. As she sat him down, she did her best to wiggle her small pushed-up breasts in his face.

Whirling her butt around, she nearly knocked down her mother as she was converging on the chair at Owen’s right hand. With a dismissive waggle of her fingers, she gestured to the lower

end of the table, as she sat next to Owen in what had always been the Baroness' chair.

"I'm sure you won't mind sitting at *that* end so that I can sit here next to *my* Owen."

She cast a syrupy smile to counter an 'if-looks-could-kill' stare from her mother, then continued.

"Go on now. Me and Owen have important things to discuss. ...the future of the Barony. ... The future of *you*. Stuff like that. Go on now."

With that, she turned her back on her mother and remarked to Owen that she really liked the view from her mother's chair.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

He opened his eyes as the door was flung open and two young people entered. The shorter one was Macy. Or was it? He was confused. Macy was a girl, wasn't she? The taller one he didn't recognize at all.

As he opened his mouth to speak, Macy rushed over, blinking furiously. Positioning herself, (himself?), between him and her companion, she rushed over to the bed. Putting a finger to his lips, she reached for the water pitcher, only to find it empty.

"Eric." she called out over her shoulder. "Could you get this pitcher filled up? And while you're at it, can you see if Cookie can scrape up some broth or something else easy to get down? Arthur here..." There was the winking again. "...is probably starving."

'Arthur? Arthur Camberly?' The name sounded familiar but it didn't feel quite right. Arthur Camberly? Was that his name?

As the door closed behind Eric, Macy turned back and planted a big wet kiss on his lips. 'Macy was a girl alright!' A memory flitted across his mind and he reached up and put a hand inside her seamen's blouse. Yep, her breasts were wrapped up. He vaguely remembered doing it. Macy was a girl pretending to be a boy but he wasn't quite sure why.

"Oh Crazyboy." she cooed. "I didn't know you cared."

He looked up at her and smiled, not sure where to begin. Many things were familiar, but familiar in a bits and pieces sort of way. 'How do you tell someone you don't even know your own name?' You dive right in.

"Uuuuuh, Macy... I can't remember... Uuuuh, I don't... Uuuuh, I can't remember my name."

She held him at arms length and challenged him with a look. A 'really?' was answered with a nod of the head. An 'Are you OK?' got her a shrug of the shoulders. Macy chuckled.

"Crazyboy. Crazyboy. Maybe that's for the best." Her eyes twinkled. "For now, why don't you just be Arthur Camberly? Say your head hurts and don't talk to anybody but me, okay?"

Seeing the look of confused dissent in his eyes, she glanced back at the door, then leaned in closer until she was whispering.

"They all think you are Arthur Camberly. It would be best if they keep on thinking that. I think they are our friends." Another glance over the shoulder. "...but I'm not sure. We are headed for Sacton and you need to see a doctor."

He lay back, even more confused, and not exactly reassured. He stared at the angelic face beaming down at him and knew that he didn't really have a choice. His life was in her hands. Hearing footsteps in the hallway, he realized she hadn't answered the most important question of all.

"What's my name?" he blurted out.

"I already told you." she answered, smiling down at him as the door swung open. "... Crazyboy!"

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

Beck motioned over his shoulder to set it in the corner, thinking it was Lily returning with the valise of clothes that Madam had promised. The door clicked shut as he continued to stare down on the hustle and bustle of the dockside. He was eager to get down there, walking anonymously among the people, leaving the pomp and circumstance of being a Baron behind.

Sensing movement behind him, he turned away from the window and was surprised to see, not Lily, but Annie standing behind him. His eyes roamed her body, still enticingly clad as a lacy angel. He took in the boots, the stockings, the wings, then settled on the rouged nipples peeking through the lace. He looked at her smiling, made-up face and locked in on her dazzling blue eyes.

"I thought you were making ...arrangements ... arrangements ...with the Captain: Oh..."

Cheeks blushing and anger flashing in his eyes, he turned back to the window. Hunching his shoulders and jamming his hands in his pockets, he tried to steel himself against the thoughts he was thinking and the feelings he was having. His heart raced.

"I want to leave this place," he mumbled. "I hate it here."

"You don't understand," he heard as Annie came up from behind and wrapped her arms around him.

"Turn around," she whispered, nuzzling the small of his back and pressing herself close to him. He didn't resist as she twirled him about to face her. He avoided her eyes but couldn't avoid looking down at the small perfect breasts sandwiched between them.

"Uhh... Uhh..." he began, before being cut off by a finger to the lips. She then put a finger under his chin and lifted his head until their eyes met.

"You don't understand," she repeated. "I have been coming down here to the port since I was a little girl. Many years back Madam saved me from a... a bad situation. I've been kind of the mascot around here ever since. It's not what you think."

Still clutching him tight, she brought his other hand up between them and placed it on her breasts. It was trembling. His eyes wanted to run away.

"You are the only man who has ever touched these," she whispered, laying her head on his shoulder. "And when you did it was wonderful. They've been tingling ever since. Go ahead. You can put your hand inside. Yep. That's nice."

As Beck stood there, holding and caressing the woman he loved, all doubt flew out the window. Leaning over, he planted a big kiss on her lips. When their lips parted and their tongues met, it was as if he'd been struck by lightning. When her hand snaked down to rub the front of his trousers, he groaned out loud.

"I love you Beck," answered Annie. "Another thing no man's ever done is see me undress. But if we are going to make it to the boat by noon, I've gotta get changed. Wanna help?"

All Beck could do was shake his head as she pushed him into a chair and placed one booted leg onto his already uncomfortable lap. Reaching out with shaky fingers, he began unlacing the laces as his eyes danced with anticipation.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

The curtains whispered closed behind the still-furious Baroness as she obediently followed the Deacon through them. All eyes except Owen's followed her. His were where they had been the whole meal: on Callie.

Smiling inwardly at her small victory, Callie knew that the war was far from won. But after years of being under her mother's thumb, even small victories were worth savoring. That done, she turned her attention back to the doting Brother Owen.

"It is a shame, but I assume not too big of a shame..." She winked. "...that your brother Arthur did not survive ValleyHo. Are you sure of it?"

Owen shook his head and mumbled in the affirmative. When questioned by the Baroness early in the meal, he had said he personally saw his brother go down, but he refused to elaborate. It was no secret that they had never gotten along. And if rumors about the twins were true, the battle may have cost him a brother and gained him a Barony. No wonder he was reluctant to talk about it.

Grabbing his bandaged arm and squeezing it until he winced, Callie attempted to draw Father Tom and the stablemaster into the conversation.

“So, Father Tom. Do you think that these rumors we’ve been hearing for what seems like forever are true? Do you truly think there are twins running around out there, waiting to inherit the Barony?”

The preacher man glanced furtively across the table at the stablemaster, drained yet another glass of wine and hiccupped.

“Noffer meetoo shay, Missh Callie.” he slurred.

“Nonsense!” challenged the stablemaster. “Don’t you think that if there were twins and they lived, we’d have found out about it before now? An old wives tale. We find out about them only after the Baron dies? Nonsense!”

Callie couldn’t help but notice Owen fidgeting uncomfortably. She went for the kill.

“So tell me Brother Owen. Be honest now. Have you ever dreamed that you were one of the twins? ...that the whole Barony was yours to inherit? You are the right age. Your father did keep you hid all those years.”

Owen fidgeted some more. You could hear a pin drop. All eyes were on him.

“Yesssh, tell usssh.” encouraged Father Tom.

Owen cleared his throat, glanced at Callie and took a sip of water before answering.

“What boy my age hasn’t dreamed that dream? It’s in our blood. It’s in the Barony’s blood. But it’s just a story. The Red Knight was, uh, is just another dreamer. Beck is Baron and that’s that.”

Callie could see in his eyes that his ears didn’t believe what his lips were saying.

“Well, that’s a load off my mind.” she cooed, squeezing his bandaged arm yet again. “It would be a damned shame if you and Arthur were the twins.”

He looked at her with ‘why’ in his eyes.

“It’s obvious, silly.” she countered. “You’ve already lost a brother this week. You wouldn’t want to lose me too, would ya? If you were one of the twins, my calling you *Brother* Owen would take on a whole new meaning, now wouldn’t it?”

Father Tom burped and shook his head.

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Waldo stood silently at the rail as the two coffins were hauled up the gangplank and deposited in the hold below. There were so many coffins on the quay that no one seemed to pay them any mind. But it wasn't lost on the Cap'n that the other coffins had gone down the gangplank's, having recently arrived from ValleyHo, whereas his two had gone up the gangplank. Curious.

It was obvious that security was tighter than usual this morning. All of Friston was abuzz with Beck Friston's antics at the Mass last night. Imagine. Proposing to a lady-in-waiting right under the noses of the Deacon and that crazy mother of his. Then sweeping her out of the Cathedral and disappearing into thin air. 'Maybe that boy had more sand in him than anyone gave him credit for.'

Waldo watched as agents from the Castle mingled with the crowd, stopping anyone with red hair, anyone who remotely resembled the runaway heir. He looked suspiciously at the stairs leading down to the hold. Madam wouldn't have done that to him, would she? If he were trying to sneak out of Friston this morning, hiding in a coffin would be a good way to do it. Cap'n Waldo wasn't the brightest star in the sky, but he wasn't an idiot either.

He was up to his eyeballs yet again in Madam's wheeling and dealing. A 'secret, keep yer mouth shut' cargo to Sacton on this, of all days, was a little more coincidence than the Cap'n could swallow. He rubbed his sore butt and chuckled to himself. He'll never learn. Maybe he was just too old a dog to be learning any new tricks. Madam knew him way too well.

Waldo waddled over to check on the progress being made by the first mate he'd scraped off the floor at Madam's. Satisfied the *The 'nesses Revenge* would be ready for a noon departure, he went below in search of a bottle. Finding one, he took a long pull.

Standing at the porthole, he noticed a distinct lack of activity over on Geary O'Farrell's scow, *The Maidenhead*. He wiped his

lips and shook his head. Madam had told him about O'Farrell's supposedly secret mission to the Castle last night. He could see no trunk on the deck and it didn't look like they were heading to the Great Western Ocean anytime soon. Obviously, something had gone wrong.

Waldo was eager to put Friston behind him. The heat here was way too high for his liking. Madam said there'd be one more package delivered just before noon. Shadows on the dockside were almost non-existent. It was almost time.

Even as he thought this, he heard a clatter from the gangplank above. He took another long belt from the bottle and headed for the stairs. Halfway up, he was met by two cloaked figures heading down. Standing aside to let them pass, he butt-bumped the table and let out a yelp.

A muffled 'Let's get underway' emanated from one of the hoods as they passed. Taken aback, Waldo was just about to protest when they sat on the bed and doffed their hoods. The blonde was...

"Annie, what are..." The Cap'n trailed off, taking in the scene before him. It didn't take the fact that they were holding hands for the Cap'n to see that the two youngsters seated before him were in love. It didn't take the light freckling of the nose, nor the reddish tint of the eyebrows to figure out who the dark-haired boy was seated before him. Waldo's 'rithmetic wasn't too good, but he could add two plus two.

"I'd better see to getting us underway." he said, hurrying past them and heading for the stairs.

"Cap'n Waldo." called out Annie, smudges of make-up still visible. "Thanks."

Embarrassed, Waldo just grunted, then grabbed the railings and heaved his bulk up the stairs.

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Eric couldn't quite put his finger on it. But something strange was going on here. As he watched Mace getting Sir

Arthur ready to go ashore, there was something not quite right about it. He couldn't put his finger on it: the looks that passed between them. The unspoken communication. The little touches. There was something not quite right there. The part that bothered him the most was that he felt jealous about the closeness they seemed to share. 'Was he one of those 'fancy boys' he had heard about?' He shuddered at the thought. But he smiled back when Mace looked at him with a big grin on his face.

"Don't just stand there." Mace admonished, snapping Eric out of his reverie. "I could use some help over here." He rushed over, got under the other shoulder, and between them, they got the fallen warrior out of bed. With a little bit of dancing, they got him through the door, up the stairs, and onto the deck.

His Da, Richmond, and Simon were already there. The *Siarra's Mist* was tied off and they were just waiting for the gangplank to fall. He looked across the bustling levee road to the roof of the Hawkins warehouse. Richmond was already hollering across to the workmen who were manning the hoist sticking up through the warehouse ceiling.

As soon as the gangplank crashed to the dock, his Da clumped down it, followed by Richmond. Marching across the road, they arrived on the warehouse roof just as Eric's sister, Siarra, arrived from below. With a perfunctory husbandly peck on the cheek, Hawkins passed her by, disappearing below with Richmond still on his heel. Eric frowned, readjusted his load, and headed for the gangplank. Seeing him, Siarra smiled and waved.

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Callie stood at the window, sobbing softly. Beck and Annie had been gone only half a day and already the ache was almost unbearable. After lunch, she had rushed back here to her room, eager to get away from Owen Camberly. 'Ugggh!' She felt like she needed a bath.

Her triumph over her mother was short-lived. It felt somehow hollow with no one to share it with. She had no doubt

her mother would be busy planning her revenge. She'd be eager to exact her pound of flesh. Of that, Callie had no doubt.

So, as Callie stood there and watched Owen mount up in the courtyard below, she knew she had to keep the initiative. When Owen turned to her and waved, she pasted on her most saccharine smile and waved back.

Turning away, she slumped in a chair, mind raging. Reaching out, she fiddled with the chess pieces arrayed on the game table before her. She allowed the 'ocean' sounds coming from the grate at her back to soothe her racing heart.

She needed a plan. That was obvious. Flaunting her intentions in her mother's face probably wasn't the smartest of ideas. When push came to shove, Owen would be in her corner. She had him wrapped around her finger. Unfortunately, at best he was but a figment of the Deacon's imagination.

Aaaah, the Deacon. He was the wildcard in all the machinations revolving around the succession. To some, he was the only thing that held the Barony together in the face of her father's perceived weakness. To others, he was the devil incarnate. Whatever the case, he was a force to be reckoned with. Callie sighed and twirled the bishop chess piece between her fingers.

Leaning back, she closed her eyes and listened to the rushing water. In time it had its usual calming effect. Calm but alone. She sighed and rang for her new lady-in-waiting. A bath was definitely in order.

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Macy helped tuck in an exhausted Will, then stepped back. She and Eric, with help from Simon, had managed to get him off the *Siarra's Mist* and over here to the Hawkins compound without incident. Macy was relieved that, during the trip, Will had played it safe and kept his mouth shut. His eyelids fluttered closed. The exertion had obviously done him in.

"Let's let him sleep." whispered Macy, backing towards the door. Simon and Eric followed her through and she clicked it closed behind them. The three of them stood there a moment, studiously avoiding each other's gaze. It was an awkward moment. The big, bald, Simon made Macy uncomfortable, sharing as he did a powerful unspoken bond with Eric. It seemed to Macy as though he could see right through her. She forced herself to not reach up and scratched at the wrappings around her chest.

After what seemed like forever, the big man nodded a goodbye and padded off down the carpeted candlelit hallway. Eric turned in the opposite direction and with a "C'mon" motioned for her to follow. As soon as he turned his back, she reached up for a furtive scratch or two. Then she hurried off behind him.

She followed him to the ground floor where he stood before a closed door with key in hand and a look of anticipation on his face. He addressed her in a hushed tone.

"Behind this door is the reason we have been searching high and low for Sir Arthur. Behind this door is his future." He paused, letting the mystery and tension build. It was Macy's turned to fidget.

"It is time for Sir Arthur to claim what is rightfully his. Our futures... Our very lives depend on it. The die has already been cast."

With that, Eric inserted the key, turned it, and threw open the door. Macy stepped through. Standing before her was the most beautiful set of armor Macy had ever seen. The fact that it was tinted red made her go weak in the knees.

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The spindly old man radiated contentment as he sat in the sunshine feeding the pigeons. The fire-ravaged port of Friston smoldered below him. The quiet from the dining hall told him the servants had finished cleaning up lunch. He smiled, burped, and patted his full belly.

‘Fools.’ he thought. ‘They had it all wrong.’ It was true that his hand had been at the tiller of the Barony’s ship-of-state for more than a quarter century. But that’s not saying the Baron, bless his soul, didn’t play a role. Truth be told, his role was probably greater, much greater, then he was given credit for by those milling about on the streets below. The Deacon had played the bad guy so the Baron could be perceived as the good guy. It needed to be done. It was too late to regret it now.

Lifting his frail bag of bones from the bench, he went over to the terrace railing. ‘Where had the years gone?’ When he’d arrived in the Bay Area those many years ago, the Baron was still a force to be reckoned with. His many military campaigns had cleared great swaths of Unwashed territory, and the beloved first Baroness was still alive. He shook his head at the memory. When he had signed on at the Cathedral as the Deacon, that title carried none of the weight or connotations it did these days. Nor any of the respect. ...or fear. ‘Yes, indeed. Things had changed.’

Right place. Right time. Amazing how much one’s life was determined by being in the right place at the right time. The night the first Baroness died in childbirth was just such a time and place. The Baron’s grief left a vacuum and he, the Deacon stepped in and filled it.

But things had come full circle. He was tired. Weary really. It hadn’t been easy being hated and feared these past twenty-five years: the silences as he entered the room. The whispers once he’d passed by. The lies.

Hopefully history would paint him in a better light. He was ready to retire to his pre-Dark Times library over on Pelican Island. If the history of these times was going to be accurately written, it would probably be up to him to do it.

It would have been a lot easier if Edmund Camberly hadn’t gotten himself killed over in ValleyHo. He had been the only other left alive who knew the truth of that night. Together they could have set things right. ‘Now? Who knows?’ After all these years who would believe the boogeyman?

He patted his copy of the will, safely tucked away in the and or folds of his robe. Poor foolish Edmund. He thought we were enemies. Perhaps I played my role too well. At this point he would have to let the chips fall where they may. An opportunity would present itself. He hadn't spent a quarter century holding the Barony together just to see it fall apart over the succession. Oh, no. That wasn't going to happen.

The Barony could do much worse than having Beck at the helm, even if Beck couldn't yet see it. The Deacon chuckled to himself. Beck might not be the warrior his father once was, but last night was proof he had plenty of piss and vinegar in him. And though he'd never admit it to the Baroness, Annie was good for Beck. She made him stronger. Their sum was greater than its parts.

Annie was the one person at Frismont Castle who didn't run from him. ...didn't fear him. ...didn't lie to him. He recalled fondly the many afternoons the two of them had shared on this very terrace, he the frustrated teacher, she the avid pupil. She had a powerful intellect....for a woman. Together, she and Beck made a formidable team.

The Barony didn't need a warrior this time around. It needed a diplomat, a wise man, a scholar. The times were a-changing. The Unwashed Wars were becoming more and more one-sided. The Enclaves had evolved. The Unwashed had not. This brought to mind a quote he had unearthed by a politician named Adams from the pre-Dark Times days. It said something like: 'Let us teach our sons politics and war, so their sons may study math and science, that theirs may learn art and music.' Indeed, the Enclaves were entering a new phase, a new era.

Pity the poor Baroness. She was blind to all of this. She had grown bitter over the years. Set in her ways. 'And who can blame her?' It wasn't easy living up to a legend. She had never truly been accepted in the Barony. The first Baroness had become a martyred symbol of the good ole days. It was only natural for the second Baroness to be blamed for all the Barony's current woes. Her thin skin, petty disposition, and self-centered

viewpoint would be her downfall. No, that's not true. Callie would be her downfall.

He chuckled again. She didn't even see it coming. Callie was twice the force she would ever be. All it took was backing her into a corner for her to show her claws. And show them she did. The Baroness was undoubtedly still licking the wounds she'd incurred at lunch.

He felt a pang of remorse at the way Callie had been thrown at Owen Camberly. No way would he ever let a spirit as sunny and full of life as hers be tied to anything as dark and disturbing as an Owen Camberly. But it was still in the Barony's best interests to have it seem to be headed that way. It enabled the Baroness to think it was her idea and it tempered Owen's excesses. It helped Callie find the power within her. Beck, too.

And Owen Camberly was evil. Of that he had no doubt. He cringed and the pigeon feeding from his hand flew off. 'Aaaah, the Camberlys.' For a family that had stayed out of the political maneuverings of the past twenty-five years, an awful lot of the Barony's past and future seemed to revolve around them. Poor Arthur. He had no doubt that Owen was behind the fact that Arthur hadn't returned from ValleyHo. Even though a body had yet to be recovered, the Deacon had no doubt. He could see it in Owen's eyes. Arthur wouldn't be coming home.

Nor would the Red Knight. What a fiasco that was. Reports came in that he had been injured just before the big fire the other night. Owen claimed to have tracked him to a warehouse down at the docks. Owen swore that the Red Knight was no more and when Owen said he had sent someone to their heavenly reward, one did well to believe him.

The Red Knight had caused quite a stir for a while there. It got the peasants all riled up and brought back talk of the twins. For a time it had been the central topic of his terrace talks with Annie. Hopefully it would now die of its own accord, forgotten in the excitement of the upcoming festivities. Too bad so many good men had had to die.

And it was all for naught. So much death. “Fools.” he muttered to himself. He’d been willing, all those years ago, to bear the brunt of the people’s anger for doing what had to be done. For a quarter century he’d shielded the Baronial family by being the boogeyman the peasants used to scare their children to sleep.

Things would have been very different if the first Baroness hadn’t died in childbirth. But she had. And when she did, decisions had to be made. Hard decisions. Quick decisions. Overcome by grief, the Baron had been unwilling, or unable, to make them.

The Deacon could still see, in his mind’s eye, the two twin boys swaddled in their cradle, the still form of their mother laying in the bed next to them. His faith was still strong in those days. Everything was assessed for the message it represented from the Almighty. Things seemed much more black and white back then. Gray areas, like gray hair, seemed to be a function of age. He sighed.

When he’d suggested to the grief-stricken Baron doing away with the twins, his youthful righteousness was sure it was the right thing to do. After all, it wasn’t his decision. It was God’s Will. ‘Baaaah!’ The truth was that civilization was still too fragile, the Dark Times still too near, to allow any disruption in the status quo. The smallest seed of insurrection, once planted, could have resulted in humanity losing everything it had gained in the fragile decades leading out of the Dark Times. Had he been confronted with the same choices now, he may very well have reacted differently. But then? With a semi-catatonic, grief-stricken Baron and a beloved Baroness laying there dead? How could he announce to the people that their heir was a club-footed cripple? It was a question that had haunted him every day of the twenty-five years since.

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-----Chapter Seven-----
-----DECEPTIONS-----

It had been one of the most disjointed weeks of Will's life. At least he knew his own name again. As the swelling in the side of his head subsided, the memories came back. Not all of them, and in no particular order. But he recalled Macy and the battle, Friston and Cap'n Waldo, the fire and the Lady Sara. He was getting there.

One thing he did know is that he was tired of being treated like an invalid. He was also tired of hearing only half the story. He knew it was important that these people keep on thinking he was Sir Arthur, but Macy had hemmed and hawed when he'd tried to get her to explain why.

"Enough is enough." he muttered, swinging his feet over the side of the bed. Pulling his nightsweats-soaked nightshirt over his head, he padded over to the corner sink. Grabbing a spongeful of cool water, he squeezed it over his head to flow to the slate floor. After finishing cleaning himself up, he went over to the wardrobe in search of clothes. As he stood before it butt-naked, the door crashed open behind him. Shielding himself with the wardrobe door, he peeked around it to see Hawkins wife, Siarra, staring at him, amused expression on her face.

"I assure you," she teased. "You have nothing I haven't seen before."

Will blushed as she headed for the bed with an armful of clothes. Setting them down, she turned to face him, hands on hips. Will tried squeezing himself further into the wardrobe.

Siarra stood there smiling at him, in no hurry to ease his predicament. She was very pretty in a plump sort of way. She had Eric's fair hair and complexion. Her lips were full, as was her bosom. Her eyes twinkled when she spoke.

"My husband is expecting you for breakfast. Our tailor has finished putting together some clothes befitting someone of your status, Sir Arthur." She nodded toward the bed. "As soon as you get dressed, please meet us in the morning room."

“... and don’t worry.” She turned and headed for the door. Reaching it, she turned back towards him. “...size doesn’t matter.” With a titter, the door opened, closed, and she was gone.

Aghast, Will looked down, then chuckled, knowing he had been had. Hurrying over to the bed, he pawed through the clothes that had been left for him. They were indeed befitting a noble, much finer than anything he had ever worn. Rummaging through them, he chose a natural-colored chamois shirt with silver buttons, a pair of leather leggings, and soft deerskin moccasins. Stopping at the mirror, he ran a brush through his hair and did his daily assessment of the damage. The swelling was almost gone, but the blue and yellow bruising was gonna be with him a while longer. Thankfully, his blond moptop covered most of it. With a nod of approval and stiffening of the shoulders, he headed for the door and breakfast.

Halfway down the stairs, the smell of bacon reached out and reeled him in. Upon entering the morning room, he was surprised to see that only Hawkins was awaiting him. A servant had just set down steaming platters of bacon, scrambled eggs, flapjacks, and hot cereal. Only two places were set. Hawkins sat at one and motioned him to the other.

“I trust you slept well, Sir Arthur.” he said in his quiet, clipped voice. “At least that is something you seem to have no trouble with these days.”

It was the closest to a joke that Will had ever heard the rather reticent Hawkins utter. It was obvious, even in the short time that Will had known him, that the crippled jack-of-all-trades sitting across from him wasn’t comfortable with the social graces. His dealings with others seemed to take on the air of something forced. Taking his seat, Will filled his plate and waited for the other to continue.

“Sir Arthur, I have conspired to have this few moments alone with you. There is much we need to discuss. I’m not sure where to start.”

“Why not start at the beginning.” said Will between mouthfuls in an attempt to lighten the mood a bit.

“The beginning...Aaah, yes.” mulled Hawkins, not ‘lightened’ one bit. “For starters... This isn’t easy to say... Aaah, don’t take this all wrong... But you aren’t Sir Arthur Camberly.”

Will nearly gagged, spitting up bits of bacon and hot cereal.

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It had been one of the most wonderful weeks of Macy’s life. She’d been waited on hand and foot like the noble she was pretending to be. For the first time in her life she felt truly needed, running the show while Will recuperated. And she was in love.

“You lied to me!” she called out as she hurried to catch up. “This is not a shortcut.” Eric had enticed her out of the house in the pre-dawn hours with the promise that they’d be back well before Will’s breakfast. That obviously wasn’t going to happen now. She shielded her eyes against the early morning sun and followed Eric deeper into the woods. He just turned back to her, smiled, and pressed forward.

She sure wished Will would heal faster. This deception of theirs was getting harder every day. She had been afraid to let Will out of her sight for fear he would let something slip. This week at the Hawkins compound left her fairly certain that they wouldn’t do anything too drastic once they found out the truth, but she wanted Will to be recovered enough to make their escape if necessary.

Huffing to catch up, she emerged from the trees to find Eric sprawled on the grass before a small spring-fed lake. Plopping down in the grass next to him, she took in her surroundings. The little clearing was something out of a fairy tale, with the golden rays of the sun dancing among the treetops and the babbling of the spring as it filled the lake.

“You tricked me.” she accused Eric, who was now on one elbow looking down at her. As she looked up at him, she found it hard to maintain the deception. She wanted so badly to reach up and pull him down to her. She could see in his eyes the confusion of wanting the same thing. ‘Did he see through her disguise?’ It

was possible he was a 'fancy boy' but she didn't think so. Would he ever be able to forgive her when the truth came out? She sure hoped so. Eric was a part of her every waking thought these days. He had even invaded a dream or two. 'What was she going to do?'

As if sensing her confusion, Eric rolled away, sat up, and stared out into the water. Picking up a stone from between his shoes, he skimmed it out over the surface. Macy stole a glance at him out of the corner of her eye. 'Yep.' He was as confused as she was.

"Penny for your thoughts." she asked. Receiving only a 'harrumph' for a reply, she pressed onward.

"...tell ya what I think. I haven't spent much time with people my own age." She detected an almost imperceptible nod of agreement. "I didn't know what I was missing. This past week has been just about the funnest of my whole life... All because of you."

At this, he stood up and strode off down the shore, occasionally stopping to skim another stone off the water. Fearing she had gone to far, Macy dared not call out after him. Instead she just watched him as she wrestled with whether or not to tell him the truth. She still hadn't come to a decision by the time he strode back and sat down.

"Me, too." he mumbled, receiving a "What?" in reply. "I had a good week, too. I never had a friend my own age before."

Macy looked at him but he was nervous and avoided her gaze. As she watched, he unlaced his boots and began unbuttoning his shirt. She could see that his hands were trembling. It was her turn to jump up and stride off down the beach.

Hearing a splash behind her, she turned to see a pile of clothes and the circular ripples where he had disappeared into the water. With trepidation, she turned back. By the time she reached the pile of clothes, her heart was beating so fast she could feel her ribs crash against the inside of her bindings.

When Eric's head broke the surface and beckoned her to join him, the tightness in her throat made it possible only to squeak "my poultice." When he came out of the water after her in all his naked youthful beauty, all she could do was stare. When he savagely ripped the buttons from her shirt, exposing her 'poulticed' chest, all she could do was raise her arms.

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It had been one of the most emotional weeks of Annie's life. Meetings with her parents, rare as they were, were traumatic anyway. Arriving on their doorstep with two coffins and a fiancé only made matters worse: Much worse.

So, as she stood at the dock waving goodbye to them, she felt a sense of relief. They were sailing back to the family estates in Pleasanton to bury her brother and sister in the family plot. Though they had taken great pains to assure her that the deaths weren't her fault, it hung in the air between them and probably always would. 'The damn Red Knight.' All for nothing anyway.

She stood there saying her silent goodbyes until their ship was but a speck on the southern horizon. Having made her peace with the past as best as she could, she turned around and headed toward the family townhome and her future. Beck was still there all snug and warm in the big feather bed. She had told him the night before that she would wake him before heading for the docks but, in the pre-dawn hours it seemed like something best left to the immediate family.

There was much to do. The Gubnator was throwing a ball tonight in honor of Beck's impending baronetcy. Tomorrow, they would return to Friston in a display much more lavish and visible than the surreptitious boat ride which had brought them to Sacton a week ago. Like it or not, they were 'politicians' now: players. The more peasants they could impress on the journey back, the better. The dedication of a battlefield memorial in ValleyHo would make for great theater, with Beck taking his place alongside the Gubnator and the other powers that had made victory possible.

Crossing the levee road, she opened the gate and entered the landscaped, terraced roof of the Pleasanton family townhouse. Heading for the far rail, she looked down upon a Sacton already gearing up for the Gubnator's Ball tonight. Below her, at street level, she could see the tradesmen's wagons already queuing up for entrance to the Gubnator's compound. She could hear the bleating, mooing, and squawking of tonight's dinner as it complained its way along toward the kitchens.

"Time to go wake that lazybones up." She turned on her heel and headed for the door leading down into the family quarters below. Stopping off in her room, she threw off her clothes, replacing them with her sexiest nightgown, a black satin number that covered only what it had to and not an inch more. Stopping at the mirror, she ran a brush through her wind-blown hair and dabbed on some gardenia scent.

Grabbing a 'Do not disturb' sign for the servants, she padded down the hallway towards Beck's room. As befitting his status as a Baron-to-be, her family had ensconced him in far-and-away the best of their guest rooms. His canopied, four-poster bed was every bit as good as the one in which her parents slept. The massive brick fireplace had been brought here from a demolished country manor house. The view through the leaded glass windows looked along the length of one of Sacton's prettiest tree-lined streets. The marble soaking tub in the corner was a virtual work of art.

Hanging out the 'Do not disturb' sign, Annie quietly clicked the door open and slipped inside. Clicking it quietly closed behind her, she headed for the bed and the still sleeping Beck enfolded by it. Along the way, she saw that the servants had already been in. The fire had been stoked and two sets of clothes, one for the day and one for the Ball, had been laid out, as per her instructions the night before.

One of the first things she had done on arriving in Friston was negotiate one of Callie's necklaces into a wardrobe befitting a Baron-to-be. With an additional handful of jewels and jewelry she purchased some fine warhorses and hired a retinue of

syncophants and retainers appropriate to Beck's new-found status. At her father's recommendation, she hired a small but efficient troop of guards from Pleasanton, some of whom were outside keeping watch at this very moment. Half the battle of being the Baron was looking the part. Callie would understand. After all, jewels were just jewels.

As she neared the bed, Beck stirred. 'He looked so young when he was sleeping.' She silently hoped that neither of them would ever forget what it was to once have been kids, playing together in the halls of the Castle. With that thought, she lifted the covers, spooned up against his back, and held on tight.

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This past week had been the loneliest in Callie's life. But it was almost over. Beck and Annie were due back tomorrow. The fact that they were returning as fiancés wasn't lost on the mercurial Callie. Nor was the fact that, up to this point, whatever relationship they had had revolved around her. Things would indeed be different. But that lessened her anticipation of their return not one bit.

Never one much for breakfast, she grabbed a pastry, poured herself a cup of tea, and headed for the terrace. Below her, Friston was abuzz with preparations for the upcoming week's festivities. Baronial red and gold was everywhere. The port was full. The air virtually crackled with excitement.

"You miss them dreadfully, don't you?"

She whirled around. Nestled on a bench in and among the trees was the knobby, wizened figure of the Deacon. He too appeared to be partaking in a light breakfast.

"Good morning Deacon," she replied with a slight curtsy of respect. "Yes I do... something terrible."

He nodded knowingly. Gesturing to the bench next to him, he bade her to sit. She did and they spent a few minutes munching, sipping, and taking in the scene unfolding below them. He turned to her.

"Miss Annie and I shared many a breakfast out here. Did you know that?" Callie nodded. "I miss her too. Does that surprise you?" Callie nodded again. "Many surprises await you in the coming days, I fear. I very well may be one of them." He scrunched his bony shoulders. "It is unfortunate that you and I have crossed paths so rarely. I blame your mother for that."

She shot him a glance that emboldened him to continue.

"You have much of your mother in you. You share her fire. Now don't give me that look. I'm not telling you anything you don't already know. You resist the comparison because you only know today's Baroness, not the idealistic young bride who showed up here more than twenty years ago.

"Your mother's life hasn't been easy. She's grown bitter. That's the difference you see, the comparison you resist. But ask yourself: Who has more potential for bitterness than an idealist whose ideals have been shattered?"

He stopped there, allowing his words to sink in. Callie had spent so much of her life pitting her fire against her mother's, that it was the differences, not the similarities, which stood out. She had honestly never thought about what it must have been like to have shown up here under the circumstances that her mother had. Reflection wasn't in her nature.

"Your mother was the spitting image of you in those days. She was a sunny force of nature every bit as powerful as you've shown yourself to be here lately. But nothing she did could bring your father around. The demons which possessed him to the day he died were just too strong.

"Like you, she was a being built to love. When she realized hers was a marriage that would never know love, she changed. Rather than transfer her love to her children, as many women do, she set out to make the world around her pay for her lot in life. And we have all been paying ever since."

Callie finished the rest of her tea and stared off into the distance. It was never easy having to come to grips with lifelong impressions etched in stone. But she couldn't refute what she was

hearing. Every word rang true. She shuddered at the thought of seeing herself follow in her mother's footsteps.

It was all too much. It wasn't just having to look at her mother in a new light. It was sitting here having this kind of conversation with a man she'd spent most of her life avoiding, if not exactly fearing.

She knew that Annie had often sought the Deacon out, many times returning with answers to the kinds of questions all kids ask about their world. He was still the bogeyman, the severe older presence always lurking about the Castle.

She was confused, not sure what to do with this new found insight imparted to her. It had only been recently that she had geared herself up to fight back. Now this. Sneaking a glance at the Deacon, he seemed content to allow her to figure it out for herself.

Standing up, she returned to the railing and the hustle and bustle below. Turning around, sun at her back, she addressed the wizened little man still seated among the trees.

"So you are saying that I should give her a break and try to make peace with her?" He shook his head adamantly, serious expression on his face.

"Nothing of the sort, my dear. It's a fight to the death. Only one of you will survive. I'm just trying to let you know what you're up against."

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

This past week had been the most profitable in Cap'n Waldo's life. Between hauling supplies for the upcoming festivities and this latest burial scam, he couldn't add it up fast enough. But it was time to get back to work. Locking up the strongbox, he left his cabin and headed for the deck above.

Under a temporary tent structure sat three coffins and a small pile of scrap metal. With a crowbar he pried off the first lid, then went weak in the knees at the overpowering stench. It had been a week since the battle in ValleyHo and these 'heroes' were

starting to ripen. Grabbing the remaining scrap metal, he threw it atop the fallen warrior and closed the lid.

Hearing a commotion from dockside, he exited the tent, took a big draught of fresh air, and headed for the rail. Below was a collection of street urchins clamoring for his attention. The two big sea chests he had left at the foot of the gangplank had been re-filled with scrap metal. For the past three days he had been paying the urchins to comb the fire-ravaged areas for it. Now he could 'process' the coffins remaining under the tent. He rubbed his hands together in glee and bellowed at the urchins. They bellowed back. Reaching into his pocket, he pulled out a huge handful of coppers and flung them at the waiting rabble. Most squealed in delight. A few squealed in pain. Waldo's aim was still dead on.

Now, as soon as that useless drunkard of a new first mate shows up, he could get that scrap up here on deck and they could get on with the important work of making money. 'What was that lout's name? Will? No. That was the last one. Daly. Yeah. That was it.' Hopefully he wouldn't have to scour every bar in Friston to find him.

The thought made him thirsty so he headed below in search of a bottle. There was plenty of time before their planned dusk departure. A little nip wouldn't hurt. Especially since the money had been so good lately that he had been able to splurge on something better than the usual rotgut he swilled.

Setting his bulk into his reinforced chair, he pulled a bottle up close and popped the cork. It had been almost too easy. And to think he had gotten the idea from that moron, Geary O'Farrell: 'A heroes burial out in the Great Western Ocean. Moonlit sailings through the Gate and into the treacherous seas beyond. ...all for only ten times the cost of a normal burial! Step right up!'

Waldo chuckled and looked in the direction of his strongbox. The fact that the coffins were loaded down with scrap iron, then pushed overboard in the middle of the bay on his way to Oakton bothered the Cap'n's moral compass not one bit.

“Dead is dead. Buried is buried. What type of moron do I look like?” he mumbled. “The type who would risk life and limb sailing into the Great Western Ocean?”

“That’s the type of moron I came here to see.” boomed a deep voice from the huge shadow now blocking the doorway. Waldo looked up and his heart fell. Striding into the cabin was the caped figure of his nemesis, Brother Owen.

“Well, well, Cap’n Waldo. Long time no see.” He strode over to the table, turned a chair backwards, and sat straddling it. Lifting the bottle he passed it under his nose.

“Drinking the expensive stuff these days. Business must be good.” Waldo fidgeted. Owen chuckled at his obvious discomfort. “When you gonna quit fearing me Cap’n? I like your fat ass. You make me laugh.” Waldo wasn’t convinced. The Paladin continued.

“I came here with a business proposition for you.” His voice deepened: “Waldo’s burials at sea. Moonlit trips into the Great Western Ocean! I thought I’d tag along.”

Standing, the Paladin replaced his chair, showing no indication that he saw the aghast look on the fat Cap’n’s face, a face grown deathly pale.

Heading for the door, he could sense the Cap’n’s lips moving, though he heard no sound coming from them. Reaching the doorway, he turned back in a swirl of cape. Waldo’s brain was still trying to coordinate with his lips. Owen wasn’t having that problem.

“What I most want, Cap’n Waldo, is to take a close-in look at Pelican Island and what the Deacon is hiding out there. Afterwards I need to get to the port of Oakton. I have some business at Calber Castle.”

With that and a flourish of his cape, he was gone, leaving Waldo with terrible visions of death on the Great Western Ocean. Seconds later, the Paladin’s head popped through the porthole at Waldo’s back. Waldo jumped.

“By the way Cap’n, I’m not the kind of moron who wants to risk life and limb out on the Great Western Ocean either. So if you

want to head straight for Oakton after circling the Deacon's island, it'll be okay by me. And don't worry Cap'n... I promise not to notice when you slide those coffins full of heroic scrap metal over the side halfway there. Bye-bye now. See you at dusk."

With a gentle rocking as he descended the gangplank, Brother Owen was gone. Cap'n Waldo reached for the bottle.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

This past week had been the happiest of Beck's life. He had spent virtually every waking minute with Annie. Most of his dreams featured her. His whole being seemed to be enveloped by her.

Even before his eyes flickered open, he could feel her soft, cool, satin-clad body spooning his. His fingers were intertwined with the hand draped across his chest.

For a moment he was disoriented. He had fallen asleep expecting to be jarred awake in the dark pre-dawn to see Annie's parents off. Since they'd obviously decided to keep it a family affair, he kept his eyes closed and savored the moment.

He felt a nibbling at his ear, then a pinching of his nipple.

"Ouch!" he squealed. "What was that for?"

"For being such a bad faker. Time to get up, lazybones."

He rolled over on his back and Annie rearranged herself to lay on his shoulder and throw a leg over the top of him. He bent down and kissed her on the top of the head.

"So, did the future Baroness of Friston do a proper job of seeing her family off to Pleasanton?"

His chiding tone made her pinch him again, harder this time. "Ouch!"

"I did. But I fear that my brother and sisters' deaths will forever stand between us. I fear that you and Callie are the only family I have left."

He squeezed her tighter as he felt the first tear splash down onto his shoulder. For a few minutes they just lay there, she sobbing away the past, he preparing her for the future. When the

sobbing subsided, he rolled toward her and kissed away what remained of her tears.

When she tilted her head up and kissed him back, the past was forgotten. Hands roamed everywhere but continued to hold on tight. Every soft contour could be felt as they squirmed against one another. Beck could feel himself stiffen as his breathing grew ragged. As they squirmed rhythmically against each other, their eyes sung to each other with a love that had been building for years.

At the point when the sensations became too much to bear, Beck disengaged and rolled away panting. Grabbing a bell from the nightstand, he rang for the servants, then crawled back beneath the covers. When his summons was answered, he gave instructions for the marble tub to be filled, then settled back down with Annie to wait.

"That was close." Beck panted, the situation having abated somewhat. "I've wanted you for so long. I think I can wait another week. Are you okay with that?"

The squirming agony of Annie's reply reassured him that, while it was what she too wanted, it wasn't going to be any easier for her than it was for him.

When the tub was filled and the servants were gone, Beck rolled out of bed, threw off the covers, and pulled his nightshirt over his head. He stood there watching as she shimmied out of the tiny, black satin nothingness that passed as her nightgown. From the glistening wet streaks on her thighs to the razor sharp points standing at attention on her chest, her state of arousal was still very evident. Her scent filled Beck's nostrils until he felt his head spin. The eyes looking up at him were so primal they were barely human. It took every ounce of willpower Beck possessed to not dive headfirst back into bed.

Instead, he scooped her up in his arms and hurried toward the awaiting tub. Lowering her, he watched first her feet, then her knees, then her waist, and finally her breasts, slide below the soapy surface. Climbing in, he sat opposite her and tried to distract himself, change the subject, do something to dampen the

effects of the doe-eyed, soaped-up, naked beauty seated across from him.

“Are you excited about tonight?” he croaked. “Your first formal appearance as a Baroness in the making?”

With obvious effort, she drew herself back to the present and the question that hung in the air between them. For a few minutes they both just sat there, allowing the hot water to leech the passion from their bodies. They shared a secret smile, knowing that the unconsummated moment they had just shared went far beyond what most others could dare to even hope for. When she finally spoke, it was barely a whisper, a throaty reverence to the time just shared.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

It had been far and away the most confusing week of Eric's life. Its highs and lows buffeted him about in an emotional hurricane. His every thought centered on Mace Blackwood. And he hated himself for every single one of them.

Yet here he was, a naked Priapas, charging across the grass, dripping wet and enraged. It was as if he were looking down on someone else as he watched his hands tear at the buttons of the young Squire's shirt. The shock and acceptance on the delicate young features before him only served to increase his rage and lack of control. He couldn't stop himself. There was no turning back now.

As his hands reached for the poultice wrappings, he sensed a change. There was something he was missing. He could see Mace's lips repeatedly mouthing the words “I'm sorry”, but the blood boiling in his ears didn't allow him to hear any of it. When the first tear rolled hesitantly to the tip of Mace's nose, then hung there in slow motion, the spell was broken.

Dropping to his knees, he found himself trying to make eye contact with the downcast young Squire as the last of the wrappings fell away of their own accord.

When they finally did make eye contact, both sets of eyes were filled with tears, both sets of lips were mumbling unheard apologies. Eyes drawn downward, Eric's mind was having trouble processing what he was seeing.

'How could he ever have looked at the vision of loveliness sitting across from him and thought it... ...a boy? ...a man? ... whatever? Even the blood boiling in his ears didn't stand in the way of the mumbled "I love you" he received, then returned.

When the apparition before him stood up, he reached out and undid the belt that hovered just inches from his nose. When the trousers it was holding up dropped to the ground, and aroma of femininity washed over him. He received no protest as he lifted first one leg, then the other, removing trousers and shoes in the process.

When she was as bare to the wind as he, she straddled his kneeling figure and sat down, sandwiching his hardness between them and holding on tight. Pulling back, he gazed into her big brown eyes and stilled his beating heart just enough for his ears to work again.

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry." he heard, before pressing a finger to her lips. Her eyes seemed to melt at the gesture and the tension slipped from her body. She hugged him tighter as he rubbed up against her belly, now panting heavily.

Gently, he laid her back in the grass, wanting only to drink her in with his eyes and reassure his mind that all this was for real. Her hand snaked out to relieve him, even as her legs parted, beckoning the same from him in return. He grunted at her touch and reached for the down-covered mound virtually throbbing before him. Their eyes locked on and screamed 'I love you' in a way only possible at the peak of intimate frenzy.

Heart still fluttering, he bent down to kiss, first her lips, then her tiny breasts. Every new contact seemed to bring on a fresh spasm of moans. As he tasted the first breast he had ever known, he nearly lost control and had to jerk himself away from her rhythmic ministrations.

Pulling back panting, her eyes beckoned him down upon her. A nearly imperceptible nod of the head told him it was okay, that she was his if he wanted her. A subtle spreading of the knees drew him down upon her like a magnet. Wrapping her arms around his neck, she thrust upward to find him. The rivers she was producing required no assistance for him to find his mark.

“Oooof!” she grunted in his ear, getting an alarmed look in return. She just held on tighter.

“Don’t... stop... uuuh... It’s supposed to... uuuh... hurt... uuuh... the... uuh... first time. Oooo... Oooo... Oooo... Yeah, that’s it!”

He clung tight to her until he didn’t know where he left off and she began. Whispers of love were exchanged. Sweat intermingled. Their grunts were in unison and building to a crescendo.

When it finally washed over them, there was nothing left of the individual. It had been replaced by a duality whose hearts beat as one. Pulling back, he looked into her big brown eyes.

“Hi there. I’m Macy.” she said.

“Glad to meet you.” he replied.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

“N-Not Arthur Camberly?” stammered Will, eyes roaming, contemplating flight.

Hawkins smiled and reached across the table to pat his forearm.

“No. No. Sir Arthur... You are still Arthur Camberly. It’s just that you are much, much more than that.”

“Where’s Mace?” Will asked, uneasy by her absence.

“I asked Eric to entice him out of the house and keep him busy so that we could have this little talk. It wasn’t easy. He’s very devoted to you and hasn’t left your side all week.”

Will accepted his answer, seeing in it no alternative agenda, no indication that their little ruse had been seen through.

"What do you mean by 'much more than that'?" he prompted, shoveling another forkful of scrambled eggs into his mouth. He could sense the other looking for a place to begin. Two forkfuls later, he did.

"I've known your daddy for many years. Sir Edmund was a fine man. He saw to my upbringing and paid for my boarding schools when I was younger. He set me up with everything you see around you."

He paused to let this sink in. He seemed to be struggling to get said what he wanted to say. His eyes betrayed the turmoil inside him. Will sipped his tea and waited.

"I have no proof for what I am about to tell you. The proof may exist... That's another story... But I don't have it today, so you'll just have to take me at my word."

"And why should I do that?" asked Will.

"Because it will be in your own self interest to do so. You see, Arthur..." Here he paused. "I am your brother. Not only am I your brother..." Here he paused again. "I am your twin brother."

Will picked at his breakfast as he processed what he had just heard. 'What did all this mean?' It meant that he and Macy were in way over their heads here. Their lives could very well be in danger if he wasn't careful.

"What about Owen?" he mumbled.

"He's not made of the same stuff as you. That has been obvious for years. He's not your brother."

"He's a Camberly, right?" Hawkins nodded in agreement.

"So you are trying to tell me that we are the legend of the Friston twins. ...in the flesh? What makes you think that?"

"I've known for years that I was the eldest twin. My clubfoot was the reason they decided to do away with us. Sir Edmund spent a lifetime vowing to right the wrong he was part of. He spent a lifetime preparing for me to assume my rightful place once the Baron died.

"A week and a half ago I received a summons to meet him in Friston. He told me that he had prepared a will that made the

succession clear and was headed to Friston to get the Baron to sign it.”

Hawkins paused, seeing Will’s face go white.

“What is it?” he asked.

“I think I had it.” Will replied. “Ar... Uuh... Sir Edmund entrusted a sheaf of papers to me right before he died. They were in my hand when I took this blow to the head. If you didn’t find them on me when you scraped me off the battlefield, I fear they are lost.”

Hawkins shook his head slowly, sadly.

“What about Mace?” he asked.

“Sh-He said nothing to me.” Will replied.

They looked each other in the eye, trying to figure out where to go from here.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

Callie looked out across the baronial compound from her perch high up here in the belltower. She had spent the afternoon here, alone with her thoughts after breakfast on the terrace with the Deacon.

It was all too much for her to process. She liked things in tidy little packages. ...in black and white. People like the Deacon may thrive on the gray areas, the little subtleties, the occasional treachery. That gray world wasn’t for Callie. She liked knowing who her friends and enemies were.

Yet how could she fight her mother, ‘to the death’, to use the Deacon’s words, especially after this newfound insight had her seeing so much of herself in her? And what did the Deacon mean by ‘to the death’ anyway? Callie had been flapping her gums and talking a good game here lately, but she knew she wasn’t in her mother’s league. Did she want to become the duplicitous treacherous witch it would take to go nose-to-nose with her mother? That was the question.

Callie was depressed. Her head was filled with questions she didn't want the answers for. She wasn't used to this much thinking. It hurt.

As she watched from on high, she could see her mother raising Hell from one end of the baronial compound to the other. Even worse, she could hear her. It was a sound like fingers on a chalkboard. It was a sound that occasionally invaded Callie's quiet times when her mother was nowhere near. She feared it would be a sound that would remain with her the rest of her life.

Callie watched as the compound below her was transformed for the upcoming week's festivities. A jousting pitch with tiered seating now ran from Cathedral to Castle, splitting the compound in two. To its north was a smaller exhibition ring and a large freak show tent, with an open air market for nobles in between. The southern half of the compound was still cluttered with kitchen workers trying to get ahead of the game and other servant preparations for the influx of visitors expected. This area would eventually handle the overflow cooking from the kitchens as well as a huge open-air market for the common people.

Seemingly every window on all sides of the compound was hung with banners, pennants, and bunting in baronial red and gold. Full-size potted trees and flowering shrubs dotted the grounds. The noise was deafening.

Yet above it all screeched be high-pitched voice of the Baroness. It just made Callie more depressed. In it she could hear herself. From it she could sense her own rage at the world. 'With Beck and Annie looking forward to a 'happily ever after', was she destined to spend her life on the outside looking in?' Was she doomed to spend a loveless life with Owen Camberly? Or even worse, die an old maid?

A final screech from below proved to be the straw that broke the camel's back. Turning away from the goings-on below, she slumped down, put her head in her hands, and bawled and bawled and bawled.

"You look just like a princess from a fairytale." cooed the servant. With a worried glance at the gathering dusk, Annie shot back:

"I'd be happy to look just like a Baroness from Friston, if that's okay with you."

Finishing touches complete, they stood back and gazed at the reflection staring back at them from the full length mirror. Annie's hunt-green satin ballgown set off her fair skin and blonde hair. It shimmered black in the candlelight, high collar framing her face, its low-scooped front accentuating her chest. A dazzling emerald hung to the point where her breasts met and was matched by dangling earrings, compliments of Callie. Annie was ready for the Gubnator's Ball.

Tonight would mark her and Beck's formal entry into society with all the trappings, (and traps!), that entailed. The intrigues and jockeying for power would be unlike anything she or Beck had ever known. She hoped he would be up to the task. Hell, she hoped she would be up to the task.

Descending the staircase, she hurried towards her father's library where she knew Beck would be waiting. Rounding the corner, she came up short in the doorway. Unaware of her presence, Beck stood across the room with his back to her, hands on hips, staring at her father's wall of books. For a moment, she saw his father, the Baron, in the pose. It unsettled her. The Baron had seemingly spent half his life staring off into some unknown only he could see, a place he seemed to prefer to the place in which he actually found himself. It had always made her sad.

When Beck turned and smiled at her, the past was forgotten. She drank him in with her eyes as he strode across the carpet toward her. He wore a ruffled green shirt that matched her gown, covered by a tight-fitting, thigh-length, black suede jacket. Cream colored breeches were tucked into knee-high soft black leather boots. He virtually glided across the carpet, his smile growing with every step. Reaching her, he took her in his arms and gave her a peck on the lips, careful not to mess her makeup.

"You look stunning." he said, holding her at arms length.

"You look like a Baron." she answered back. "Are you ready for tonight? Rumor has it the Gubnator throws quite the party."

In answer, he arched his eyebrows and held out his arm. She took it and they headed for the door.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

"You did what!" exclaimed Will.

"But I... I love him." mumbled Macy, eyes downcast. "He... He promised not to tell until we talked with you. ...until after the Ball."

"It's been quite the day for surprises." muttered Will, shaking his head. Getting up, he turned his back on her and went over to the window. It was getting dark out and it wouldn't be long before someone came looking for them to head to the Ball. Part of him wanted to snatch up the foolish young girl sitting behind him and make a run for it while they still had the chance. But another part of him wanted to trust her intuition, her *woman's* intuition, and play out the hand dealt them.

He had already been dressed for the Ball when an out-of-breath Macy burst through his door a few minutes ago. She had been gone all day and he had been getting a bit frantic, especially in light of the revelations made to him by Hawkins over breakfast. Now this. 'Could Eric be trusted?' A quick decision needed to be made. If Eric had been ensnared by Macy's wiles, chances are he was pretty damn ensnared. Will chuckled.

With that, he turned back from the window and folded his arms across his silk fronted chest. When Macy peeked up at him, he smiled in return.

"C'mon... Crazygirl. If we're gonna make it to this Ball, you better start getting ready. She launched herself off the bed and hurled herself across the room and into his arms.

"Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I really am."

He hugged her back, then pushed her away and pointed toward the pile of clothes laid out on her bed.

"I'm not really dirty because..." she began before trailing off red-faced. He watched as she stripped out of her day clothes and hurried into the evening finery which had been laid out. 'Was it his imagination or was she a bit more self-conscious than she had been in the past?' He couldn't help but feel a sense of loss. He couldn't help but feel again the loneliness that had been his life's constant companion.

When the knock came at the door, they were ready.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

From his position at the wheel, Waldo could keep an eye on both that drunkard Daly and that lunatic Owen Camberly. Having done what needed to be done to get underway, the former was curled up in the front of the boat, looking like he was going to be sick. The latter was up in the rigging, spyglass pointed straight ahead at Pelican Island.

Waldo had a bad feeling about all of this. 'One just didn't go near Pelican Island.' But, then again, one didn't say 'no' to Brother Owen either. A rock and a hard place. That's what it was. A rock and a hard place.

The waters close to the island were treacherous, shallow, and rock strewn. If not for the rickety wooden pier extending out from the side of the island, protected from the Gate to the Great Western Ocean, approach by boat would be impossible. Anchoring offshore and swimming in would be madness in the shark-infested waters. Yep, the Deacon's Island was about as secure a location as one could hope for, even if it weren't for all the superstitious stories spread about it to keep the curious away.

That the island's structures dated to before the Dark Times was obvious. Most were concrete and rusted steel ruins clinging to the steep hillsides of the rock as it rose out of the surrounding seas. A steep, switchback pass led to the top of the hill and the only remaining structure of any significance.

It was a huge, flat pillbox of a building, the rusted bars on its windows lending credence to the stories that it had been a dungeon in pre-Dark Times. Waldo shuddered. The thought of being locked up in there to bear the brunt of the weather rolling in from the ocean just beyond made the Cap'n reached for his bottle and its warming properties.

Who knew what kind of evil the Deacon perpetrated up there? What's more, who cares? With a glance at the Paladin clinging to the rigging above, Cap'n Waldo took a long pull on his bottle and made a minor adjustment to the wheel, keeping the island dead ahead.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

Beck's stomach was churning as he stepped from the carriage and held an arm out for Annie to follow. It was one thing to be addressed as Baron in the safe confines of Annie's parents' townhome. It was quite another to be strolling down the red carpet with seemingly every eye in Sacton upon you. Annie gave his arm a reassuring squeeze as they entered the Gubnator's palace.

The opulence made Frismont Castle seem tame by comparison. Banners of Gubnator purple and white hung from the rafters of a ceiling many stories over their heads. So many candles were lit that the room glowed as though it were on fire. Liveried, powder-wigged servants seemed to outnumber the guests. Music unlike anything he had ever heard came from a gallery packed with musicians.

Beck tried hard to not look like the country bumpkin he felt like. 'One foot in front of the other. Eyes straight ahead.' Crossing the entry Hall, he found himself at the top of a grand staircase leading down into a cavernous ballroom. There, Annie brought him up short with her eyes so they could take in the scene below them and wait to be formally announced.

So they stood there, she in her shimmering black-green satin dress, he in his black suede riding coat. At the bottom of the staircase they could see the Gubnator and the Gubness greeting

the guests ahead of them in the receiving line. The Chamberlain appeared to be deliberately letting the steps clear before announcing the guests of honor. So they waited at the top, all eyes upon them, Beck's stomach churned.

After what seemed like forever, their turn came as the voice of the Chamberlain bellowed out from somewhere off to their left. The crowd was silent. The music had stopped.

"Announcing Beck, the future Baron of Friston and his fiancée, Annie of Pleasanton."

As they descended, the band started up again. The crowd stayed silent, following them with their eyes. With every step, the Gubnator seemed to grow in size while the Gubness seemed to shrink. When they finally reached the bottom, Beck found himself dwarfed by the largest human being he had ever been in the presence of. The Gubnator looked as though he had been carved from solid rock. Even his teeth were twice the size of a normal man's. When he opened his mouth, he didn't talk, he rumbled.

"Vellcome to my 'umble 'ome." he said in an accent that took Beck by surprise. "Ziss must be zee beautiful Annie I have been 'earing about for zo long." When he bent to kiss her hand, Beck couldn't help but flashback on a story from his childhood: Beauty and the Beast. The thought unsettled him

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

Macy stood at the top of the staircase, trying her best to look like she belonged. Below, she could see the Gubnator engaged in animated conversation with the future Baron of Friston and his bride-to-be. She stole a sideways glance at Hawkins. When push came to shove, she didn't think the young redhead at the foot of the stairs stood a chance against the cripple. No way. He'd get eaten alive. The bride-to-be on the other hand...

Out of the corner of her eye, she caught Eric giving her that look again. She kicked him. If he wasn't careful he was going to ruin everything. Thankfully they were announced before that could happen.

As befitting his newfound status as scion of Quentin Castle and Lord of Marinwood, 'Sir Arthur' descended first, his trusty squire 'Mace' Blackwood a step behind. Bringing up the rear were the very rich but common Hawkins family, Richard, Siarra, and Eric.

"Velcome to my 'umble 'ome." rumbled the Gubnator at Will. "My condolences on the brave passing of your Vater." They exchanged pleasantries, Will more than holding his own, before heading off into the crowd. As Macy tried to slip past, the Gubnator's booming voice wouldn't let her.

"So ziss must be zee heroic Mace Blackwood." he boomed, a twinkle in his eye. "It izz zaid you are single-handedly responsible for zeeing to it zat Sir Arthur made it out of ValleyHo alive. Zomehow, I imagined you, well, bigger."

With that, he broke into a deep belly laugh, joined by those milling around nearby. Macy's ears burned red as she mumbled a ridiculous apology for not being 'bigger'. Will shot her a glance telling her to keep her cool even as she shot Eric a glance, warning him to do the same.

As she melted into the milling crowd, she could hear the Gubnator's booming laughter behind her. It was going to be a long night.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

Not much caught Waldo's cynical old soul by surprise anymore. But when Brother Owen walked up and cold-cocked Daly, it certainly did. The punch was so powerful it looked like it dissolved every bone in the drunken first mate's body. Down he went. And there he stayed. In a puddle.

They were but a few hundred yards off of the Deacon's island, headed straight for the dock on its sheltered side. After knocking out the first mate, Brother Owen had told him to head toward the dock, then disappeared below. Cap'n Waldo clutched the wheel with white-knuckled concentration. 'What was that holy roller nut job planning now?'

It could be worse. At least they weren't heading out into the Great Western Ocean. And there was profit to be made. He glanced over his shoulder at the three coffins lashed to the deck. "You make me laugh, Cap'n Waldo." he muttered under his breath, mocking the Paladin. They were almost to the dock.

Owen reappeared from below, a coil of rope over his shoulder, a box full of tools in his other hand. Setting them down, he stepped gingerly over the fallen mate and headed for the front of the boat, hollering over his shoulder as he went.

"Lower the sail and aim for the dock. We will drift her in."

Waldo wondered if he had heard right, even as he unquestioningly trimmed the sails. 'Were they really going to tie off on the Deacon's own island? Madness!' If there was anywhere in the Barony with a more terrifying juju than Pelican Island, the Cap'n couldn't think of it. Going to Pelican Island *just wasn't done*. Obviously, the crazy Paladin kneeling at the front of *The Barnacle* didn't get the memo.

It was obvious now why the first mate had gotten his lights put out. One didn't leave witnesses on missions like this. Waldo ought to know. He had been on more than a few of them in his day.

As *The Barnacle* drifted in, Owen jumped to the dock and expertly tied her off. Leaping back aboard, he grabbed the rope and tools, then beckoned to Waldo.

"C'mon, fat man. We've got some exploring to do."

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

"You can call me Gub." bellowed the drunken force of nature seated between her and Beck at the massive round table. Annie suppressed a smile at the decadence of it all.

The room was full of gaily-clad jugglers, semi-clad dancing girls, and roaming minstrels playing instruments she had never seen before. There was a Court Jester hovering over the Gub's right shoulder, and a bear secured to the wall over his left. 'A bear!'

She smiled inwardly at the prodigious amounts of food and drink that disappeared into the oversized head seated on her right: seemingly whole hams, whole turkeys, and slabs of roast beef, the leftovers thrown over his shoulder to the waiting bear. So too disappeared gallons of ale, wine, and hard spirits she had never seen before.

Poor Beck! No one could possibly keep pace, but he was doing his best to not totally shame the Barony. The result was that he looked about ready to pass out. He had quit making sense an hour ago. Still, Annie was proud of him.

Dinner at the Gubnator's was quite the experience, even before the 'special treat' to end the meal that had been promised. So, when the food was cleared, and a drink the others seemed to know, but she didn't, 'coffee', was poured, anticipation ran high.

Because of his forays under the waters of the Inland Sea, the Gub' was liable to produce just about anything at one of his parties. So, when servers entered the room with covered silver trays and positioned themselves around the table, the room grew silent.

When they approached the guests and removed the lids, the silence was replaced with confusion, eyes turning toward the head of the table. On the tray before Annie sat a pile of cylindrical objects about twice the thickness of her thumb, tapered on the ends, the size and color of, well, turds. They had an aromatic smell. Next to them was a small bright yellow cylinder of some unknown substance, capped by a shiny metal and a red tab.

The Gubnator reached out, every eye in the room on him, and grabbed one of the brown cylinders and the yellow one. With a flick of his thumb he drew a collective gasp from his audience as flame appeared at the top of the yellow cylinder. Putting the brown one in his mouth, he applied the flame to the other and and puffed until it glowed orange and his head was wreathed in smoke.

Twenty minutes and a lot of coughing later, orange tips glowed all around the table and smoke hung in the air. When the Gubnator rose to propose a toast, the scraping of chairs could be

heard as his guests staggered to their feet. The Gub' raised his glass high.

"I propoze a toast." he boomed. "Zey eat like birds. Zey don't hold their liquor too good." He looked at Beck. "ValleyHo is proof that zey can outrun zee dogs. But..." he glanced at Annie. "...at the least zey got zee balls to find their women from around zee Inland Sea. To the girlie-men of Friston. Salut!"

The crowd erupted in laughter. Annie stood there, mouth hanging open. Beck stepped forward, slapped the Gubnator across the cheek, slurred "Them's fighting words", and proceeded to pass out.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

"You have to stop looking at me like that!" hissed Macy to the googily-eyed Eric standing next to her on the terrace. She had dragged him out here after the dessert dishes had been cleared to set him straight. Unconvinced, he leaned in close and whispered:

"I just can't believe they don't all see it. How could I ever have thought... You are just so... Sorry."

It was at that moment that a commotion from inside brought their attention back to the party. Hurrying back through the glass doors, they were assaulted by a cloud of smoke and the sight of everyone standing in a circle near the head of the round table.

Jostling to the front of the pack, they found themselves at the back of the kneeling Baroness-to-be, kneeling over an obviously passed out Baron-to-be. The Gubnator stood over them, bigger than life, hands on his hips. The Gubness looked out from behind her husband. The crowd was mumbling something about the Gubnator having been challenged by the fallen young nobleman.

Macy caught Will's eye as he stepped into the center from the opposite side of the circle. She could see the resolve in his eyes and frantically tried to dissuade him from what he was about to do. He winked but otherwise ignored her and strode up to the Gubnator.

"If I may be so bold as to call you Gub." he began. "As one who nearly left his life on the battlefield at ValleyHo, I too am insulted by your toast. ...insulted for all of Friston and the Barony.

"As per the chivalric codes, I demand to stand in place of my fallen liege lord. And in his name I demand satisfaction."

"Are you zure you vant to do ziss?" shot back the man-mountain towering over Will with a twinkle in his eye.

"I mean you and yours no inzult Zir Arthur."

Will twinkled back. "It is too late for that, Gubnator. Let us get it on."

With that, he reached down and helped the bride-to-be bring her man up to a sitting position. That accomplished, she stood up and turned abruptly, bumping into Macy in the process. After a moment's confusion, both took a step back.

"Macy?" mumbled Annie.

"Annie?" mumbled Macy.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

"I won't. I won't. I won't." panted the Cap'n like a mantra. One foot in front of the other, Cap'n Waldo refused to drop dead while climbing this rock. His innate orneryness wouldn't give Brother Owen the satisfaction. He looked down across the switchback path to *The Barnacle* berthed far below. Half a switchback ahead of him strode the Paladin. 'Almost there.' "I won't. I won't. I won't."

At the top of the hill, Brother Owen strode toward a corner of the building like he knew where he was going. Hurrying to catch up, Waldo found out that he did. As Waldo watched, the Paladin repeatedly threw the rope up until it looped itself over a protruding metal bar.

"Look up there, Cap'n Waldo." he pointed. "That window is missing a bar and the other bars appear to be nearly rusted through.

"From out on the water, I studied every inch of this island with my spyglass. This is our way in."

As he walked over and tied one end of the rope around his waist, Waldo sized-up the window, sized-up himself, and doubted everything but the Paladin's insanity. When he was told to tie the other end around his own waist he started to get a very bad feeling.

Strapping the heavy box of tools to his back, Owen tugged on the rope to make sure it wasn't going to come loose up top. When he told Waldo to go check on *The Barnacle*, the Cap'n should have seen it coming. As soon as he got near the edge of the hill he felt the boot in the middle of his ass, and next thing he knows, he's stumbling down the steep embankment toward the switchback pass below.

Tumbling ass over tea kettle, the last thing he remembered seeing was Brother Owen being dragged up the side of the building toward the targeted window. Then he landed with a splash and everything turned to stars.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

Will was beginning to wonder about what he had gotten himself into. Sometimes the right thing to do is the stupid thing to do. This appeared to be one of those times.

The chivalric code prohibited disputes between gentlemen from being resolved by deadly force, so the usual weapons of choice were blunted wooden swords. But just because you couldn't die didn't mean you couldn't suffer a pretty good ass whipping.

Everyone had resumed their seats, except for he and the Gubnator who stood, wooden swords in hand, at opposite ends of the open space in the center of the table. Now someone tells him that the Gubnator makes it a point to insult somebody at his parties so that they are forced to demand satisfaction. Then he toys with them until beating them silly as a cap to the evening's festivities. Harmless fun they all said. All those who weren't staring down the Gubnator, wooden sword in hand. 'Oh, brother.'

Across the way, Sacton's finest was preening for the crowd. Bare from the waist up and greased down, he glowed in the candlelight like a demon just summoned from Hell. The wooden sword whirled through the air so fast that it disappeared from sight. The word "girlie-man" floated to him from across the way, eliciting a drunken yell from the crowd.

He could see money changing hands and bets being placed. But a closer listen told him they weren't betting on who would win, but rather how long it would take him to lose. With that as motivation, he headed for the center of the ring.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

Eric was impressed. He hadn't really expected Sir Arthur to step up and take the place of the drunken young fool who had challenged the Gubnator in the first place. Maybe Mace, Macy, was right. Maybe the Camberly heir had more sand in him than Eric had given him credit for.

When, halfway across the circle, Sir Arthur doffed his shirt, revealing a myriad of dueling scars, Eric settled in. This might be interesting after all. The crowd, too, seemed to notice that he handled his wooden sword like he knew what to do with it.

The only one who didn't seem to notice was the Gubnator. He was still at the far end, flexing his biceps and running his mouth. Quick as a cat, Arthur was on him. The sword whistled through the air. A few glancing blows were landed. Then he was gone, back to the center of the ring. Eric noticed increased activity from the bettors around him.

The Gubnator roared in delight, thumped his chest, and took a couple of steps toward Arthur. When he was just a few steps away, he squared up and seemed to get serious. When he'd lunged, he cut nothing but air, yet received the flat of Arthur's sword across his backside for the effort.

For a while they parried back and forth, neither landing any real blows of significance. It was the Gubnator's power versus Sir Arthur's quickness and the result was a standoff. Sweat

glistening, they continued to circle each other, looking for an opening.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

“Madam told me you went off in search of Sir Arthur. I see you have found him. But...” hissed Annie, masked by the noise of the cheering crowd. “...but, why are you dressed like that?”

Behind them the crowd roared as one or the other of the combatants landed a blow. Macy leaned in closer.

“Call me Mace. They think I am Arthur’s squire. I was at the battle in ValleyHo. It was terrible. Blood. Dogs. Death.” The words just poured out. “Nothing is as it seems. We need to talk but not here.”

The crowd roared again. Annie could sense Macy’s distraction and concern for the young noble going toe-to-toe with the Gubnator. ‘Was there something more there than what she saw?’ And what of the other young man who seemingly hadn’t left Macy’s side all evening? Where was he anyhow?

“”So you are really a noble and really getting married?” Macy said with more than a little awe in her voice. “So you aren’t Madam’s daughter after all. You had us all fooled.”

Annie smiled down at her young friend. They both had a lot of explaining to do but this obviously wasn’t the time or place. But, before she could arrange a better one, a collective gasp from the crowd drew Macy toward the ring and she was swallowed by the crowd.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

Macy got there just in time to see Will’s wooden sword fly through the air and skitter under the table. Unarmed, he dodged to the side, deftly avoiding the hail of blows aimed at him by the red-faced Gubnator.

Macy’s mind raced. She was close to overloading. Today would not be a day she would soon forget, that’s for sure. It

started by the spring with Eric. That part made her smile. But Hawkins's revelations to Will about the twins just added danger, complexity, and uncertainty to their lives. Eric knew her secret and now Annie was here, too. 'Annie! Baroness Annie!'

This friend she had known all these years was going to be the new Baroness of Friston. That is unless of course the adoptive father of the boy she loved became Baron. And she had maneuvered it so her good friend Will was stuck in the middle of it all. Someone was going to get hurt here and Macy wasn't at all sure she could do anything about it.

At the moment the likeliest candidate for getting hurt was scrambling away from an enraged Gubnator and his windmilling wooden sword. Having nowhere left to run, Will had lost his footing and lay sprawled on the floor, up against one of the massive table legs.

Macy held her breath as the Gubnator straddled him, roaring for the crowd and brandishing his weapon overhead. Her ears rang in empathy as she anticipated the flat of the sword crashing down on Will's head. The Gubnator roared again.

"You fight good...for a girlie-man." he bellowed. The crowd roared. "Do you have any last words before I dub you with ziss sword my latest victim?"

The crowd grew instantly silent, awaiting Will's response. Macy's eyes were drawn to the sword held high above Will's head, then to his eyes, eyes which surprisingly had no defeat in them.

"Gubnator... Gubness... Assembled guests..." Will began, drawing each word out.

"I have met my match in this worthy opponent. But, in honor of my liege..." he nodded toward the still-passed-out Beck. "... I ask for quarter from this... from this..."

With that his hand shot out from under the table, the tip of the wooden sword in it burying itself just deep enough into the Gubnator's scrotum to elicit a squeak and stand him on his toes. Will continued. The Gubnator's eyes bulge.

"I ask for quarter from this... from this... from this 'girlie-nator'. If I don't receive it, there might just not be any little Gubbies to suckle at their mother's breast."

The Gubnator's sword clattered to the floor and he joyously gave his quarter. When Will release the pressure of his sword, the Gubnator reached down and helped Will to his feet, slapping him on the back. The Gubnator had a new best friend. As he was escorting him toward the liquor, Will looked over his shoulder and gave Macy a wink. Then he was swallowed by the crowd.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

Callie would be glad to put this day to rest. It had started on the terrace, breakfasting with the Deacon and his revelations. It had ended in the courtyard, screaming at her mother to mind her own business. Most of its middle had been spent high up in the belltower, crying her eyes out.

She missed Beck and Annie so much that it caused her physical pain. It wasn't just their absence. It was also the knowing that they would be forever changed when they returned. Yet she would be the same old flighty Callie.'Ha-Ha: no one ever takes Callie seriously.' The thought of turning into her mother made her want to curl up into a fetal ball.

Doffing her clothes, she threw them into a corner, still not used to doing the day-to-day things without Annie. Going to the wardrobe, she withdrew a favorite nightie, a lacy little number dyed a light green: It set off her fair skin and flaming tresses.

Going over to her little altar she lit a candle for Beck and Annie's safe return, as well as one for her father's departed soul. Passing the bureau, she grabbed a brush and went to the window.

She stood in the window, brushing her hair and staring out at the night sky. When she saw a falling star, she had so much to wish for, she didn't know where to begin. It just made her sad. On a day when she didn't think she had any tears left in her, she ended it by staring out into the darkness, just bawling her little eyes out.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

No sooner had Waldo huffed and puffed his way back to the top of the switchback than an "Over here!" came at him out of the fog-muffled darkness. Sensing it came from the south end of the building, the Cap'n headed in that direction. Rounding the corner, he nearly bumped into the Paladin.

"Come on, Cap'n Waldo. You ain't gonna believe this!" It was the most excited Waldo had ever heard the crazy monk. Some of his trepidation for trespassing on the Deacon's property was replaced with a curiosity fueled by greed. "Lead the way, brother Owen." he mumbled to himself.

Hurrying ahead and up a few steps, Owen called out over his shoulder. "Wait'll you see this." before disappearing through a door he had obviously unlocked from the inside. Tentatively stepping through behind him, Waldo was swallowed by the darkness.

"Here, try this." he heard as a heavy cylindrical object was shoved into his hand. "Push that button by your thumb."

When he did, he gasped and nearly dropped the object. For out of its front shot a beam of light, pure and straight and unlike anything Waldo had ever seen before. Then a second beam of light appeared, held by the Paladin.

"Come Cap'n Waldo. This is only the beginning of the wonders of this place." He led the way along a rusty green metal corridor door and through two doorways. The Cap'n followed.

Upon passing through the second doorway, Waldo's shone his light down a corridor so long that the light ended before it did. Corridors stretched to the left and right, ending in walls with tall, barred windows in them. When Brother Owen strode off down the central corridor, Waldo hurried to keep pace. For reasons he couldn't quite put his finger on, this place gave him the creeps.

That it had once been a dungeon was obvious. On both sides of the corridor they strode down were ironed-barred cells, not much bigger than a man was tall. There were two tiers of

them and they obviously stretched the entire length of the building. Their most unusual feature was that they were full. Not with prisoners, but with boxes, crates, and objects unlike anything Waldo had ever seen before. Shining his light up to the second tier, he could see that those cells were full, too.

Since most of what he was seeing looked nothing like anything he had ever seen before, he assumed that the contents, like the building, dated from before the Dark Times. It looked a whole lot like this was where civilization made its last stand as the Dark Times descended. If so, this had to be the greatest treasure trove in the whole Bay Area, maybe even the world. Just the thought made Waldo salivate and go weak in the knees. 'Hell, the light he held in his hands was worth its weight in gold!'

Just ahead, brother Owen disappeared around a corner to the right. They must be in the center of the building. The corridor they had been walking along continued to stretch off into the darkness. The one stretching off to the left ended in the same window wall as the one seen back at the beginning of his walk. But the one stretching off to the right, now lit by glowing light, appeared to end in a room of some sort.

Upon entering, Waldo stopped dead in his tracks, panning his light along the walls. He had never seen so many books. From floor to the ceiling high above his head were shelves full of them. A rusty steel circular staircase led to a catwalk so the higher shelves could be accessed. Angling his light at some of the nearby spines, he could see that they were written in an archaic form of Franglish, the dialect spoken throughout the bay and inland sea areas.

The center of the room was dominated by a huge desk with a comfortable chair. It was a space that had a lived-in look, testament to the fact that this was probably where the Deacon spent most of his time when he was on the island. Going over closer and shining his light, Waldo could see that the desktop was covered in maps, overlaid with a sheet of glass.

Maps were something the Cap'n knew. As a boat captain, his life depended on it. He could understand some of the writing

but it wasn't the writing that was important. The writing obviously described a world that no longer existed.

What was important were the bodies of water. Those the Cap'n could easily read. One map in particular caught his eye. It was a double map. The map on the right showed shorelines very similar to the ones he navigated. The map on the left had a much smaller bay and the inland sea wasn't there. He could see Pelican Island on both. It was called al-ca-traz. Friston was called san-fran-cisco.

When he looked at a larger scale map under glass just to the right of the double one, he had to sit down. It showed land stretching away forever to the East and the Great Western Ocean stretching even further to the west. Obviously the world didn't end at You Seem Mighty Valley. Waldo sat back and allowed a moment for that to process.

His reflection was interrupted by an excited summons from the top of the circular stair. Heaving his bulk out of the chair, he maneuvered it none too gracefully to the top of the stair. When he got there, the Paladin shoved another metal cylinder into his hand, this one about twice as big around as the light, but not much bigger than his fist.

"Lift the top up, but don't cut yourself," commanded Owen as Waldo watched him use some kind of device to pry the top off of a similar cylinder he held in his hand. "Now drink," he said as he tipped his cylinder to his lips.

Waldo did, tentatively at first, greedily thereafter. It had a distinctly metallic tang, but Waldo wolfed down the diced up pieces of fruit in some kind of sweet, heavy syrup.

"There's thousands and thousands of these back there," said Owen, the awe obvious in his voice. "There are all different types of foods and there's enough of them to feed an army. You could live here the rest of your life and never go hungry. Incredible."

A device on a tripod, just behind the mad monk caught Waldo's eye. If it was what he thought it was, it was far and away the biggest one he had ever seen. When Owen went off in search

of more food cylinders, Waldo moved in for a closer inspection. Yep, it was what he thought it was. It was the biggest dam spyglass he had ever seen.

Putting his eye up to it and focusing, he chuckled to himself and muttered "You dog". For, framed in the viewing space, as close as if she were in the room, was the window-framed, negligee-clad figure of Callie of Friston, bawling her little eyes out.

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-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

-----Chapter Eight-----
-----RECEPTIONS-----

Annie had to stifle a yawn as she listened to Father Tom drone on. She hadn't gotten much sleep last night. The Gubnator's Ball had dragged on into the wee hours, then she had been dragged out of bed before dawn and put aboard a boat bound for ValleyHo. Spread out now below her was the battlefield she had heard so much about this past week.

It was much as she had envisioned it: the Inland Sea on the right. The tree-filled gully off to the left. The long ridge opposite and the farmhouse smack dab in the middle of it all. The high yellow grasses had all been trampled and great swaths of earth lay ripped asunder by the pounding of hooves. Wagon tracks criss-crossed back and forth as testimony to the ongoing clean-up effort.

She sat among the first families of the Enclaves in a hastily erected reviewing stand sitting in the shadow of the ValleyHo walls. The slopes on both sides were crammed with the common folk who had shown up for the dedication. Minstrels, jugglers, and fools could be seen working the crowd. High behind them, the city walls were lined with trumpet-wielding heralds.

'Would Father Tom never shut up?' It was barely noon and he was already slurring his words. He spoke to them from a podium in front of the reviewing stand, the battlefield in panorama behind him. Between podium and reviewing stand lay the large cloth-covered reason for their being here today: the memorial.

A surreptitious peek around told her that she wasn't the only one tired and fidgety. Nor the only one bored to death by Father Tom's droning. "Of course God was on our side," she muttered under her breath. "We won. Didn't we?"

Beck looked at her with questions in his eyes, obviously having heard her mutter. She shook her head, smiled at him, and took his hand. Poor Beck. He was looking green around the gills and a bit worse for the wear. As far as she knew, last night was his first real drunk. From the looks of things, if he survived it, and

that wasn't exactly a foregone conclusion, it very well may be his last. Poor Beck.

Further along the row sat the Gubnator, his usual bigger-than-life self showing no ill effects from the night before. Prim and proper at his side sat the Gubness. He was to deliver the key address here today and, if you asked Annie, it couldn't come soon enough. Father Tom droned on.

The CeeEeeHo of San Hoton was in the front row with his lady, the CeeEffHo, and their two gawky daughters. The whole family was tall, skinny, and birdlike, their black and turquoise raiments giving them the look of peacocks. He too was supposed to speak today. Annie wanted to drink poison. She stifled another yawn.

A commotion at the end of the row caught her attention. When she looked that way she found herself being stared at by the just arriving Owen Camberly. Involuntarily she clutched at herself and turned a protective shoulder to shield Beck. She glared back and he just smiled, tipped his cap, and took his seat next to the Seneschal of the Flame.

She had seen him when they had first arrived. He had been talking to some fat man up by the iron wagon tracks. The iron wagon sitting behind him was most probably how he arrived here. Before turning back to the droning Father Tom, she silently reaffirmed her vow that she would see the good Brother Owen dead before she ever let him lay a finger on Callie. Too bad he's not more like...

That's when it hit her. The face that was nowhere to be seen was that of the crazy paladin's brother, Sir Arthur. Come to think of it, she hadn't seen him all day. The last she remembered seeing him was after the swordplay last night, as he was swallowed by the crowd, his newfound friend the Gubnator's arm about his shoulders. 'HmMMM.' Father Tom droned on.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

Eric stifled a yawn as he listened to the Bishop of Sacton drone on. He hadn't slept much last night. After returning from the Gubnator's Ball, he had stayed up talking to Macy most of the night. He had wanted to do more than talk, but she refused to risk their being caught. He had finally gone to his room and stretched out across the bed for a few hours.

When he had awoken, she was gone. As was Sir Arthur. When they had rushed around to get out of the house in the cold pre-dawn, he had asked his Da about it, but wasn't really given an answer. He didn't want to be too obvious about his questioning, self conscious as he was about the events of the day before. He knew 'Mace' was a girl, but they didn't.

When they had boarded *The Barnacle* to follow the power lines to ValleyHo, his Da had been huddled in the cabin below. Simon and Richmond were missing too. He considered asking Siarra about it but he knew he couldn't keep his secret from her, so he had been avoiding her all morning. So he sat in the front of the boat to await his Da coming out of the cabin, and next thing he knew, they were berthed in ValleyHo and he was being jostled awake.

So here he sat, listening to the Bishop drone on. He and the family were seated in a privileged commoner section, back up against the city wall, and off to the side of the nobles' reviewing stand. If he craned his neck, he could see the cloth-covered memorial that was to be unveiled. His Da sat beside him, talking business with one of his partners from south of the Inland Sea. Siarra sat next to him. The Bishop droned on.

Eric felt kind of guilty. He wasn't used to keeping secrets from them. Yesterday, at the spring, Macy had convinced him to keep their secret until after the Gubnator's Ball. After the Ball, she had convinced him to keep it until after the dedication ceremonies. Now she was gone. Eric was starting to get a bad feeling about all of this.

'Should he tell?' And what about Sir Arthur? Was he the real deal? And how would all of this affect the plans that had been in the works for years? And if that wasn't Sir Arthur, who was it?

Could he trust Macy? She told him he could but he knew his heart was clouding his judgment.

The Bishop of Sacton droned on. Eric was depressed. This was the longest he had gone without seeing her since she's staggered up to him drunk out of a pile of bodies on the field that now stretched out below him. He smiled at the memory, but it just made him sad and miss her all the more.

Amazing what a difference a week makes. Though some of the landmarks were undoubtedly familiar, Eric had trouble seeing the valley below as the place where so many died just a week ago. There was something surreal about the fancy clothes, big hats, and solemn speeches. He wanted to jump up and shout: "people died here! I almost died!" Though he appeared calm on the outside, he was screaming so loud on the inside that he was amazed the others didn't hear it. Maybe they were screaming on the inside too.

The Bishop droned on. Eric yawned again. A look toward the reviewing stand told him he wasn't the only one bored to death by the so-called festivities. Many of the nodding heads up there had been present at the Gubnator's Ball until way past their bedtime. At least Eric had the advantage of having stayed sober last night. The hangover pain he saw on some of the faces was downright comical.

But not on the Gubnator's, of course. For all the prodigious amounts of alcohol Eric had seen him consume over the years, he couldn't honestly say he had ever seen him drunk. Eric watched as he talked animatedly to the Seneschal who was seated next to him, obviously ignoring the droning Bishop. He was due to deliver the keynote address and might actually be worth hearing. Eric yawned again.

He could see that Owen Camberly was quietly listening to the heated conversation going on between his Seneschal and the Gubnator. He gave Eric the creeps. How could anyone have ever thought he and Sir Arthur were brothers? He sure hoped his Da knew what he was doing. When those two finally squared off

against each other, Eric wouldn't want to be caught in the middle of it.

As he ruminated on that forthcoming showdown, a series of squawks from the reviewing stand brought him back to the present. Looking up, he could see Beck Friston hurtling down the aisle and throwing himself off the side of the reviewing stand. Green in the face and holding his mouth, he hurried around to the back of the stands where he loudly retched his guts up. Eric shook his head. Poor Beck Friston. He didn't stand a chance.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

Callie stifled a yawned as she listened to her mother drone on. She hadn't gotten much sleep last night. For the longest time she had just stood in the window and stared out at the stars. When she did finally lay down, her mind raced and sleep wouldn't come. Then she had been awakened way too early. And now this.

The sun was high in the sky, it was the hottest part of the day, and she found herself sitting in a stifling reception tent set up down at the Friston dock. Across the way, her mother saccharinly greeted yet another inconsequential little noble from the hinterlands. Callie fought to keep her eyes open.

She shook her head to get the oxygen flowing again. Then she dragged herself out of the chair and went over to the tent flap. Her mother droned on behind her. Stepping through, she was acknowledged by the Castle guards posted on either side of the doorway. The air virtually crackled with anticipation.

Today was the day. 'The end of the beginning or the beginning of the end.' Something like that. Callie looked up at the sun and shielded her eyes. The dedication ceremonies over in ValleyHo ought to be winding down about now. When it was over, most of them would be coming to Friston. It was going to be a long day. Callie yawned again.

Every berth in the harbor was full, offloading people and supplies. Behind them, ships from all over the bay and Inland Sea

awaited their turn. The harbormaster and his man were running around, shouting orders, and doing their best to keep things moving along. Drunken shouts could be heard from the overflow of revelers spilling out of the dockside taverns. A cornucopia of smells assaulted her nose from the myriad of foods being hawked all around her.

The smell of fresh grilled asparagus separated itself from the others and she found herself moving toward it. The crowd parted and she found herself standing before a brazier heaped with the delicacy, a toothless old man tending it from behind.

“M’Lady!” he grinned. “Would yer likes ter try some?” he asked, even as he heaped a cornhusk full of the freshly-buttered spears. Callie reached out and took it as he continued to babble.

“Today’s the day, M’Lady. I told my old lady I was gonna wait here all day if’n I had to. Cain’t wait to see the look on yer mother’s face when yer brother and miss Annie get off their boat.”

Callie munched her asparagus, eyes scanning the crowd, only half listening.

“Sure took some ba... err, sand for him to sweep that girl off her feet right in front of the Baroness’ nose. ‘magine that! The things we do for love, eh? Then to disappear right under her nose. Hah! And the Deacon’s.” He crossed himself and glanced toward the heavens. Then he replenished Callie’s now empty cornhusk and continued

“Give that boy time and he might make hisself a fine Baron. That’s what the people say. Yeah. We always did like young Beck. That we did. Miss Annie, too. Not many knew her, but the ones that did speak mighty highly. That they do.”

As the toothless talking machine turned away to fill another order, Callie surveyed the crowd. As rare as were her forays out among the ‘common folk’, each one was an experience to be savored. Her leash was never long. Even now, two of the Castle guards hovered protectively nearby. What made this time different from all the others is that, for the first time, Annie wasn’t at her side to share it. Never had Callie been surrounded by so many

people yet felt so utterly all alone. The old man was droning on again.

“...for you. Yep. Yep. That’s what we need. We needs to finds a good man for you, miss Callie. Yep. That’s what we needs. The rumors about brother Owen cain’t be true.” He crossed himself and peeked at the heavens again. “They just cain’t. A delicate flower like you and a... a... a caveman like him. Cain’t be true. Say it ain’t so miss Callie. I’d rather see you be alone than with that brute.”

Callie burst into tears. Throwing her empty husk in the nearby trash, she whirled on her heel and headed for the relative safety of the reception tent. Bursting inside, she threw herself down on one of the pillow-covered settees and buried her face in her hands. In the background, her mother droned on

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

Beck stifled a yawned as the Gubnator droned on. He hadn’t gotten much sleep last night. He had just returned to his seat after puking his guts out behind the stands and his stomach was on fire. His mouth tasted like something died in it and his head felt like it was too big for his skull. Beck was hurting but thankfully this part of the day was almost over. Soon he could go back aboard the Gubnator’s ship, lay down, and pretend he was dead. Annie squeezed his hand.

It was as if she could read his mind. They had communicated for so many years without words that they didn’t really seem necessary now. When he was thirsty she quenched it. When he itched, she scratched it. The faintly amused expression on her face told him that the only thing she could do for his current predicament was be there. He squeezed her hand back. The Gubnator droned on.

He could sense those around him growing restless. The dedication was almost over and they were anxious to get on with their lives. Many of those in the reviewing stand would leave here for Friston and the week of festivities awaiting them there. The

thought made Beck's stomach lurch since he was the none-to-eager center of attention for most of those festivities.

He glanced sideways at the blonde beauty seated next to him. His idyllic week with Annie was over. It was time to get down to business. It was almost as if the honeymoon preceded the marriage.

Beck feared that he would someday look back on this as the happiest week of his life. His every waking moment had been spent with Annie. He had no responsibilities and was waited on hand and foot in a big house full of books. For Beck, it just didn't get any better than that.

Annie squeezed his hand, as if sensing his moment of doubt. He looked at her sheepishly. With Annie at his side, he would find the strength to do what had to be done. He squeezed her hand back.

A murmur from the crowd brought their attention back to the podium. The Gubnator had finally stopped speaking. His attention was on the memorial before him, about to be undraped for the first time. The crowd grew quiet as four wives whose husbands had not returned from the battle approached the corners of the memorial. With a flourish they removed the covering, eliciting the appropriate 'ooohs' and 'aaahs' from the crowd.

Before them lay an angled granite slab as wide as a man is tall and twice as long. It had been inlaid with polished stones of red, green, blue, purple, and black to represent the positions of the various forces on that day. With the actual battlefield in panorama behind it, it was easy for the mind's eye to re-create the battle on the field below.

When Beck did, it sent an involuntary shiver through him. As Baron, he would be expected to lead the Barony's forces into battle. That was the one responsibility Annie couldn't help him with, and the one that most scared him. 'Was he a coward?' It was a question that couldn't be answered until he found himself confronted with it. And, by then, it would be too late.

The crowd had grown animated around him. Annie was shaking his arm and pointing down at the field. So were many of

the others. The Gubnator too had turned to look. Following the pointing fingers, his eyes were drawn to the back of the farmhouse. The stable doors were now open and a mounted figure appeared from its depths. It just sat there in the shadows, apparently savoring the uproar it was creating up on the hill.

When it moved through the doorway and into the light, Beck could hear the collective intake of breath all around him. His heart began pounding and he could sense all the eyes that had turned toward him. Mounted below them on a massive black warhorse sat the Red Knight.

Cradled in his right arm was a menacing looking twelve-foot lance. Held aloft by his left hand was a spear with some sort of red banner attached. As the crowd on the hill watched, shocked into silence and inaction, the red warrior slowly circuited the house, red banner trailing behind him. Having completed his lap, he again turned to face the crowd. He held the banner high above his head, then thrust it into the ground. It stood there quivering as the Red Knight yanked the reins and trotted off, heading for the copse of trees at the head of the Valley. When a gust of wind filled the banner, the crowd gasped, Annie's nails dug into his palm, and Beck felt like he was going to be sick again.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

Waldo stifled a yawned as he listened to the Wagoneer droned on. He hadn't gotten much sleep last night. After dumping the coffins in the bay and putting *The Barnacle* into Oakton, Brother Owen had told him there was an iron wagon waiting to take them to the dedication in ValleyHo. So while the Paladin attended the festivities below, Waldo stood up here on the hill doing his best not to listen as the Wagoneer droned on about the wonders of his mighty machine. Waldo yawned.

Behind him, Waldo could sense a change in the mood of the crowd. When the droning, soot-covered little man's eyes nearly popped out of his head, Waldo turned around. Scanning the crowd assembled on the hillside, he detected a problem but

couldn't figure out what it was. A tap on his shoulder and a pointed finger directed his gaze down into the valley.

Waldo's mouth hung open. The Wagoneer droned on. Waldo reached out and clamped a hand over the little man's mouth, then punctuated it with a dirty look. It worked. The Wagoneer shut up for the first time in hours. Waldo padded to the edge of the slope.

'It couldn't be.' Below him was a sight he was sure he would never see again. The Red Knight was dead. He saw it with his own eyes. Yet there he was, lance held high, trotting off the battlefield toward the trees to the west.

Returning his gaze to the viewing stand, his eyes sought out the crazy Brother Owen. There he was, seated at the end of a row, hands in his lap, either totally calm or in shock. Probably the latter. Seated next to him, the Seneschal was gesturing, not toward the retreating warrior, but toward the farmhouse in the center of the valley.

That's when Waldo saw it. The shock of it took the strength from his legs, and he plopped down onto the grass where he had been standing. There, in the middle of the corral, stood a quivering spear. Hanging from it, fluttering in the wind, was the tattered remains of a blood stained red velvet dress: a dress he had last seen covering the battered figure of the Lady Sara as she lay writhing in the firelight beneath the rhythmic assault of the crazy Owen Camberly. Waldo crossed himself. 'Lord A'mighty.'

He wasn't sure how long he had been sitting there. When he looked back down at the field, the Red Knight had disappeared off to the west. The Gubnator appear to have formed a party to go down the hill and inspect the tattered dress. Many of the first families were headed towards their carriages or the boats anchored along the Inland Sea. The commoners were being held back by the town militia which had been mobilized. He could hear the Wagoneer again droning on behind him.

Brother Owen was up the hill and in Waldo's face before he knew it. Any questions he might have thought to ask were strangled by the look in the Paladin's eye. Without a word, he

yanked the Cap'n to his feet as he strode on past. Turning, Waldo could see the Wagoneer being given instructions to get underway, and to do it sooner rather than later.

The dirty little man scrambled up the steps and started maniacally shoveling black rock into the still glowing firebox. Owen was at the back of the iron wagon, hurtling his already saddled mount up the ramp and into one of the stable cars. He reappeared a few moments later, slid the ramp up into its slot, and secured the door. Waldo waddled towards the parlor car just behind the black rock tender.

He had just put his hip flask back when Owen charged up the steps and burst through the door. The look in his eyes unsettled the Cap'n. If it was possible, he looked even more crazy than usual.

"Well, well Cap'n Waldo." he said over his shoulder as he rooted around in the arms cabinet, throwing weapons and armor over his shoulder. "Looks like we've seen a ghost."

The iron wagon lurched forward as he started donning the armor he had piled on the floor. The Paladin smiled a cruel smile.

"There is only one way out of the valley he disappeared into and we are going to be waiting there for him when he gets to it." Turning to Waldo, hands on hips, he jabbed the air with an imaginary dagger. "I hate ghosts."

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

Macy stifled a yawn as she listened to the first mate droned on. She hadn't slept much last night. After returning from the Gubnator's ball, she had stayed up talking to Eric most of the night. He had wanted to do more than talk, but she refused to risk their being caught. She had finally gone to her room and stretched out across the bed for a few hours.

Up ahead, she watched as the ships jockeyed for position to get in and unload at the Friston dock. She guessed they would be sitting out here at least another couple of hours. The first mate droned on. But it was easy for the high-born 'Mace' to show him

no mind. She was too busy looking out at the city in which she had spent her whole life. She had never seen it from this perspective, out here on the water.

The town of Friston was dominated by Frismont Castle which stood on the crest of the hill behind it. The southern end of town showed some signs of reconstruction but was still pretty much burned timber and twisted metal. The North end was dominated by Signal Fire Hill and the stark white tower of the Brotherhood rising above it. It was in the center where all the action was.

Even from this far out in the bay, Macy could see and hear the hubbub that was going on all along the dockside. Were it not for this, the most incredible week of her life, she would have undoubtedly been in the middle of it. She could see that a huge red and gold reception tent, as well as a number of smaller ones, had been set up. She could hear the playing of minstrels and hundreds of spirited voices floating to her across the water.

The dockside was alive and she was eager to be ashore and be a part of it. She had places to go, people to see, and preparations to make. She had been told to expect 'Sir Arthur' soon after nightfall. Hawkins had said that they didn't want to risk him coming ashore in the daylight, but they didn't want to wait so late that the dockside would be deserted, either.

She sure hoped that Eric wouldn't spill the beans before she had a chance to talk to him. The plan had been to tell the truth over breakfast this morning. After all, there was no way Will was going to be able to pass as Arthur during the dedication in ValleyHo. Macy didn't even want to think what Arthur's creepy brother Owen would have done.

"The best laid plans of mice and men..." muttered Macy. Beside her, the first mate droned on, oblivious.

Plans had changed in the cold pre-dawn when Simon came into their room and jostled her awake just moments after her head had hit the pillow. When she and Will arrived in the morning room, breakfast was waiting, as were Hawkins, Siarra, Simon, and

Richmond. Between forkfuls steak and eggs, the crippled Friston heir explained his plan.

With secretive glances back and forth, Macy and Will made the decision to put the truth off for another day. Hawkins was correct in assuming that if Arthur didn't show up at the dedication, but the Red Knight did, everyone would assume Arthur was the Red Knight. The idea was to keep the pressure on Owen Camberly until he snapped. It was Hawkins contention that the Paladin had to be drawn out and destroyed if there was to be any hope of a peaceful succession and prosperous future for the Barony.

With Macy and Will unable to get off by themselves to discuss things, their only real choice was to go along with the plan. Macy put her two cents worth in by noting that if Sir Arthur weren't at the dedication, his squire's presence would just invite unanswerable questions. So, as Will played the role of Arthur playing the role of the Red Knight in ValleyHo, she played the role of his squire Mace as he listened to the droning first mate while awaiting a berth in Friston.

Macy had a plan too. She was eager to get ashore. She needed to get to Madam's to see if it would work. It was obvious that Will's impersonation of Sir Arthur had to end today. The question was what that was going to mean for the two of them. Would they have to slink away in the night, or might it be possible to transition into some other role that would still help Hawkins get his Barony. She sure hoped the latter. Her heart panged at the thought of losing Eric. The first mate droned on.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

Will stifled a yawn as he listened to Richmond droned on. He hadn't gotten much sleep last night. After celebrating his besting of the Gubnator with about a dozen 'for the road', he staggered home and passed out across the bed. When Simon came in and jostled him awake, it felt like his head had just touched the pillow.

It had already been quite the day and it was barely half over. After a hearty steak and eggs breakfast, they had been bundled aboard ship in the dark and followed the fog-shrouded power lines to ValleyHo, arriving there just as the sun was making its presence known on the eastern horizon.

In order to get into the farmhouse unnoticed, he had had to cross the battlefield just after dawn, before the morning ground fog burned off. And since he had to wait there by himself, he had to be fully encased in the red armor when he got there. So there he had sat waiting all morning as the sun rose higher in the sky and the temperature inside the farmhouse's soared.

He was tired enough that he had managed to stretch out and sleep for a few hours, but the heat was too much. Finally, he could hear the sounds of the festivities floating down to him from up on the hillside. He had been told to make his presence known, leave the bloodstained dress, then hightail it for the tree-covered valley to the west.

So here he found himself, riding between the ever-silent Simon and the never-silent Richmond as they hurried their way toward the rendezvous with one of Hawkins awaiting ships. They were in a no-man's land on the edge of Unwashed country so they were just a bit antsy. The good news was that meant they probably wouldn't be pursued from the dedication site. The bad news was that they could be engulfed by the Unwashed at any moment.

Despite himself, Will yawned, slumping in his saddle. The adrenaline rush that pushed him out of the farmhouse and along the path he now rode had passed. He felt spent. The red armor grew heavier by the yard. The sheen of sweat between him and his armor felt like it was ready to sizzle. Richmond droned on in his ear.

He hoped Macy was all right. She ought to be in Friston by now. He had faith in her. She was one resourceful little force of nature. Will had to give her that. He smiled. If not for her, he would have ended his days as vulture food on the battlefield at ValleyHo. When she had pulled him aside on the boat ride from

Sacton and told him to be ready to make his move as soon as he stepped ashore in Friston, what choice did he have but to trust her?

However it played out, their little ruse would end today. By now Brother Owen was undoubtedly aware of the existence of his 'brother' in Sacton. Yet he knew his brother had not walked away from the battle. Will had seen the murder. He lay there helpless as the crazy Paladin slid his dagger between breastplate and helm. The brightly spewing fountain of arterial blood left no doubt that Sir Arthur was no longer of this world. It was kind of unsettling for Will to realize that the only two people aware of this fact were he and the crazed, murderous Paladin. 'Yep.' Today was certainly the end of the little game he and Macy were playing. The stakes were getting too high. People were dying.

A tap on the arm brought him back to the present. Simon was pointing to a narrowing of the Valley up ahead. Then he pointed to his eyes and patted the sword hanging at his side. The message was clear. 'Keep your eyes open. The defile just ahead is a good place for an ambush.'

Will reached across, tapped Richmond on the arm, and put a finger to his lips. For the first time in an hour there was silence. It was unsettling. The three of them spurred their horses to a gallop and re-organized into single file, Richmond in the lead with Simon bringing up the rear.

As they entered the defile, a false sense of security overcame Will. The hillsides were clear, he could see the exit not far ahead, and there wasn't an Unwashed in sight. He spurred his big black warhorses on. Bursting into the open on the other side, he could see the Sacton River spread out below them. They had made it.

Just as he started to relax, he was jarred by what felt like a bee sting on the left calf. Reaching down to slap it, he was surprised to see an arrow sticking out of his leg. As he spurred his horse into the copse of trees leading to the riverbank below, he glanced over his shoulder and his life passed before his eyes.

Standing high on the hill behind them, bow held triumphantly over his head, was a vision of the angel of death. Surprisingly, he looked a whole lot like Owen Camberly. Will crossed himself and spurred his horse onward.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

“If it wasn’t Sir Arthur, then who was it?” bellowed the Gubnator. Beck just shook his head, doing his best to not be drawn into the big man’s rant. It was all Annie could do to not burst into tears. Of all the people on the Gubnator’s river barge, only she and Beck knew the true story of the Red Knight.

She had nearly lost it when she saw Sara’s dress impaled down there on the battlefield. She had seen her sister in bed, the evidence of Owen’s rape covering her body. But to see the torn and bloody dress took it to a whole new level. Only Beck’s strong presence kept her from breaking down in front of everybody. So, if the Gubnator wanted to assume that Sir Arthur was, and always had been, the Red Knight, it was for the best.

Once back aboard the Gubnator’s spacious river barge, she had taken the women’s prerogative, claimed ‘the vapors’, and went to her cabin to lay down for a while. Beck had no such luck. The Gubnator had corralled him and off they went to share sangria and conspiracy theories.

Now back on deck, Annie helped herself to a glass of the chilled, fruited wine and tried to catch Beck’s eye. When finally she did, his face lit up and he hurried over. The Gubnator didn’t seem to miss him, transferring his rants to other members of his assembled audience.

“Are you feeling better?” he asked, concern in his eyes. Taking a seat, he put his arm around her and gave a little squeeze. She snuggled in closer and sighed.

“It caught me by surprise. That’s all. It’s over for now. I’m not sure what’s going on but we don’t have time to think about it now. ...not with your mother waiting for us on the dock in Friston.”

“Don’t you worry about *her*. Callie will have her under control by the time we get back.” He gave her a lopsided grin, acknowledging the absurdity of the statement. Both of them knew that the week ahead would probably be the most important of their lives. ...and probably the most dangerous.

“It’s not her I’m worried about.” said Annie solemnly. “It’s you. What if the twins are alive and show up claiming their birthright? Where does that leave you? Where does that leave us?”

“It leaves us just where we’ve been this week. Two people in love without much wealth or power, but no real responsibilities, either. It leaves me waking up every morning of the rest of my life next to you, without having to jump out of bed. I can live with that.”

“Me, too.”

There. It was said. Now Annie truly did feel better. As she watched the hubbub going on around them, she knew it was going to be all right. As long as they had each other, they could make the other stuff work. She couldn’t help but feel that it made them a formidable force to reckon with. ‘Bring it on, Baroness. Bring it on.’

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

Callie looked up as the Deacon entered the tent, Father Tom yapping at his heels. Obviously, the first boats had arrived from ValleyHo. At first Callie had been surprised that the Deacon hadn’t managed to insert himself into the dedication ceremonies somehow. But it made sense. The dedication was the Gubnator’s deal and he and the Deacon had never seen eye-to-eye.

As she pulled out a pocket mirror and did her best to fix the effects of her little cry, she couldn’t help but overhear Father Tom’s whispered babblings. When the Deacon glanced her way she felt somehow guilty and exposed considering their ‘fight to the death’ talk over breakfast on the terrace. From the ‘if-looks-could-kill’ expression on the Baroness’ face, Father Tom obviously wasn’t the bearer of glad tidings.

The only question is: 'was the news bad for her mother or was it bad for all of them?' Since Beck and Annie were supposed to be in ValleyHo to, she perked up her ears to listen. The Red Knight had appeared during the ceremony? But that was impossible if what Annie had told her was true.

Finally acknowledging her, the Deacon gave her a slight nod and started ambling in her direction. She steeled herself. Communications of any kind with the Deacon tended to be mentally exhausting. The grave look on his face promised that this time would not be any different.

"Good afternoon, Ms. Callie." he offered with a slight bow. "Grave news has just reached us from ValleyHo."

Seeing the stricken look on her face he hurried on.

"No. No. Don't worry your pretty little head. Beck and Annie are fine. They should be arriving here within the hour." He paused. "It's the Red Knight. He appeared in the middle of the ceremony, but he got away. But that's not the disturbing part"

He paused again. Across the tent, Father Tom was huddled with the Baroness, undoubtedly scheming their little hearts out. The Deacon waited until he had her full attention again before continuing.

"The disturbing part is that his Lady was not with him. He left behind her red velvet dress. It was torn and bloodstained. It seemed like a challenge. Even more disturbing is the fact that I was told, I was *assured*, that the Red Knight was dead. Now this."

Callie looked up at him. Everyone in the Barony knew who had been hunting the Red Knight. It wasn't very hard to put two and two together. She looked him in the eye.

"Owen Camberly?" she whispered.

He nodded.

"The bloody, torn dress?"

He nodded again.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

Everything made sense now. Eric couldn't help but smile to himself. When Sir Arthur had appeared out of that farmhouse, he had been as surprised as anybody there. Whatever game his Da was playing, it appears to have worked. The appearance of the Red Knight had turned the dedication ceremonies upside down. It was on everybody's lips.

But while everyone else's eyes seemed riveted on the field below, Eric's had been drawn to the two people that would be most affected by the reappearance of the Red Knight: Beck Friston and Owen Camberly. What he saw surprised him.

Though he seemed taken aback to see the Red Knight, Beck didn't seem at all concerned that a rival for his Barony had shown up unexpectedly. ...unlike his fiancée, Annie of Pleasanton. She appeared ready to lose it. The look of horror on her face is one Eric wouldn't soon be forgetting. Weak in the knees, she would never have made it off the reviewing stand without Beck's help. The strength the young Baron showed toward his bride-to-be earned him a new respect in Eric's eyes.

But just the thought of it made him miss Macy all the more. 'Was this what love was all about?' Yesterday was the happiest day of his life. Today felt like the loneliest. The highs and lows he had felt since meeting the squire 'Mace Blackwood' were unlike anything he had ever experienced before

He looked guiltily towards his Da, standing like a statue in the bow of *the Siarra's Mist*. Obviously lost in thought and dreaming up his next move, a wave of guilt washed over Eric. Undoubtedly the information he possessed changed everything. 'If 'Mace' was 'Macy', who was Sir Arthur?'

Macy had asked that he trust her. And deep down in his gut, even accounting for his hormones on parade, he felt that he could. After all, she wasn't avoiding him; she was just caught up in the latest of his Da's never ending schemes. Things would get straightened out once they got to Friston. ...if they got to Friston.

The look on Owen Camberly's face as he climbed down from the reviewing stand was another that would take a long time to dissolve from Eric's memory. It terrified him at the time and

terrified him still. When, moments after climbing down, the iron wagon chugged away, there was little doubt that it was hurtling the Paladin toward yet another confrontation with his red-armored nemesis.

Eric had seen at the Gubnator's Ball that Sir Arthur knew how to handle a sword. But would that be enough against the diabolic treachery that was Brother Owen Camberly? Eric crossed himself and fervently prayed that it would.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

Waldo had to admit that traveling by iron wagon had its advantages. It was an admission made easier after finding the hidden liquor cabinet. All it took was a bit of snooping after Owen went off in pursuit of that damn Red Knight. A couple of light taps on the beautiful walnut desk paneling and 'voila!', there it was.

There were smoky, wood-colored bottles of whiskey, bourbon, and scotch. There were clear bottles of gin and various flavored vodkas. There were bottles that smelled of licorice, hazelnut, and almond. Obviously the iron wagon wasn't the only thing Brother Owen had access to that was from before the Dark Times.

So Waldo sat in one of the plush leather chairs, whiskey in hand, and watched the room spin. He had only taken a small nip from each of the bottles that was unfamiliar to him, but that was enough. He usually spent the greater portion of his day somewhat drunk, but he was a bit beyond that today.

Outside the parlor car window, he watched as the Wagoneer jumped from the fire pit car and hurried into a grove of trees, unbuttoning his fly as he went. Waldo took a sip and chuckled at the way dust seemed to fly from the dirty little curmudgeon as he moved.

Moments later the dust cloud reappeared at a trot, hurried along by the mounted figure of Brother Owen behind him. Orders were being shouted and the Wagoneer's head was bobbing. Waldo's scrambled to finish his drink and re-secure the liquor

cabinet. Even before he was done, he could hear the engine roar to life and feel the iron wagon start to inch forward. He was again seated in the leather chair by the window when the parlor car door crashed open and in stomped Brother Owen. Paying Waldo no mind, he went straight to the arms cabinet and started peeling off his armor and throwing his weapons inside.

"Didjer git 'im?" slurred Waldo, burping in the process. The snarl he received in reply was all the answer he needed. It was obvious the crazy Paladin wasn't happy. Waldo looked out the window at the scenery rolling by. Owen would tell him what had happened when he was good and ready.

Plopping down in the leather chair opposite, the Paladin was lost in thought. Waldo could see the gears turning, sense the calculations being made. It made him a bit uneasy. He let go with another 100 proof belch.

"I got there too late." intoned the Paladin, as much to himself as to Waldo. "But I wounded him. He will be limping for a while. For what... For what that's worth."

All of a sudden he jumped up, re-energized, and whirled to face Waldo.

"That's it!" he cried. "This iron wagon will get into Friston long before any ship he could take. All we gotta do is get to the docks and wait for him to limp down the gangway!"

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

Will winced as the shaft of the arrow was broken off, leaving the head embedded in his calf. It took all he had to not cry out when alcohol was poured on his leg to cleanse the wound. He did cry out when Richmond used a knife to dig for the arrowhead. By the time the blood flow was staunch and the wound wrapped up, Will was exhausted. He lay back against the tree, panting.

They were hidden in a stand of scrubby oaks at the edge of the Sacton River, their horses tied up nearby. Simon had retraced their path back up the hill to make sure that the crazy Paladin wasn't in pursuit. Will kept an eye peeled upriver for the Hawkin's

boat which was to pick them up and take them into Friston. Richmond cleared his throat.

"You're going to live, Sir Arthur." he said with a smile. "Nothing important was hit. You'll be limping for a bit, that's all." Going over to the saddle bags, he brought back some jerky and a goatskin of wine.

"Here. Gnaw on this. It'll give you something to do to take your mind off the ache in your leg. Simon ought to be back soon. And from what Hawkins said back in ValleyHo, so should our boat."

Will made himself comfortable and gnawed on the dried meat. At least that damn red armor was off. He had thought he was going to bake. It had taken the better part of a half-hour for he and Richmond to get it off since they had forgotten to bring the special tools with them. It was now piled up over near the horses, it too awaiting the boat. Will watched as Richmond fed and watered the horses. The wine was starting to take effect. The throbbing in his leg was subsiding somewhat.

This morning had felt good. When he had first been shown Lady Sara's tattered, bloody dress, he had almost given himself away. Will the apprentice knew that was the Lady Sara's dress. Sir Arthur certainly didn't. Seeing that dress had transported him back to the savagery of that night. It reinforced the fury he felt towards Owen Camberly. Before he planted the spear holding her dress into the ground, he had shaken it directly at the smug Paladin sitting up in the reviewing stand. The others might not have noticed, but Brother Owen certainly did.

Will sighed and took another swig of wine. One way or another, it would all come to an end today. He couldn't very well show up in Friston claiming to be Owen Camberly's brother and get away with it. The only question was, would he be able to help the crippled Hawkins claim his birthright in another way, or would he and Macy have to hightail it for the hills?

He smiled at the thought of her. His life had been a whirlwind since the minute she popped into it: "Hey Crazyboy. Wanna do me?" He chuckled. She had gone ahead to talk with

the Madam about things. All he had to do was slip into Friston unnoticed. 'Considering that half the known world was headed there today, that shouldn't be too hard, now should it?'

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

"Why not?" asked Madam in all seriousness.

"Because it's crazy!" answered Macy, seated across the desk and still dressed as a squire. She watched as yet another fistful of apricot pastry made its way from the tray on the desk to the mouth munching opposite her. Madam chose her words carefully and was obviously giving her latest time to sink in.

They had been discussing their options for more than an hour. After Macy had shown up in her 'Mace' disguise and Madam had had a good belly laugh, she had ushered her up here to her office and they'd been going at it ever since.

After all, it was Madam who had sent her and Will off to ValleyHo in search of Sir Edmund. When she had found out that the Baron's will had been lost or destroyed, it upset her mightily. They both knew the stakes they were playing for. Both could see the nightmare that would result from a Barony run by the good Brother Owen. Both were committed to seeing that never happening. The only question was how to go about it.

Both knew that if the twins, and the will that legitimizes them, were taken out of the picture, that it wouldn't take Owen Camberly long to displace Beck Friston as the power in the Barony.

Macy's revelation that the crippled Hawkins and the now-dead Arthur were the true twins and heir's had taken Madam by surprise. Edmund had assumed that the Deacon had taken the second copy of the will that had been signed that night, but how were they going to get him to reveal it? That was when Madam's latest brainstorm poured forth, where it still hovered in the air between them.

"Why not?" repeated Madam.

“Because it’s crazy!” parroted Macy, but with less conviction this time. “Owen Camberly will know he’s not Sir Arthur.”

“Yeah. But he’s the only one. ...and everybody thinks he’s crazy anyway.”

It was crazy. But that didn’t mean it wouldn’t work. Macy’s mind raced. Madam had propose that Will keep on impersonating Sir Arthur in the hope that it would somehow trick the Deacon into showing his copy of the will.

Could Will pull it off? ‘Sure.’ She had seen him do it up in Sacton. The fact that the Gubnator was his new best friend wouldn’t hurt either. It would only be for a few days. Just long enough for Owen to show his true colors. Her eyes went to the mountain painting: and if he stayed in Madam’s hidden rooms between appearances up on the hill, they might just get away with it. It was crazy, but it just might work.

Nibbling at the remaining crumbs of apricot pastry, Macy fidgeted. She hadn’t yet told Madam about Eric and she wasn’t sure where to begin.

“What’s troubling you dear?” asked Madam, sensing something amiss. “Will can pull it off. It’s not him I’m worried about. It’s me. ...or rather Mace Blackwood.” Sensing it was a time for sharing crazy ideas, she barged ahead. “But I have an idea.”

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

“Nervous?” whispered Annie.

“Uh-huh.” croaked Beck. Truth be told, he was terrified. The sights and sounds that poured in through the porthole were unlike anything he had ever experienced. It seemed as though every person in Friston, no, not Friston, every person in the whole Bay Area was waiting out there on the dock. Everyone, that is, except the one he feared most: his mother. The Baroness was nowhere to be seen. Nor was the Deacon.

Callie was there at the foot of the gangway, virtually vibrating with excitement. Surrounding her, and filling every

square inch of the Quay, was a greeting party composed of well-wishers of every size, shape, and color. Kids sat on their parents shoulders. Every second floor window and rooftop was packed to bursting. And every one of them seemed to be jockeying for a better position.

The barge ride down river and across the bay had been uneventful. The weather was clear and the waters calm. From somewhere topside, Beck could hear the Gubnator barking orders in preparation for debarking. He squeezed Annie's hand for luck and looked into her eyes for strength.

He still wasn't sure what to do about the reappearance of the Red Knight. ...not to mention the rumors about the twins. It wasn't like he was going to be challenging anybody to a duel. Annie and he had talked about it back in Sacton.

If the twins showed up with a legitimate claim, i.e. the will, he would be more than happy to step aside. The only real problem was Owen Camberly. There was no way they could put the Barony in his hands. Should he show up with some kind of claim, they decided they ought to try and contact the Red Knight. It wasn't a great plan but it was the only one they had. The enemy of my enemy is my friend. Right?

As if she could read his mind, Annie turned to him, smiled, and nodded her head. He squeezed her hand tighter and headed for the door. He might not feel like it on the inside, but at least on the outside he looked like a Baron. He wore a high collared, ruffled shirt made of gold thread under a padded-shoulder, thigh-length Crimson velvet coat. A jaunty, wide-brimmed black hat with an eagle feather was offset by above-the-knee black calfskin boots.

And Annie. 'Wow!' Beck had never seen her so beautiful. Her gown of golden taffeta left her shoulders and the tops of her breasts bare, then fell away in shimmering layers to the floor. Rubies adorned her throat, ears, and the small tiara she wore.

As they stepped out into the corridor, the retinue of syncophants and guards that had been hired in Sacton fell into step behind them. A roar from the crowd outside told them the

Gubnator had made his appearance. They waited in the darkened corridor for it to die away. Then, with one last look at each other, they headed for the gangway.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

Eric stood at the rail, in awe of the crowd gathered on the Friston dock. The Gubnator's barge was taking up three births and ships were still stacked up all over the bay. The *Siarra's Mist* would be lucky to get a birth before nightfall.

Eric smiled, remembering his last visit to these waters. He was right about where they sat anchored now the first time he saw Macy's butt. And the first time he had heard her cuss an unladylike blue streak.

He hadn't realized it was her, hadn't put two and two together, until their little talk last night after returning from the Gubnator's Ball. She had admitted to being on that boat, in spying on him from afar at various times throughout the battle of ValleyHo. He attributed his uneasy feelings of being watched to kismet, conveniently rewriting history in that special way that lovers often do.

Looking out at the jam packed docks, he couldn't help but wonder whether Macy was staring back at him. Would Mace Blackwood be waiting for them when the gangway finally dropped to the dock? Eric sure hoped so. If she and Sir Arthur were going to make their escape, now would be the time to do it. He looked uneasily over his shoulder for signs of the Hawkins ship that was supposed to have rendezvoused with Sir Arthur, Richmond, and Simon. There was no sign of it. He said a silent prayer: 'Macy, please don't let me down.'

His Da had told him that after accompanying Sir Arthur to ValleyHo that morning, Mace had continued on into Friston to try and arrange last-minute lodging for their party. Mace was supposed to be waiting for them when they finally got there. Eric didn't know how he was going to begin explaining things if she, he, wasn't.

A roar from dockside caught his attention and distracted him from his worries. He could see the Gubnator and the Gubness preening for the crowd from the top of the barge's gangway. He could see as they descended to the dock, where the crowd parted so they could make their way to the big red and gold reception tent.

Eric felt a hand on his shoulder and looked up to see his Da standing beside him. The strange look he gave Eric made it seem as if he suspected something. Eric blushed with guilt but dared not speak. He felt a tapping on the shoulder. "I'll be here when you are ready to talk about it." With that the older man turned and clumped away.

Conflicted, Eric turned and watched through hooded eyes as he walked away. For a moment he considered chasing after him with the truth. But a roar from the shore broke the spell and he turned his attention back to the docks.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

Callie couldn't believe her eyes. When Beck in Annie appeared at the top of the gangway she did a double take. It was hard to imagine that she was looking at the same two people she had grown up with. It brought a tear to her eyes.

She wanted to race up the gangway and give them a big group hug. It saddened her to know that those days of childish exuberance were behind her. ...behind them. One just didn't rush out and hug a Baron. ...or a Baroness. The tears started flowing more freely.

By the time they made their regal way to the foot of the gangway, she was crying like a baby. Speech was impossible, so loud was the roar of the crowd around them. But words weren't necessary. The look in their eyes was enough. Callie could see her own sadness reflected back at her. She could also see hope. ...and love. ...and fear.

As the guards around them jostled to make space, the three of them made their way toward the reception tent. The nearby

crowd jostled to get a better view and they did their best to keep smiles on their faces. Callie did her best to silently communicate to them what, and who, awaited them in the reception tent.

When the flap was pulled aside and they ducked through, their first feeling was one of relief: relief at being away from the glare of the crowd. This was almost immediately replaced by a steeling of themselves for the inevitable confrontation to come. For standing across from them was the Baroness, Deacon at her side.

"Well. Well." she sniffed. "The prodigal son returns." She let that hang in the air as she cooled the tent down with her icy stare. The Deacon stood bemused at her side, uttering not a word. Callie caught his eye and could have sworn he smiled at her as the Baroness continued spewing.

"I must say." she uttered, finger dramatically to her lips. "For a common little servant girl, your sow's ear of a fiancé makes quite the impressive silk purse." She emitted a cruel little laugh at her own joke. "Unfortunately things at the Castle have gone to Hell... You just can't get good help these days."

That was it. That was all Callie could take. She launched herself at her mother, clawing and gouging. The Baroness was so surprised that she hadn't even raised a hand in defense. When they finally pulled her off, Callie had skin under her fingernails and clumps of hair in her balled-up fists. She was panting heavily and the look in her eyes startled everyone to silence. Whimpering, her mother scrambled backward. The Deacon cast a knowing smile toward Callie and positioned himself between the two antagonists.

Callie headed for the tent flap, still panting heavily. Even Beck and Annie backed out of her way. Hand on the flap she turned to her cringing mother.

"Your day has come old woman. You taught me well. I am your worst nightmare." She whirled on the Deacon.

"Wipe that smirk off your face. I'm nothing like her!" With that, she was through the flap and gone.

Waldo was huffing and puffing. His head was aching and his feet were throbbing. Brother Owen was going to be the death of him yet. After a hair-raising iron wagon ride from where they had failed to intercept the Red Knight, the Paladin had marched him halfway across Friston at a pace much faster than his old heart wanted to go.

Thankfully they were almost there. They were halfway up Signal Fire Hill and the Brotherhood's tower loomed larger with each wheezing step. Behind him, he could hear the boisterous celebrations at dockside as they floated up to him on the wind. At the risk of falling further behind the long-striding Brother Owen, he turned around for a peek.

The Gubnator's barge dominated the dockside, but it was being backed out to make room for the myriad of vessels which still waited out in the bay. His heart skipped a beat and his feet stumbled over themselves as he noticed that that damn cripple's ship was one of them. His hand throbbed at the memory. He'd sure like a drink but he dare not fall any further behind.

When they reached the crest of the hill, Waldo stopped, put his hands on his knees, and drew in great big lungfuls of air. When Owen disappeared into the tower, he reached for his flask and drained the contents. It barely dampened, much less whet his whistle. His head ached even more.

Just as he was about to plop down for a much needed rest, Owen reappeared at the head of a troop of armed Brothers. Waldo nearly cried.

"Come on fat man," he called over his shoulder. "...to the docks!"

One foot in front of the other. Eyes straight ahead.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

Will through the crutch aside and limped across the deck. His leg hurt like hell, but he figured he could make it down the gangway and across the Quay unassisted. Simon and Richmond

watched him like hawks, reluctant approval on their faces. They didn't want to draw too much attention to themselves when they docked in Friston. For that reason the huge bald Simon had planned to stay aboard while he and Richmond made their way to the safety of the side streets.

Eric was supposed to be waiting to take them on to the accommodation the faithful squire Mace was supposed to have arranged. Will smiled, having a good idea of where they were going to be spending the night. At the very least it ought to provide some small bit of protection for the two of them when they confronted Hawkins with the truth.

The deck rolled beneath him as the boat left the mouth of the river and entered the choppy or waters of the bay. The sun was beginning to set in the western sky and he could see the front wall of a fog bank as it formed on the other side of Pelican Island. With any luck at all they would be disembarking into a fog as thick as the one that usually befuddled Cap'n Waldo. He laughed at his little joke. Then his brow creased, wondering what had happened to the fat man. He feared there was still a reckoning to be resolved somewhere in their future. He chuckled again. 'After all, he did steal the man's boat!'

Oh, well. That was a worry for tomorrow. He had enough worries for today.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

Eric was nervous. The sound of the gangway crashing to the dock put his heart in his throat. He hoped he didn't do anything stupid. He hoped he hadn't already done something stupid. He could trust Macy. If he told himself often enough, he'd eventually come to believe it. His heart started racing as he looked out at the dock and she was nowhere to be seen. In his mind's eye, he had expected the squire, Mace Blackwood, to be the first person they saw at the foot of the gangway. Each step he took down toward the dock took him a step closer to the realization that she had skipped out on them. There was no Mace. There

was no Sir Arthur. There was only the cold hard fact that he had betrayed his family name and let his Da down. Big time.

He could hear his Da and Siarra start to chatter behind him as he stepped onto the dock. He found it hard to breathe and it seemed as though he were looking at things from down a long, dark tunnel. He wanted to run away and hide.

From far off, he could hear his name being called. Then he felt a tug at his sleeve. He could feel the presence of his Da and Siarra over his shoulder. Forcing himself to focus, at first his brain couldn't process what his eyes were seeing. When it finally did, he felt like he was tied to the iron wagon tracks and the earth was rumbling. It took his ears tuning in for things to finally make sense as the vision before him repeated itself.

"My brother regrets that he was unable to meet you here himself. He sent me in his place. I'm Macy."

Before her Eric stood what was undoubtedly the most beautiful thing he had ever laid eyes on. He replied: "Pleased to meet you. My name's Eric."

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

"Wait over there in the tavern? No problem!" Waldo chuckled to himself and took another swig. After being marched halfway across Friston and back again, he was more than glad to wait in the tavern. The fog had been rolling in, the Cap'n's hip flask had been empty, and a chill had been setting in.

So here he sat, at the window of one of Friston's dockside taverns. The sun had set, fog was rolling across the water, and the hubbub from earlier in the day was dying down. Keep a lookout for one tall limping guy getting off a boat? 'Cap'n Waldo can handle that.' Praise the Paladin and pass the bottle!

After positioning Waldo, Brother Owen had gone out to set up the ambush. There were still a number of vessels out in the bay waiting to off load. The Paladin was convinced the Red Knight was going to be on one of them. As soon as he stepped off, the Brotherhood would pounce. At least that was the plan.

Waldo's job was to point out which ship he came in on and do his best to secure it. He looked uneasily across to the other window where two severe, heavily armored members of the Brotherhood kept a vigil with him. By now Brother Owen should have men position all along the dock. The trap was set and waiting to be sprung. Waldo took another swallow.

Just as he was about to order another, a movement from dockside caught his eye. The Brothers across from him stiffened. Descending a gangway just opposite them was a tall, cloaked figure noticeably trying to hide a limp, accompanied by a short dark-skinned nervous-looking type. The game was on. Waldo took a swig.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

Macy led them up onto the loading dock and in through the kitchen door. Eric was nipping at her heels, Siarra somewhat behind him, and Hawkins clumping up in the rear. Once inside, she seated them around the table in the big empty kitchen and offered them refreshment, which had already been laid out. The table held trays of meats, cheeses, assorted sandwich fixings, and breads. There was a choice of drinks, both alcoholic and non-.

"I must apologize on behalf of my brother." she began as they dug in the heartily. "These were the only accommodations he could find on such short notice."

"Nonsense." answered Siarra, one plump hand waving the air for emphasis. "I see nothing wrong..." Her voice trailed off as the door opened and in marched Madam in all her overdone glory, accompanied by the scantily-clad Lily, bearing a tray of fresh fruits. The three new arrivals looked up wide-eyed.

Madam took over.

"I can see Macy hasn't quite gotten around to explaining things, has she?" She waggled one bejeweled finger at a blushing Macy. "This place is what you think it is." It was Lily's turn to blush. "But don't fear. I have a private residence to share with the two of you." She gestured towards Hawkins and Siarra, then

towards a door at the far end of the kitchen. "Unfortunately there is no room for this young man. You must be Eric. He'll have to stay in Mace's room until Mace gets back." He bowed to the Hawkins'. "Macy can show you to your room, but if I'm not mistaken young Eric here had better get a move on if he plans to be at the dock when Sir Arthur arrives."

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

Will had a bad feeling about this. He couldn't quite put his finger on it but the hair was standing up on the back of his neck. The docks certainly looked eerie enough as the billowing fog throbbed with an inner light from the torches spaced along its length. It gave him the creeps as he descended the gangway. Doing his best to compensate for his injured leg, he couldn't help but feel he was being watched.

'Shake it off,' he told himself. It's just nerves. Richmond wasn't helping. He was wound up like a top, chattering incessantly. He looked shifty and nervous at the best of times and these certainly weren't the best of times. One foot in front of the other. Eyes scanning left and right.

It would have helped if Simon were with them but he did tend to be a seven-foot tall attention magnet. It would have helped even more if if Eric were there waiting for them, but he was nowhere in sight. With every painful step across the Quay Will's apprehension grew. Richmond rambled on. If Eric wasn't waiting for them, they were to make their way towards Madam's. Will was pretty sure he remembered the way. Once there he was supposed to hide while Richmond made sure the coast was clear. Oh, well. It was a plan.

They were almost to the safety of the darkened side street, so why did the apprehension grow, not diminish? Richmond tugged at his sleeve and pointed. Eric! Finally! He was headed toward them out of the darkness. A commotion off to his left caught his attention. The last thing he remembered wondering was: 'What's Captain Waldo doing...'

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

Callie lay across the bed, softly sobbing. The room was cold and dark. Still raging when she had returned to the castle after attacking her mother, she had thrown out of her room the servants who had been in the process of lighting the fire. So here she lay, cold, tired, and cried-out.

She was turning more and more into her mother every day. When she had been bathed in the light of Beck and Annie's love, she radiated sunshine. But take it away and look at what she had become. Damn the Deacon and the conversation they'd had. She didn't want to fight anyone 'to the death'. She didn't want to 'understand' her mother better.

When she heard the door click open, she didn't even have the energy to roll over and see who it was. So she lay back and listened to the ocean sounds coming through the grate as she heard the fire being lit. When it's warm shadows started dancing along the walls she felt a little better. When Annie came over and, like old times, started undressing her for bed, she felt a lot better.

Snuggly tucked in and warm for the first time in hours, Annie sat with her, neither having yet uttered a word. For just a moment it seemed like old times. Callie lay still and listened to the sounds of the ocean and the crackling of the fire. Tomorrow was another day. Today was over. It wasn't every day you got tucked into bed by a Baroness. Callie fell asleep with a smile on her lips.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

Eric had just rounded the corner, excited at seeing Richmond headed toward him, a hooded Sir Arthur limping at his side. His initial reaction was tempered somewhat by the obvious tension on their firelit faces. With another step they were engulfed in shadow. Eric's feet stopped moving. Something just didn't feel right.

That's when all Hell broke loose. The street ahead of him filled with swarming bodies, their armor glinting in the torchlight from the dockside. Eric tried to shrink back and hide in the swirling fog. Up ahead a body seemed to break from the pack and come hurtling toward him. He shrunk back into a doorway until it passed without being pursued. All efforts seemed intent on capturing Sir Arthur.

Moments later a pack of monks from the Brotherhood hurried past, the limp form of Sir Arthur carried between them. Eric gasped and crossed himself when he saw the caped figure of Owen Camberly bringing up the rear. When an evil eye was cast toward his hiding place, Eric almost pee'd himself. And then they were gone, swallowed by the darkness and muffled by the fog.

Stilling his racing heart, Eric jumped up and raced toward the lighted docks as fast as his feet would take him. When he got there, he could see two more members of the Brotherhood and a fat man holding on to the anchoring ropes of a ship trying its damndest to leave the harbor.

Spying a cartload of oil amphora, Eric grabbed one and tossed it at the feet of the Brothers. With the ropes wrapped around their arms, when their feet lost traction, they were pulled over the side and into the water. As Eric raced away, he could hear the fat man screaming like a little girl as he too hit the water with a resounding splash.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

He could hear the sound of running water and the crackling of a roaring fire. He could smell mildew and a combination of sweat, piss, feces, and fear. His legs throbbed and his arms felt like they were going to be pulled from the sockets. He could see nothing because he was blindfolded.

From far off he could hear the moans of others, punctuated by the occasional cry. Closer in, he could hear the mumblings of a muffled conversation. There was a ringing in his ears that wouldn't go away.

Will wasn't quite sure what had happened, but he knew it was bad. He vaguely remembered walking across the Quay with Richmond. Then this.

Will's heart ached. Not for himself, but for all those he had let down. He willed himself to be strong. Hanging as he was, shackled to this wall, he had no doubt what was coming. He didn't need his eyes to know he was in a dungeon. The problem was: he knew too much. His weakness could cause the death of the Hawkins', Macy, and God only knows who else. It would affect the very succession of the Barony. His weakness could see to it that Owen Camberly took the reins of power. Thousands of lives might very well depend on him being strong in the coming hours and coming days. It was a sobering thought.

He heard footsteps approach and the hood was snatched from his head. Staring back at him were two of the coldest, most lifeless eyes he had ever seen. Down here, away from polite society, there was no need for pretense. There was no warmth in the firelight down here, punctuated as it was by the pounding of metal on metal and the rending of flesh from the bone. An agonizing wail floated up from the depths and the lifeless eyes twinkled. This was Hell, or at least a little corner of it. And in this little corner of Hell, Owen Camberly was the Master.

The lifeless eyes smiled up at him, chilling him to the bone.

"Hi there. I'm Owen Camberly," they said. "...and who are you?"

Will looked down and tried to find enough wet in his mouth to speak.

"I'm surprised you don't recognize me," he croaked through parched lips. "...don't you recognize your own brother... It's me: Arthur."

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-
-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

-----Chapter Nine-----
-----APPETITES-----

Callie smelled rosewater. Turning, she saw that the Deacon had come up to stand behind her. She had wandered out here to the terrace to marshal her courage for what would undoubtedly be an emotionally-taxing evening. Below her, the port of Friston glowed gold in the rays of the setting sun. The fog had yet to roll in and it was still a tad warm out, especially decked out as she was in all her party finery. She fanned herself.

The day had mostly been spent preparing for tonight's welcoming feast. A long luxurious soak in the tub had been followed by a shampooing and setting of her fiery red tresses. A new pearl-white gown had been delivered and she had to stand for an hour like a statue while the fussy little tailor had made the final adjustments. In the end, they were both pleased with the results. It sheathed her body in shimmering white satin with a slit up the side. Combined with high heels and a hairdo piled atop her head, it made her seem taller and somehow more substantial. ... more formidable.

When she had arrived in the Great Hall, she found her mother already there, holding court in that certain way of hers that always drove Callie crazy. After all, she was still Baroness, at least for a few more days. So Callie had slipped away to the relative quiet of the terrace, undetected, or so she thought.

"So how's our little fireball doing this evening?" purred the Deacon with a chuckle. "Did you manage to get your mother's face scraped from your fingernails?" He chuckled again. "She's spent all afternoon trying to fix the damage, cursing you a blue streak the whole time."

He let that hang in the air between them. Callie didn't trust herself to respond. Both of them knew it was going to be a long evening. Technically, Beck and Annie were supposed to be the center of attention, paraded for approval before the assembled nobility and wealthy merchants. 'But who were they kidding?' The Baroness had been a force to reckon with for decades. Did they

really expect her to go quietly into the night? 'Kicking and screaming' would be more like it. Tonight would be round one.

"I am not like her." mumbled Callie, although she wasn't quite sure she even believed herself anymore.

"No you're not." agreed the Deacon. "You are still soft clay, waiting to be formed into the woman you will become. You are malleable. Every day you are a new shape. Your mother, on the other hand..."

He paused for effect, letting his words hang in the air. He let them hang there until Callie's curiosity forced her to turn around and faced him.

"Your mother, on the other hand, has been hardened by the fire that is life. She is no longer malleable. There is no softness left. She is who she is and who she always will be. She will only change when she is broken... When she is shattered."

Not surprisingly, the thought didn't exactly make Callie feel any better. She understood the inference in the Deacon's words. 'Was she strong enough to shatter her mother, should shattering her mother become necessary?' She thought so: if not for herself, then certainly for Beck and Annie. The question was: could she do it without becoming so hardened that she lost her softness. ... her malleability?

A look into the Deacon's eyes didn't reassure her. They seemed to be looking back at her with the very same question.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

Eric smelled Macy. Keeping his eyes closed, he inhaled deeply. He had been ready to head for the Castle an hour ago but women always took longer. Everyone knew that. He wondered if she would have been ready an hour ago too if she had been going as the Squire, Macy Blackwood. He smiled and opened his eyes. The extra hour was well worth the wait.

She stood before him in the fading twilight filtering in through the skylight of one of Madam's secret rooms. They had spent the most wonderful night of his life together in that room.

They had lain entwined in each other's arms, sharing their fears for Sir Arthur in the hands of his crazy brother. Eventually they had drifted to sleep.

They lay there until mid-afternoon. Not long after waking, Macy had been spirited away to be transformed into the fairytale vision which now stood before him. He too had been bathed, dressed, and ministered to. ...by a giggling coterie of Madam's girls. They had left an hour ago, so he had stretched out on the bed to wait.

She just stood there, allowing his eyes to drink her in. Her dark brown, shoulder length hair had been curled to pillow softly on her bare shoulders and encase her big brown eyes in a forest of ringlets. A golden comb swept her hair back to one side, a tuft of turquoise feathers for accent, thin turquoise ribbons hanging past her ear.

Her dress was of turquoise satin, falling away from a black velvet collar around her neck to sweep under her arms, leaving shoulders and back bare. It tucked into a wide black belt, flared out at the hips, then cascaded in tatters to end at mid-calf. Her nails had been painted a matching turquoise and her pretty little feet were wearing a pair of high-heeled, black sandals befitting a princess.

She twirled once, all bare back and swirling skirt. Eric bounded off the bed and took her in his arms. His hands kept going, across her back, past her ribs, and inside her dress until they found her tiny breasts and their throbbing nipples. She moaned and ground into him. Their lips found each other.

A knock at the door and their moan turned to a groan. They were still more one being than two when the door crashed back on its hinges and in waddled a jangling Madam.

"Well. Well." she uttered, heading for the only chair in the room that would hold her bulk. From a pocket somewhere, she produced a handful of nuts and munched away while Eric and Macy resigned themselves to her presence.

"Don't look at me like that." she admonished. "After we spent all day making you two all pretty, I couldn't very well let you

get all hot and nasty just before you left. Now could I?" She popped another handful of nuts into her mouth. The two of them looked at each other sheepishly. Madam continued.

"You two better be careful tonight. I know the whole story but, to every one else, you just met yesterday. From the looks of it, it's not gonna be easy. And besides... What would Mace say about you making googily eyes at his sister?"

She laughed, obviously relishing the situation they had put themselves into. Then she grew serious, worry lines parading across her forehead.

"Tonight's not going to be easy..." When Eric looked at Macy, Macy saw an almost imperceptible wink from her old friend. "No. Tonight's not going to be easy at all.

"Owen Camberly will be there. He is going to try and pretend he doesn't know you and never has." She looked at Macy until Eric was forced to look, too.

"He might even try to claim that the Sir Arthur who was in Sacton, and by inference the Red Knight, was an imposter. Word all week here in Friston was that he had assured the Deacon that both Arthur and the Red Knight, separate people mind you, were dead."

She let the gravity of that sink in. Neither was looking forward to being the object of that madman's wrath, but what choice did they have? After washing down another handful of nuts with a silver flask she pulled from a different pocket, Madam pressed on. This time she was looking Eric straight in the eye.

"As for going to your Da with Macy's little, uh, deception, don't you think that can wait? A foolish young girl... An easily persuadable nobleman taking her places he really shouldn't have... A little white lie... Okay, a big white lie. Don't you think it can wait 'til we get Sir Arthur back? It is really his white lie to 'fess up to, not Macy's. Don't you think?" She let that hang in the air.

Eric stood there, Macy staring at him from one side, Madam from the other. At that moment what she had said made perfect sense.

“Uh-huh.” he croaked, as Macy squeezed his arm and steered him toward the door.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

Beck smelled Annie. From behind, she grabbed his shoulders and kneaded the tension out of them. He gave in to her embrace, allowing his head to loll from side to side, a sigh on his lips.

“That’s nice.” he cooed, turning to look up into her big blue eyes. He had been ready to head down to the feast for an hour, but women always took longer. Everyone knew that. When she came around to stand before him, he saw that it was well worth the wait.

Her long blond locks had been piled atop her head, held in place by a gold and ruby baronial tiara. Her face had been subtly made-up, a sprinkling of gold sparkles highlighting her cheeks, lips reddened and eyes shadowed.

Beck smiled upon seeing her dress. It had once been his mother’s but it did absolutely nothing to compensate for the droopings of age, probably why Beck hadn’t seen it on the Baroness since he was a little boy.

Fortunately Annie had nothing she needed to compensate for. The stretchy, ruby-colored material hugged every contour of her lithe, athletic body. Inlaid with sequins and tiny gem fragments, it caught the light and shimmered with her every step. It had one long form-fitting sleeve, leaving the other arm bare. On the side opposite the bare arm, the skirt was slit to the hip, exposing one graceful leg with each step. The whole ensemble was enhanced by just enough of the Barony’s jewels to make his mother livid.

“Wow!” was all Beck could manage, but that was all Annie needed. Her already beautiful face became even more beautiful if that was possible.

She sat down delicately on the settee, engulfing him in lilac scent and exposed thigh. Reflexively, he reached out and

caressed the latter, his nostrils unconsciously seeking the former. Her hand too found a thigh as they sat there, looking into each other's eyes, talking without words.

They were in Beck's room, lit only by the fading twilight and the embers of a fire not yet rekindled. It was as if they could see younger versions of themselves staring back from the shadows: ... the time Annie fell, burning her hand on the hearth. ...the time Beck offered to show her 'his' if she showed him 'hers'. She had refused, of course. Beck smiled at the memory. It had indeed been worth the wait.

Beck grunted. Looking down he could see that Annie had found the tent pole in his pants that seemed to be his constant companion these days. A soft smile and a nibble at his ear was his first realization that his hand had left Annie's thigh to seek out the warm wetness that lay beyond where the slit in her skirt stopped.

With every ounce of willpower he could muster, he removed his hand from her leg, took hers, and brought it to his lips. He kissed it and brought it to his breast until their breathing returned to normal.

"Annie of Pleasanton, Baroness of Friston." he mumbled reverently.

"Beck. My Beck." she replied. "You will always be just plain Beck in my heart."

He smiled, taking it for the endearment it was.

"Are you nervous about tonight?" he asked. "We might have done a good job of playing grown-ups in Sacton, but my mother wasn't there. That changes everything."

"Does it now? You didn't think this was going to be easy, did you? Besides, with Callie on our side how can we fail?"

"It's her I am worried about. I never saw her like she was yesterday. When she attacked mother, my eyes nearly popped out of my head. At first I was frozen in shock, but then I wanted to jump up and clap.

"Afterwards, I felt sorry for mother and afraid of Callie. I could feel her pain, even through all the anger. But I was afraid to

approach her... Afraid to talk to my own sister." Still clasping Annie's hand to his heart, he hung his head in shame.

"My poor Beck. You are such a good man. And you will be a good Baron one of these days.

"But this is a catfight. Leave it to us women. Callie and I are more than a match for your mother. Stay out of it. Stay above it. Callie will be okay."

"I'm not so sure..."

"She will! But don't forget... You and I have found each other this week and all the strength that entails. But our gain is her loss. Shhhh! Don't protest. You know what I say is true. And when you take us out of the picture, she is staring Owen Camberly right in the face."

Beck shook his head. "Yeah, I worry about him."

"Don't! I told you this is a catfight. Stay out of it. I will kill him with my bare hands before I let him anywhere near your sister. Do you understand?"

Beck stared into her blazing eyes. At that moment he wasn't sure which of the women in his life terrified him the most

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

Will smelled burnt flesh. At least the whimpering had stopped. After his little repartee with Brother Owen the night before, the blindfold had been replaced and they had let him hang there until his arms went numb and he passed out from the pain.

When the morning shift arrived, they had cut him down, where he lay on the floor in a puddle of pain. For much of the day he lay there listening in blindfolded darkness as they sliced, diced, skewered, and barbecued one hapless victim after another. His head rang with their cries. His nostrils filled with their stench. He had to keep a tight grip on himself to keep the madness from overpowering him.

That was obviously their intention. Brother Owen had yet to return. He felt guilty for the poor souls who had been torn apart merely to softened his resolve. They had been asked questions of

no real importance. None of their answers stopped the pain. Will did not know how long he had lain there listening to their cries. It only seemed like forever.

Nor could he judge how long it had been since the giving of pain had stopped: Long enough for the whimpering to have died down, but not long enough for the burnt flesh smell to have dissipated.

Feeling had returned to his arms and they were on fire. So were his legs, since his wrists were tied behind his back to his ankles. His mouth was so dry he felt like he could sand furniture with his tongue. His ribs ached from the blows he had taken upon capture. Dehydrated, he drifted in and out of consciousness.

Some time later he drifted back, this time detecting a subtle change in his situation. He sensed that someone was in the room with him. They were nearby. His heart began to beat faster.

"Who's there?" he rasped. There was no reply. He heard footsteps receding and heard something being dipped into the water tank in the center of the room. The sound alone would have made him salivate if he had had any saliva with which to do so. The footsteps returned. He felt water being splashed in his face. As his tongue rasped out, he detected a stream and sought it out. It's warm saltiness made him gasp and gag. His mouth was too pasted together to even spit the taste out. He heard Owen Camberly chuckling and the closing of a zipper. Then he felt another stream in his face. Heavier. Water this time. At first refreshing, but quickly overdone. Sputtering, he felt like he was drowning. Then it stopped.

When the blindfold was removed, his eyes focused on a crouching Owen Camberly, bucket sitting between his haunches. He was dressed like he was going to a party. He was paring an apple with a razor-sharp stiletto.

"About time you wake up...Brother!" he chided, emphasis on the last word. He sliced off a chunk of apple and popped it into his mouth. Using the blade for emphasis, he continued.

"Now *I* know you are not Arthur. And *you* know that you are not Arthur. But *you* know who you really are and *I* don't. That's

going to be the basis for the little guessing game me and you are gonna be playing here. I just love games, don't you?" He sliced off another chunk of apple.

"There is no doubt I'm going to guess it. The only real question is how long it's going to take me. Now if I get it on the first guess, and that's gonna take your help..." He waved the knife for emphasis. "I might just use this to cut those ropes and let you walk out of here. However..."

He let that hang in the air and went off behind Will. When he returned, he had an armful of body parts no longer attached to their owners. Some had the skin peeled off. Others looked as though they had been boiled. Some had hundreds of cuts. Others were so burnt they assaulted Will's tastebuds. He retched.

"So listened and listen good." He tapped Will's forehead with the stiletto. "I plan on winning this game. Hopefully there will be something left of you when I do. But if not... I can live with that. But I promise you. It will be a long, hard game...Brother."

With that, he stood and went off to a corner out of Will's sight. "My brother Arthur had a pet when we were little. Remember? Why didn't you let me play with him? If you had, I probably wouldn't have fed it to the dogs. What did you call him? Ben? Mickey? Oh, well. Who cares? We have new pets.

Stepping over Will, he placed a cage with three huge but starving rats atop the pile of body parts. Will's eyes went wide. The rats went wild. "You'll have to excuse me." said Owen with a bow. "I have a party to attend."

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

Macy smelled money. She was standing in the doorway to the Great Hall, hand on Beck's arm, his Da and Siarra behind them. It wafted to her from the fine leathers worn by the man and the exotic scents splashed on by their ladies. It wafted to her from the succulent array of foods laid out buffet-style on the huge oaken table. It caressed her from the towering floral arrangements peeking out of the alcoves lining either wall. It even wafted up to

her from herself, decked out as she was in the finest Madam's establishment could provide.

'Madam had been right.' This wasn't going to be easy. She felt naked every time Eric looked at her. Now, here she stood, trying to act like she had been here before, trying to forget her street urchin past. As she entered the hall, men's eyes sought her out, they too doing their best to disrobe her.

She grew more confident with each step, more in command with each lustful stare. By the time they reached the buffet table, the smell of money had dissipated, replaced by the more familiar scents of lust and greed and envy. In many ways, what was going on around her wasn't all that different from what went on at Madam's every night. 'And the girls were always in command there, weren't they?' Why should here be any different?

"Excuse me miss." came a voice from over her right shoulder. Turning, yet still holding on to Eric, she found herself looking into the somewhat unfocused eyes of Father Tom.

"Excuse me missh." he repeated. "But I can't help but feel we've met shumwhere before." Father Tom was a bit wobbly, but when wasn't he? His eyes might be unfocused but that didn't stop them from roaming her body, wishing it naked.

Macy giggled coquettishly, rippling the few curves she did have in a decidedly un-spiritual way.

"You must be Fatha' Tom. I've heard sooo much about you." she replied, curtsying and offering a hand to be kissed. "You met my brutha Mace up in Sacton. You know... of the Santon Rosa Blackwoods. I'm his sista Macy. Pleased to make your acquaintance."

No sooner was it out of her mouth than she sensed a ripple of it being passed on in an ever-widening circle around her. Madam had warned her. People from the north country were exotic, since the Camberly's had basically isolated themselves from the rest of the western lands twenty-five years before. Say you were from the north country and you were sure to draw a crowd.

And Macy had. She looked at Eric sheepishly and then at the audience that had gathered around them. Hawkins and Siarra had quietly drifted away, swallowed up by the crowd. Questions about the north country were shouted out and Macy did her best to answer them without really saying anything. Judging by the reaction, her every answer was witty and urbane. Emboldened, she started to embellish things a bit until even Eric looked at her funny. Tittering, she caught herself and turned toward the table in search of a drink. When she turned back, the crowd had grown silent and then parted. Standing before her, not much bigger than she, was the wizened figure of the Deacon.

"Welcome my dear," he said with that slight accent of his. "It is always refreshing to meet someone from the north. We get that pleasure so rarely these days." She curtsied and offered him her hand. He kissed it, then bowed in return.

"If I'm not mistaken..." he continued, eyes twinkling. "...the Blackwoods are descended from a family that journeyed up from the southlands not long after the Dark Times."

Macy's brow knitted. Her lips fluttered, as if looking for where to begin her reply.

"I've never been one for looking behind me Deacon, but it has always been my understanding that our roots are traced back to You Seem Mighty Valley. And we didn't leave the Valley until much more recent times, after an expedition by Beck and Sir Arthur's great great grand-Daddies. They saved my ancestor after he had been mauled by a bear. When he recovered, he swore fealty to the Camberly's and his son accompanied them back to the Bay Area, and thus our branch of the family was founded. I believe we still have family up there. But... I could be wrong, Deacon. You know. Tales around the campfire."

"No, no my dear. I stand corrected. Must be my age. I got your kin mixed up with the Blackthorns of Santon Barbara."

Macy saw acceptance in his eyes. She had passed his little test. But this was a little old man who did didn't mix up anything he didn't want to mix up. Of that she was certain. Thank

goodness she had kept her mind sober and her ears open when the liquor started flowing back in Sacton.

As the Deacon melted back into the crowd, she loosened her sweaty grip on Eric's arm and made a note to herself that she would do well to avoid the little old holy man in the future.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

Waldo smelled feet. Or maybe it was old cheese. He wrinkled his nose and tried to remember where he was. ...and how he got here. He licked his lips and they tasted of salt. A memory slipped past but he couldn't quite latch onto it. When the smell of feet was replaced by the smell of fish, it hit him.

He remembered being pulled off the dock and splashing into the water. He remembered the monk pounding on his chest as he spit the salt water from his lungs. He remembered staggering up the street and crashing on the sofa in the private room he kept at Madam's. He didn't remember how he'd come to be laying with his head under the sofa surrounded by misplaced dirty underwear from last year and moldy food he had dropped, probably the year before.

He reflexively tried to sit up, banging his head into the underside of the sofa, causing a rain of dust and God knows what else. He sneezed, bumping his head again, then cursed. When he tried to rub his bruised temple, his sleeve crinkled with dried seawater. The Cap'n groaned and did his best to crab-crawl his way out from under the furniture.

Having accomplished that, he looked around for hair-of-the-dog. Finding none, he staggered to the door in search of some. He headed down the corridor, ignoring the alternating grunts and snores coming from the doors on either side. At the end of the hall, he burst through a door and found himself in a common room that Madam had set aside for use by her regulars. He flagged down a serving wench and asked that a bottle of whiskey, a bucket of soapy water, and some towels be delivered to his room.

As she headed for the door, he couldn't resist a pinch, and got an 'eek!' for his efforts. He chuckled.

Just as he was about to head for the door, he noticed a lone diner over in the corner, back to him and tucking into a huge beefsteak and mound of fried potatoes. He hadn't seemed to pay Waldo any mind, but the Cap'n was feeling a bit crabby so he couldn't resist taking a jab.

"You got something to say 'bout it asshole?" he shouted toward the corner. The man paid him no mind and kept on eating. Waldo fumed and took a step closer.

"I'm talking to you." he screamed, bunching his fists and advancing another step. The man calmly popped another forkful of potatoes into his mouth. By now, Waldo was seeing red and looking for a flight. He didn't like being ignored and had to admit it wasn't an easy thing to do. By now he was towering over the other man, close enough to see his own reflection in the man's bald, shiny, pate. He was sputtering he was so angry. The other man continued to eat. He took no notice of Waldo and didn't appear to even know that he was standing behind him.

But he had and he did. When Waldo reached out to tap him on the shoulder, a fork was dropped and a bear-sized paw shot upwards, engulfing Waldo's fat fist up to the wrist. When the bald head swiveled around to look up malevolently at him, Waldo almost fainted. Pain memory caused his hand to throb. It was that big silent monster from the cripple's ship, the one who had torn up Waldo's hand the night of the fire. Waldo broke into a cold sweat.

"S-s-sorry." he stammered "I j-just wanted to know if the beefsteak was any good." He did his best to smile. The big man smiled back with his lips, but not his eyes. He squeezed Waldo's hand just enough to make him squeak, then let it go and turned back to his meal.

Waldo couldn't get out of there fast enough. He scrambled back down the hallway, not feeling safe until he was securely behind his own door again. Back to it, he stood there panting until he heard a knock. A 'Who's there?' reassured him it was the

serving girl and he let her in, bucket, towels, and whiskey in hand. On the way out, he gave her a harder-than-necessary slap on the bottom. Then he told her to let Ellaye know he was on his way upstairs. Cap'n Waldo was in the mood for a good ass-whoopin'.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

Annie smelled fear. It clung to Beck like a second skin. She couldn't really blame him. His mother had been a domineering authority figure in his life since his wet nurse days. The Deacon's role in his life had been subtler but, in its own way, no less frightening. To expect those roles to reverse without some trepidation would be unrealistic.

Grabbing his arm, she reached out and gave him a peck on the cheek. When he smiled at her, the smell went away. He stiffened his back, took her arm, and headed for the stairway that led down to their future.

When they appeared at the top of the stairs, those still assembled in the entry way below grew quiet. After a suitable pause, they began to descend. Halfway down, a genteel handclap could be heard. With each successive step, it was joined by others. By the time they reached the bottom, it had turned to hearty applause.

Annie noticed that at least two people weren't clapping. The Baroness and Deacon had been standing at the entrance to the Great Hall, greeting new arrivals. With all eyes turned toward the staircase, the Baroness was free to indulge in one of her 'if-looks-could-kill' stares. The Deacon stood at her side, bemused.

Annie steered the now-confident Beck through the throng of well-wishers and into the Great Hall, casting a nasty 'meow!' out of the side of her mouth as they passed by close enough to invade the Baroness' space. As they were greeted by the guests now gathered just inside the doorway, Annie heard a sharp intake of breath behind her. Then she could have sworn she heard the Deacon chuckle.

Beck was at his charming best, humorous and engaging. He answered questions about their trip to Sacton, took a good natured ribbing for his actions at the ValleyHo dedication, and owned the subtle congratulations received for having corralled Annie and outfoxed his mother.

The Gubnator looked on approvingly, satisfied for once to not be the center of attention. The prissy CeeEeeHo flitted about, asking a question here and there. The Seneschal of the Flame looked on judgmentally.

Then the crowd parted and there stood Callie, a radiant vision in shimmering, skintight, pearl-white satin. Annie couldn't help but notice that Beck seemed to grow taller in her presence; more substantial somehow.

"There's someone here who's been dying to offer his congratulations to you two." she bubbled. "We didn't think you were ever going to make it downstairs." she said with a leer that drew a laugh from the crowd but only conveyed pain to Annie's eyes, the pain of the hundreds of parties the three of them had prepared for, then entered together. Annie wasn't fooled. Callie was putting on a show, but she was in pain.

Annie didn't know how much until her mentioned 'someone' appeared over her shoulder. It was Owen Camberly. As usual, he wasn't his normal scary self in Callie's presence. Annie couldn't help but feeling that, somehow, that made him even more scary. When he stepped forward to take her hand, she had to resist the urge to pull it back. When he lifted it to his lips, she had to suppress a shudder.

"My compliments to the two of you." he said formally, looking neither of them in the eye. "May your marriage be a passionate one and your rule a peaceful one."

Annie wondered where he'd picked that up, since she had no doubt that he didn't have it in him to think it up on his own. Not to mention the fact that he didn't mean a word of it. Pasting on her smarmiest smile, she replied for the both of them.

"How nice of you to say so, Brother Owen. We look forward to your continued service on behalf of the Barony." She turned away, dismissing him with the gesture, then turned back.

"Maybe one of these days you will finally manage to capture that nasty old Red Knight. Oh, well." She shrugged her shoulders. "Not today... But one of these days." This time she did turn away, dismissing him as the crowd nervously tittered.

When she saw him fifteen minutes later, he was still red-faced and hot under the collar. He was the center of Callie's attention and she was undoubtedly doing her best to further add to his discomfort. Annie watched as she stuffed yet another honey-filled cake into his mouth. Owen Camberly hated honey. Everybody knew that.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

"Do you think he has a chance?"

"Not if his mother has anything to say about it."

"That's the truth. And that little game his sister is playing with Owen Camberly. That downright gives me the willies. Too bad she's a woman. That's Baron material if I ever saw it."

The other man laughed. Macy had gone off in search of a little girl's room so Eric had come out here to the wooded terrace to wait. No sooner had he nestled himself in among the trees than his eyes fluttered in search of forty winks.

The sound of voices had brought him awake. They didn't seem to know he was there and he did nothing to announce his presence. Not five feet away huddled the Gubnator and the CeeEeeHo whispering in what they probably thought was privacy.

"What about the twins?" asked the Gubnator.

"Baaaah!" countered the tall, skinny San Hoton ruler. "Too late for them. ...was probably Arthur and Owen anyways. But Arthur has no power... The Deacon would have him killed on sight if he dared show his face. And as for Brother Owen... He don't need the bother. All he needs is a ring on dear little Callie's finger. And and accident for Beck. My money's Owen Camberly." The

CeeEeeHo said this with a harrumph and an air of certain finality. The Gubnator chuckled.

“Alwasy so certain. Let us both hope you are wery, wery wrong. Or zee next war ve go to won’t be against zee Unwashed, my friend. Besides, I wouldn’t give up on Arthur so quick. I’ve gotten to know zee man. And what I saw impressed me.”

“Baaah! Because he bested you with a wooden sword, now you think he’s Baron material? His Father, Sir Edmund, was a helluva presence in his day, but...”

“My point exactly. Is zat his Father? Or merely zee man who raised him to be Baron? Maybe that’s why Brother Owen left home all those years ago. Vatever zee case, zee Camberly’s have certainly made their mark on these western lands.

“I fought zee man. I saw his scars. Someone trained him to be a warrior. To what purpose?”

The CeeEeeHo craned his birdlike neck around before replying. Eric held his breath and grew one with the shadows. The CeeEeeHo leaned in and lowered his voice.

“The thing I can’t figure out is the Red Knight’s role in all of this. He’s killed a lot of the Barony’s knights, knights who were, for all intents and purposes, the Deacon’s knights. Then it was rumored he’d been killed by Brother Owen. Then he reappears in ValleyHo with Arthur conspicuously missing. Too convenient if you ask me.”

The Gubnator seemed to mull this over. He took a pull off his tankard and stared down at the port of Friston. When he turned back, Eric clutched up, thinking he’d been seen. But he must not have been, for the Gubnator continued.

“Yeah! Yeah! I vondered about zat too but maybe it vas meant to be, uh, shall ve say... un-subtle.

“Time is running short. If zee Red Knight has something to say, he had better say it soon. Put yourself in Owen Camberly’s shoes. Maybe zat little passion play ve saw vas just for him. One rival to another? One twin to another? Zee gauntlet has been thrown down.”

“Yeah. Yeah.” was the reply, head-a-bobbing. “The Red Knight is the wild card in all of this. There’s little doubt a challenge was made back in ValleyHo. But to whom? That’s the question. Brother Owen is the obvious answer so let’s go with that for now.”

“If the obvious challengee is Brother Owen, my money says zat zee obvious challenger is his brother Arthur. Zat is a battle I’d pay to see. A fight to zee death, no doubt.”

“So where does the Gubnator stand amidst all this intrigue?”

“Vith zee vinner, of course!” He chuckled, then grew serious. “Vhat choice do I have? I am a hereditary ruler. Even if my son to be turns out a pervert and a moron, I must do everything in my power to zee that he takes my place. Consequences be damned! It’s zee way of the world.

“So how can I do any different in zee Barony? I must support whoever is legitimate. Until I’m told different, zat’s Beck Friston.”

“What if you’re told its Arthur Camberly?”

“Zen I’m behind Arthur Camberly all zee way.”

“What if you’re told its Owen Camberly?”

The Gubnator looked up at the taller man and smiled. “One thing ve do know CeeEeeHo. And zat is ‘accidents vill happen’. Yep. Accidents vill happen.”

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

“Do you think he has a chance?”

“I hope so because he sure is cute. It’ll spice up these boring diplomatic events. Maybe even make them worth attending.”

They shared a titter of agreement. Callie put her head in her hands, careful not to make a sound. After stuffing Owen Camberly with enough honey-field pastries to turn him green, she had to hold back her laughter as he had excused himself and hurried from the Great Hall. Emotionally spent, Callie had retreated to this privy stall to compose herself. No sooner had she

locked herself in than the Gubness and CeeEffHo had entered. She sat quietly and listened.

“No. Be serious. Do you think he has a chance?” repeated the Gubness.

“He has a chance.” replied the other. “A snowball’s chance in Hell! Do the math. How many people want to see him fail??? Powerful people: the Deacon. The Baroness. Owen Camberly. The twins, if they’re out there, maybe even the Red Knight. That’s just for starters. And I don’t think he even wants it. He wants Annie.

“Now Annie might want it, and she’s twice the man he is, but she has no power.... No friends.”

“You’re being unkind.” admonished the Gubness. “And perhaps you’re under-estimating him. Look how he swept Annie out of the Cathedral. Two weeks ago no one would have guessed he would have made it this far.”

“True. True. But everything he’s done, he’s done for Annie, not for the Barony.”

There was a pause and the sound of running water. Callie felt a sadness washing over her. The CeeEffHo continued in her screechy, know-it-all voice.

“Besides, Beck Friston is irrelevant. The men are just pawns in this game. This is a catfight. The Baroness has yet to make her move. When the chips fall, she’ll come out on top, believe me. Annie of Pleasanton? Baaah! She’ll get eaten for lunch by that old witch.”

“But what about Callie? She seems to have Owen Camberly wrapped around her little finger. The two of them make a formidable pair.”

Callie perked up at the mention of her name. She could hear them clucking in agreement. She held her breath as the Gubness prattled on.

“Yeah. Yeah. That’s a formidable team there. Owen sure is a dreamboat. Too bad he’s such a monster. Can you imagine them in bed? You would probably need to get an exorcism just for

imagining it!" They both laughed. The other picked up the thread of conversation.

"She grows more like her mother every day. Scary. The rumors about what has been going on behind closed doors..." She left the thought hanging. "So tell me Gubness, do you think he has a chance?"

There was a long pause.

"No. I guess not. Callie is like a feral cat just learning to use her claws. They'll draw blood before this is all over. She'll end up as big a monster as her mother."

When the door banged shut behind the departing pair, Callie sat there staring at her nails, nails which just that afternoon had had her mother's skin scraped from beneath them. She wondered if they could hear her sobbing.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

"So tell me, do you think he has a chance?"

"No. There. I said it. We've all been invited here this week to witness one big charade. Nothing is as it seems. When all is said and done, Arthur or Owen Camberly will end up Baron, not Beck Friston. We've been invited here to witness, not a passing of the torch, but a changing of the guard."

Beck gulped. The Bishop of Sacton had a way with words that made his utterances come across as gospel. Beck had come upstairs to stash a couple of the gifts he and Annie had been given by well-wishers. He'd stopped here at the balustrade to catch his breath before returning to the fray. Standing below him, off in a corner of the entrance hall, were the Bishop of Sacton, Father Tom, and the Seneschal of the Flame. Beck took a step back from the edge, held his breath, and listened.

"My faith is unwavering." came the high, thin voice of the Seneschal. "I see no reason to change my allegiances at this late point in the game. My position remains the same."

"In the Deacon's pocket." came the slurred contribution from Father Tom. Beck couldn't see the dirty blocks which were surely

cast in the Father's direction, but he knew they were there. The Seneschal continued.

"The Deacon's been the power in this Barony for a long, long time. The Baron's death doesn't change that. In fact, if anything, it strengthens it."

"True. True." agreed the Bishop. "But the Brotherhood gives him much of his power, especially in light of the dissension the Red Knight has caused among the Barony's other warriors. The fact that no members of the Brotherhood has been attacked leads people to wonder... Maybe Brother Owen hasn't caught this scourge because he doesn't want to... In times of crisis, people turn to strongmen. With the fabric of society crumbling around them, the people fall all over themselves to sacrifice the things their ancestors died getting for them."

"I read shumewhere once..." added Father Tom. "That a people who shacrifice freedom for shecurity deserve neither." There was a pause as this sunk in.

"My point exactly." replied the Seneschal. "The people may cheer the damn Red Knight now, but when he's dragged through the streets by his spurs, they will clamor for the old ways.... For security. That is the Deacon and his fist, Owen Camberly. When the dust settles, that's where the loyalties of the Brotherhood will be found.

"The church is about power. Always has been. Always will be. *What is good for the church is good for the church.* Period! The welfare of the people be damned."

"That's rather cynical." chuckled the Bishop. "True maybe, but cynical nonetheless. A shepherd's sentiment best kept hidden from the flock."

"Flock be damned. They'll do as they're told. Pull on the rings in their noses and they'll follow you through Armageddon to the Gates of Hell."

"So where does that leave Beck Friston?"

"Short-lived, I would imagine."

With a murmur of agreement, they headed back toward the Great Hall. Beck crossed himself, took a deep breath, and headed off down the stairs to prove them wrong.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

Macy could hear sobbing. She had excused herself from Eric to go in search of the privy. Along the way, she got intentionally lost a few times, gawking at the artwork, decor, and suits of armor which lined the halls of Friston Castle. Finally, she found herself in the basement at the bottom of the stairs beneath the grand staircase.

When she had pushed open the door to the privy, it appeared empty, but the sound of uncontrolled sobbing reverberated off the walls. It appeared to be coming from a closed stall at the end of the row. After taking care of business and washing her hands, Macy grabbed a damp towel and tiptoed toward the closed door. Softly, she knocked.

"Are you okay in there?" she whispered through the wood. With a choking sound and a snuffle, the sobbing slowed, then stopped.

"Can I open the door?" asked Macy. Receiving no reply, she took that as a 'yes' and slowly swung the door open. Sitting there, face all puffy and as red as her hair, was a desolate looking Callie Friston.

For a moment, Macy was taken aback. 'This couldn't be the Callie Friston the Barony knew and loved.' Though Macy only knew her from afar, the Callie she had grown up with represented something positive and sunny for the common people of the Barony. This was a side of her Macy didn't know existed and she wasn't sure what to do about it. After going over and being noisily obvious about locking the main door, she returned

"Come out of there." she admonished, extending a hand. Callie took it and allowed herself to be steered toward the settee over against the wall. Sitting her down, Macy proceeded to dab the tears from her eyes. After refreshing the cloth with cold water,

she handed it to the distraught girl, then sat down and put an arm about her shoulders.

They sat that way for what seemed like the longest time. Eventually a small 'thank you' escaped Callie's lips. Emboldened, Macy started babbling, launching into all the reasons why someone as bright and beautiful as Callie shouldn't be sitting in a privy, bawling her eyes out. She told her she was everything every woman in the Barony aspired to be. She told her what she obviously needed to hear because she got smiles in return, and eventually laughter.

A knock came from the other side of the door, followed by pleading recriminations and they shared a giggle and a conspiratorial smile worthy of naughty schoolgirls. When the knocker went off in search of relief elsewhere, Macy stood Callie up and pushed her toward a mirror. The puffy redness was gone. The sunshine was back.

"It's time to get back upstairs." said Macy from behind, seeing a nod of agreement reflected in the mirror.

"Yes." said Callie sarcastically. "Mother will be wondering what happened to me. Let's go."

"Ugggh." replied Macy. "Your mother gives me the creeps. Thank goodness you are nothing like her!"

Callie smiled and headed for the door, Macy on her heels.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

Will was hyperventilating. He fought to control his breathing and slow his racing heart. Trussed up as he was, breathing was difficult enough already. He had allowed it to get to him and look at the result. It was a good lesson to learn. He must be on guard against weakness. He must focus on his strength every second if he hoped to survive this ordeal.

Breathing back to normal, he focused again on the rat cage sitting inches from his face atop a pile of severed, tortured limbs. The rodents were going wild. One had reached its razor-sharp claws through the bars to tear the flesh from what looked like it

was once an arm. Each clawful brought back to the cage just increased the screeching frenzy already present there. That they would eventually be clawing at his own flesh Will had no doubt.

He estimated that he had been tied up down here for almost a full day, yet except for the ropes, not a hand had been laid on him. It was as if Owen were giving him time to think about what was going to come: Break him mentally before breaking him physically. And if that little episode of hyperventilating were any indication, it might just be working.

Sensing a presence, Will looked up and there stood Owen Camberly. The Paladin looked a little green around the gills. His eyes were unsettling. Will hadn't heard him enter.

"About time!" admonished Will in an attempt to seize some of the initiative. "You go off partying and just leave your brother hanging like this. I thought mama would have raised you..." Owen had kicked him in the ribs.

"Don't you ever talk about my mother." The soft tone in which it was said made it all the more frightening. As Will caught his breath, he could see Owen unwrapping something he had taken from his pocket.

"I see you persist in claiming to be my brother. That's gonna ratchet our little game up a notch. If you were truly my brother you would know why I hate honey so much; why I hate you so much." He paused and Will could see that it was a honey-cake he held in his hand. "I didn't think so." he finished.

Will watched as he dribbled a few drops of the honey just outside the rat cage, further increasing their frenzy if that was possible.

"Surely you must remember why I hate honey." the Paladin chided as he dribbled the honey from the rat cage across the dirt floor toward Will. He liberally sprinkled it in Will's pubic region, then up over his belly and chest, dabbing what remained of the sticky pastry on Will's face before finally depositing it in his mouth. Will fought the urge to wretch and kept his eyes fixed on the cold lifeless ones staring down at him.

“Still can’t remember, ...brother Arthur?” he asked in the same cold monotone, tapping the release mechanism atop the rat cage. “Good brother that I am, I’m gonna give you a little more time to think about it. I really must get back to miss Callie and the rest of my guests.

“Besides, once the rats start eating, they won’t leave anything for the ants, now will they?”

Will jerked from the first ant bite and, with big eyes, looked down on an army of them converging on the honey.... Converging on him. He looked up, but Owen Camberly was gone.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

Annie looked up at a clinking sound. Across the Great Hall, the Baroness had mounted a small dais and stood there clinking a diamond ring the size and color of a robin’s egg against the side of a cut crystal goblet. She continued until the room grew silent, the last few to get the message helped along by one of her patented icy stares. In the ensuing silence, she took a drink from the goblet, paused for dramatic effect, and addressed the crowd.

“Ladies, gentlemen, and common folk. I’d like to thank you all for assembling here in Friston this week to mark the passing of my dear, departed husband, the Baron.

There was a polite smattering of applause for a man none of them knew well, a man whose major achievements had occurred before many of them were even born.

“On the morrow,” continued the Baroness. “A service will be held in the Cathedral to ensure the safe journey of his immortal soul. This service has been coordinated by Father Tom and will be presided over by the Bishop of Sacton himself.” Another smattering of polite applause. “At the conclusion of the ceremony, his crypt will be interred next to those of his father and grandfather, in the vault below the Cathedral.”

The Baroness paused is to let this sink in, taking another sip from her goblet. When a small murmur arose at the back, she

cast an evil eye in their direction and clanked her rock on the goblet again.

“Once those solemn matters are laid to rest...,” she paused, smiling at her attempted humor. “We can move on to the more joyous affairs awaiting us this week. There will be three days of games, jousts, and markets. The Gubnator has assured me that he plans on winning again.” More polite applause. “So I threatened to bar married men from the joust and offer my daughter Callie’s hand in marriage to the winner. I know how to outfox an old fox.”

Annie’s eyes shot up. The Gubnator was laughing good-naturedly. The Deacon looked a bit surprised. Callie and her new-found friend, Macy Blackwood, were chattering heatedly. Owen Camberly was doing his best to avoid the stares that about half the room were casting in his direction. Annie couldn’t tell if the Baroness was joking or serious. Taking another sip and banging her rock yet again, she continued.

“That would be one way to get Brother Owen and his strength into the family. Too bad he’s already married to the church. Oh, well.

“I guess the only marriage we’ll be seeing this week will be that of my son Beck to, uh, uh, that Annie of Pleasantville, uh, Pleasanton. Hopefully her years of being a servant girl to my Callie will have prepared her to serve my son.” She sniffed and raised her eyebrows. A titter went up from the crowd. Annie seethed.

“One thing is certain. She’ll make a beautiful bride, and I’m guessing she’ll bring more than her share of passion, expertise, and experience to the marriage bed. We ought to have an heir within months. She has good child-bearing hips.” The Baroness raised her goblet. “A toast. To our as yet unborn heir and the unleashed passions which will result in his creation. To my son Beck. To his heir. And to his woman. Here! Here!”

The crowd somewhat uncomfortably raised their glasses and joined the toast. Annie started counting to herself: ‘One.

Two. Three...' The Baroness clanked for the crowd's attention again.

"The festivities of the week will be capped by the solemn ceremony to invest our new Baron with the power of office."

'Fifteen. Sixteen. Seventeen...'

"The torch will be passed before the eyes of God and the assembled ladies and gentlemen of the realm. Once the torch has been passed, the Barony can again move forward. Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for coming to Friston to be a part of this joyous and momentous occasion."

As the Baroness was assisted down from the dais to polite applause, Annie couldn't help but notice that, in reference to the passing of the torch, she hadn't mentioned Beck's name, not even once.

'Twenty-eight. Twenty-nine. Thirty...'

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

Beck noticed too. Before his mother had even finished clambering down from the dais, he was upon it. Mocking her, he banged a chicken bone against a spittoon to get their attention. There was a muffled snicker or two from the back of the room, but fear of the Baroness kept their responses mostly at smiles. They understood. So did she. She glared up at him. He smiled down at her.

"Ladies. Gentlemen. Invited guests. I, too, would like to thank you for joining us here to pay respects to my departed father. Many of you knew him, and judged him I daresay, by the things he accomplished before I was even born. I never knew that man."

He paused for effect. "The man I knew, and interacted with on a daily basis, was very different from that legendary warrior. He was kinder, wiser... More troubled. He was under incredible stress." A flick of his eyes and everyone in the room found themselves looking at his mother. "He was deeply concerned for the future of the Barony. He feared that he had failed you.

"When the Red Knight appeared and the Barony's Knights started dying, he spent many hours unburdening his soul to me. He knew change was coming. Perhaps he even smelled his own death in the air.

"Things have gotten so bad that there are those of you who quietly root for this Red Knight, he who causes so much havoc. Has it really gotten that bad?"

He stopped and stared out at them. Sheepishly, most of them refused to meet his gaze.

"I stand here before you tonight and promise you change. I am my father's heir. I am no one's puppet. For many years my father didn't seem to care what went on around here. He was quick to delegate authority." Beck could see eyes unconsciously flick to the Deacon.

"I will not make that mistake! I stand here before you tonight to let you know that I will be my own man. I will sweep out the old and root out the corruption which has caused so much pain and suffering over the years.

"Now, before I bid you good night, there is one other matter we must address. All my life there have been rumors of the twins brought into this world by the Baroness I never knew. It is rumored that they still live.

"Baaaah! Get over it. They are ancient history. For better or worse, I am the future of this Barony and will work hard every day to handle that responsibility to the best of my ability. However...

"...should a worthy claimant to the title step forward with irrefutable proof of legitimacy before I am crowned at the end of the week..."

He paused for what seemed like a very long time. Every eye was on him, bated breaths begging him to continue.

"...if a legitimate claimant steps forward, I will have no choice but to step aside. The consolation prize I have awaiting me is an idyllic pastoral life with Annie, the woman I love."

A pin drop could have been heard long after he stepped off the dais and escorted Annie from the Hall.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

“What did he just say?” hissed Hawkins to Siarra, standing next to him at the back of the hall. Eric smiled and kept on applauding with everyone else. Everyone but the Baroness that is. He had to admit that it had been one heck of the speech. Beck Friston wasn’t the most imposing of men, and there were many who doubted his readiness to be Baron, but there was no doubting the power of his oratory.

However, saying something well and saying the ‘right’ something well aren’t necessarily the same thing. Even Eric’s relatively apolitical mind could see the can of worms that had just been opened up by the Friston heir.

He seemed to threaten the Deacon and the Baroness. He promised to stamp out corruption to the very people who most benefited from it. He cursed the Red Knight and all those who believe in him, then turned around and said he’d give the Barony over to him if he showed up with a legitimate claim. He made a good case for himself being Baron but, in many ways, an even better case for him not. If nothing else, he set the stage for an interesting coming week.

Since his Da was now huddled in conversation with a few of his business associates, Eric decided he would get his take on what had been said later. Since part of what they were trying to do here tonight was find out about Sir Arthur’s whereabouts, he looked around for Owen Camberly. He spied him just as he turned on his heel and exited the Great Hall. He then saw Macy leave Callie’s side and slip out right behind him.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

Macy raced around the corner and stuck a foot inside the door before it could snick shut. Through the crack she could see only darkness, smell only the cool dampness of ancient stone. She could hear the echoes of Owen Camberly’s footsteps as they

descended a stone staircase. The cold draft chilled her and she had to fight the urge to flee.

She waited until the echoing footsteps died away, then hailed a passing servant girl. Taking a tankard from the tray, she used it to prop the door open. Macy tried to question the girl about the mysterious staircase, but she professed to speak no Franglish. However, the look in her eye and the way she kept crossing herself was answer enough.

Franglish or not, Macy managed to convey to the girl that she was willing to trade one of the rings she was wearing for the servants costume the girl wore. A crazy look in her eyes and a few throat-slashing gestures let her know there would be no mention of the transaction later. The girl eyed the ring greedily and bobbed her head in compliance.

A few moments later, Macy's party dress had been stashed behind a settee, the servant girl stood there in only a shift, and Macy was dressed as a servant. As the serving girl hurried off with her bounty, a barefoot Macy quietly approached the door and listened. Hearing nothing but quiet, she slipped through and started to descend.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

Will's crotch was on fire. Exposed as it was and covered in honey, the ants had torn him up. His face was raw from rubbing it in the dirt to get rid of the honey that had been dripped there. His shoulders ached from wrists tied unnaturally to feet behind him. His throat was parched and his eyes were grainy.

His ears were filled with the sound of the still-screaming rats. The honey just seemed to have made it worse, their frenzy continuing unabated. Once again, Brother Owen stood before him without Will having heard him enter. He crouched down next to the hill of limbs with the rat cage on top.

"Squirming a bit, aren't we?" he queried, throwing a handful of something at Will's exposed crotch. It was salt and the pain increased exponentially. Will gritted his teeth. "So tell me brother.

Did you remember why I'm none too fond of honey? You don't remember tying me to the tree? The rocks? The beehive? I was in bed a month. I nearly died. I made a vow to God that day... A vow I fulfilled in ValleyHo."

He reached out and slapped Will across the face. "So, unless you are a ghost, you are not Arthur Camberly. You are not my brother. Let us end this charade." Will hocked and tried to spit but the best he could manage was some dirty phlegm dribbling down his chin. Owen laughed, hocked up a big one, and planted it between Will's eyes. "That's how you do it, brother." He tapped the release mechanism on the rat cage. "Party's almost over. I'd better get back to my guests. I've waited all day. I guess I can wait a little longer." With a last rattle of the cage, he was gone

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

"Are you mad!" Annie slammed the bedroom door and whirled on Beck. He stood there with a lopsided grin on his face and shrugged his shoulders.

"She made me mad," he replied. "She insulted you. I couldn't just let her get away with it."

"Did you have to call out everyone in attendance? Your mother would already like to strangle you. Now she'll have to get in line with the Deacon and about half of Friston!"

Beck went over and sat on the bed. He patted the mattress next to him.

"Calm down and come over here. You knew when we got into this that it was going to be a battle. Truth be told, we have no power beyond my legitimacy. Our best hope is to stir up enough dissension among them that they'll be so busy fighting amongst themselves that they'll forget to do away with us."

He gave her that lopsided grin again as she sat next to him and patted him on the knee.

"You are mad," she said, shaking her head.

"I am not. I'm the heir. They'll be falling all over themselves to be my friend... But only if I show them that I have what it takes

to be Baron. I'm no warrior. I have no accomplishments. But I feel the power when I'm speaking to a group of people. It's the only hope we have."

Annie nodded, seeing the logic of it. He put his arm around her. She sighed.

"It's a dangerous game we play."

After a hurried knock, the door flew open, Callie entered, and closed it behind her. "We have a problem."

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

Will heard him coming this time. He was whistling and the effect was eerie, bouncing as it was off the stone walls. There was a spring in his step as he crossed the floor to him and again crouched in front of Will.

"Thank God that's over," he bubbled. "I hate parties... Except the kind me and you are going to have... My brother." He cackled. "Me, you, and the rats." He picked up the cage and bounced it a few times, driving the rodents crazy.

"So, are you ready to cooperate now? We both know you aren't Arthur. We both know you were dressed as the Red Knight in ValleyHo. Who are you and why were you impersonating the Red Knight?"

He banged the cage. The rats screeched. Will prayed.

"I saw Arthur die. I saw the Red Knight die." He pinched Will. "You're not a ghost. Who are you!" he screeched. Without warning, he lifted a door to the rat cage and one of them was free.

Owen sat back. Will tensed up. The rat reared up on its haunches, twitched its whiskers, and stared at Will with its pinpoint red eyes. When it lunged, Will turned his face toward the dirt as he felt the razor-sharp claws sink into the side of his neck, heard the screeching inches from his ear.

Will jerked his head back, trapping his attacker between head and shoulder. He could feel the warm stickiness of his own blood as it covered the side of his head. Rocking forward, he slammed the rat into the floor. The rodent struggled to get free as

he continued to rock, slamming it into the floor until he heard bones crack. It quit struggling. When Will lay back, it hung by the claws from the side of his head, it's blood mingled with Will's, it's body mangled and lifeless. Brother Owen chuckled and reached over to pluck the carcass from the side of Will's head. He flung it over his shoulder toward the fire and fixed his lifeless eyes on Will.

"Arthur imposter – one. Rats – zero. End of round one."

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

"We have a problem." Callie stood panting, with her back to the door of Beck's bedroom. Across from her, Beck and Annie sat on the bed, big eyes pointed expectantly in her direction.

Catching her breath, Callie went over and sat next to them. With a glance over her shoulder toward the door, she motioned them closer. Huddled conspiratorially, she spoke to them in a whisper.

"Have you met Macy Blackwood? She's the sister of Arthur Camberly's squire, from Santon Rosa."

Beck and Annie looked at each other, then looked back and shook their heads. They explained how they had met, and liked, the brother up in Sacton, but hadn't had the chance to meet the sister. Callie told them how she had cheered her up after coming upon her in the ladies privy.

"Now she's missing."

"What do you mean: missing?" asked Annie.

"We were together listening to Beck's speech. Awesome, by the way." She acknowledged her brother. He noticeably swelled at the compliment. "At the end of it, she excused herself and I lost track of her. As the last of the guests were leaving, the young man she had come with came running up to me all panicky. He said that he saw her slip out and follow Owen Camberly. She never returned."

"What's this young man's name?" asked Annie.

"Eric Hawkins."

"Where is he now?"

“Just outside the door.”

“Well, invite him in.”

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

At the bottom of the stairs, Macy was confronted with a choice. Corridors led off in both directions, dimly lit by wall sconces. There was a rack of unlit torches on the wall but she dare not light one. The only sound she could hear was that of rushing water. The smell of damp decay was overpowering. The stone floor was icy cold against her bare feet.

Just as she was about to start exploring off to her right, a low moan drifted up the corridor door from her left. She set out in search of its source. Tiptoeing along the corridor, she picked up more sounds of human agony coming from in front of her. At one point she even thought she heard a cackle, as if from the devil himself.

A sound just to her left startled her and she realized that this part of the corridor had cells lining both sides. She peeked in at the source of the sound, gasped, and stumbled backwards. The inside of the cell had been piled with prisoners, lying on top of each other, three and four deep. Rats could be seen scurrying among them. Low moans poured forth from all corners of the hellhole. Staggering forward, she dared a glance into other cells and they were no better. Eventually she came to an intersection, moans and cries coming at her from all directions. She was shivering.

Her teeth were chattering but, lucky for her, they didn't drown out the sound of footsteps coming from the corridor door behind her. Choosing the darkest of her available options, she silently plunged into the corridor on her right

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

The young man standing before them looked familiar. Annie remembered having seen him up in Sacton, always at Mace

Blackwood's side. If she wasn't mistaken, he was the son of Hawkins, the merchant responsible for forging the red armor. From the way he acted around Mace, she thought he might have been a fancy boy. From the stricken look on his face now, maybe he just had a thing for Blackwoods.

"So why was she following Owen Camberly? Her name was Macy, right?" asked Annie.

The young man fidgeted, hopping from foot to foot. She could see in his eyes that he wasn't sure where to begin; which truth to tell. Annie had no doubt that the young man standing before them had secrets... Big secrets. She could see them in his eyes. She had felt the same way the few times she had been around his Da. After what only seemed like forever, he looked up.

"It's Sir Arthur... Owen has kidnapped him. Tonight. At the docks. Saw it with my own eyes."

This drew a collective gasp from his audience. This was bad. Without a word passing between them, Annie could see that Beck and Callie understood. 'Had Owen begun to eliminate the competition?' Eric had more to say. Annie could see it in his eyes. She encouraged him to continue.

"It was Da's idea. Sir Arthur was the Red Knight up in ValleyHo." They nodded knowingly. "Da thought that a direct challenge to Owen... The dress... Would draw him out. But we didn't protect him. At least we still have the armor. But now Macy's gone."

Annie looked at him and her heart ached. He looked like he was ready to cry. There were obviously very deep feelings there. Beck filled the awkward moment.

He managed to drag out of him where he and his family were staying. Then he convinced him to return there and let them handle it. She had to give him credit: Beck was a smooth talker.

So, as the door closed behind the distraught young man, they looked at each other.

'What the Hell were they going to do now?'

"I don't have time for this!" Will heard Owen hiss to the shadowy figure who had come rushing into the room. Will lay there in agony as they huddled just out of earshot.

When the other man left Owen returned, his mood even fouler than before.

"It would seem our little game has been interrupted yet again," he spit out, punctuating it with a kick to the ribs. His heightened tension seemed to transfer to the two remaining caged rats and they were literally vibrating with rage. In a pique, Owen grabbed the cage and flung it across the room toward the open hearth. Their screeching crescendoed as the smell of burnt hair reached Will's nostrils.

Stepping over him, Owen grabbed Will by the knot which held his wrists and ankles in their unnatural position. Will thought his shoulders were going to dislocate as he was roughly dragged across the room, Owen muttering all the while.

"Can't very well hang you by your arms all night again, can we? Guess we'll have to keep you in here. Better not drown!" He pitched Will through an open cell door into about a foot of fast moving ice cold water. The shock of it took Will's breath away even as he heard the door slam home and the key click in the lock.

"Try not to drown brother. It would seem we have an intruder down here in our little funhouse. Time to go hunting." Then, over his shoulder: "I'm coming! I'm coming!"

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

Eric fidgeted in the corner of the carriage as it rolled down Sacton Street carrying him, his Da, and Siarra away from the Castle. ...and away from Macy. He hadn't wanted to leave her. 'But what choice did he have?' He couldn't quite escape the feeling that he'd been smooth-talked by Beck Friston, but what he had said had made sense.

It was every bit as much in their interests to save Sir Arthur and they could wander around the Castle looking for him, whereas he couldn't. They would send for him in the morning. He wouldn't be sleeping tonight. He was sick to his stomach.

The look on his Da's face didn't help. Having Sir Arthur up here as the Red Knight at this week's festivities would have been the combination of years of scheming and hard work. Without Sir Arthur, every thing fell apart. They would never be able to trick the Deacon into showing his copy of the will. He could see it in his Da's eyes.

"Don't you worry," he admonished Eric, none too convincingly. "Mace, Macy can handle herself." He winked. Eric's head shot up.

"As soon as we get back I'm going to put Simon and Richmond on the task. Let me talk to Madam. The front door is only one way into that Castle. And an awful lot of people's futures are riding on Sir Arthur getting out of there in one piece. Good doesn't always triumph over evil but it will this time because God is on our side."

Eric couldn't help but think that the crazy Brother Owen thought the same thing. The carriage lurched one way. His stomach lurched the other.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

Macy held her breath and silently counted the footsteps as they receded into the distance. She left the alcove she had been hiding in and padded after them. She was deep in the bowels of the Castle and she was lost. For the past hour she had been doing her best to avoid the search party that was obviously scouring the dungeon for her. She had slipped into unlocked rooms as they passed by, climbed onto rocky outcrops as they passed beneath, and once even pretended to hang unconscious from the wall as they stopped to confer right in front of her.

Once she heard Owen Camberly screeching at his men, but when she had attempted to tiptoe in that direction she had become lost in a warren of abandoned cells and dead-end passageways.

Hopefully the footsteps she now chased after would lead her back to the more active part of the underground. Up ahead she could see light. She slowed her pace and tried to move from shadow to shadow.

A shout from just ahead bounced off the stone wall. It was answered by a shout from behind her and the quickening of her heart. Spying an open door just ahead, she plunged through it just before the voice behind her came around the corner.

"Have you searched these rooms?" it barked. "Well then, I thought I told you to seal them off so we could get out of here. No intruder is gonna be stupid enough to hang around these deserted passageways. They give even me the creeps. Let's get back before Owen has our heads."

Macy heard the door slam shut, a key click in the lock, and footsteps receding away. In the pitch blackness, she groped her way toward the entrance. She tried the handle. She pounded soundlessly on the massive wooden door. She was locked in.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-
-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

-----Chapter Ten-----
-----RUMBLINGS-----

Eric was feeling kind of sorry for himself this morning. He hadn't heard back from the Castle about Macy. Sir Arthur was still in Owen's clutches. The secrets he held back from his Da were tearing him apart. And now here he was accompanying his Da to the Gubnator's, seeking assistance. Yeah, Eric was feeling sorry for himself this morning. ...and scared.

He dared a glance sideways at the elder Hawkins, clumping along, lost in thought. He looked like he hadn't slept all night. Eric certainly hadn't. The festive street scene unfolding around them seemed to pass by in a sleepy, surreal haze. Something about their manner spared them the attentions of the ever-present vendors, street urchins, and conmen. 'There was something to be said for that.'

The Gubnator had a small compound on the slopes of Signal Fire Hill. It was an exclusive neighborhood, peopled mostly by out-of-town nobles and wealthy merchants. Its proximity to the tower of the Brotherhood gave it a sense of security, but it gave Eric the creeps. He didn't think he'd like living that close to so much holier-than-thou.

"What exactly are you gonna ask him?" blurted Eric as they started up the rise. His Da looked at him in that way of his and cocked an eyebrow.

"What should I be asking of him?" he answered.

Eric stammered and felt the flush as it rose from his neck. He had no doubt that he had turned beet red. It was one thing to withhold a truth when that truth wasn't being questioned. It was quite another to hold onto a lie when it was staring you in the face.

"M-Maybe we should have a talk before going on to the Gubnator's?" he managed to choke out. With a knowing nod, his Da steered them toward an outdoor café smelling of hot chocolate and fresh breads.

They took seats in a quiet corner and placed their orders. Hawkins waited quietly while Eric's mind raced, looking for a place

to begin. Eric waited until the steaming mugs and tray full of croissants's were brought before beginning. Even after all that, all he could manage was blurting it out:

"Macy and Mace are the same person. There is no Mace Blackwood. She dressed as a man so she could go into battle."

There: he'd said it. But rather than feel unburdened, he somehow felt an even heavier weight on his shoulders as Hawkins sat there sipping chocolate and staring right through him. He felt like he was expected to say more, but of what he wasn't sure. When he again opened his mouth, only babble came out.

"I didn't know until the day we left Sacton. She said she was going to tell you. She asked me to trust her. Madam knows. She said Sir Arthur ought to be the one to tell you, but..."

The silence hung there between them, muffling the chatter and clank of cutlery going on around them. The longer it lasted, the more it seemed to pound in Eric's ears. His Da's eyes made him feel like the rabbit seeking shelter from the hawk. He wasn't sure if the "but what" he heard in his head had ever truly been vocalized. But it hung there in the air and wasn't going to go away. Eric bit into a croissant but nearly choked on it, his mouth was so dry. He washed it down with the cocoa, wiped his lips, and continued:

"I do trust her. ...them. I don't think they mean us any harm, but... but... but, if she wasn't really Mace Blackwood, Sir Arthur's squire, then isn't it possible that, well... He isn't really Sir Arthur?"

Eric watched his Da slump back, his eyes glaze over, and his lips move without speaking. Eventually he shook his head and refocused his eyes on Eric.

"It has to be him. He has the mark. Richmond checked while he was still unconscious."

Eric felt a huge burden lifted from his shoulders. When Hawkins drained his cocoa and stood up, Eric did the same. Hawkins continued clumping up the hill at a renewed pace. Eric struggled to keep up. At the gate to the Gubnator's compound, his Da turned around and looked Eric in the eye.

"You love her, don't you?"

The red flush that exploded across his face was obviously the only answer necessary, for the older man turned back to the door and rapped on it sharply.

"Well, we'd better do what we can to save her then, hadn't we?" He rapped again.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

Annie was feeling kind of sorry for herself this morning. Callie was acting strange. Beck was scared stiff but trying not to show it. Sir Arthur and that Macy-girl were in the clutches of Owen Camberly. And every time the Baroness so much as glanced her way, she felt like she needed a bath. Yeah. Annie was feeling kind of sorry for herself this morning. ...but determined.

That's why she was standing here on the terrace, sipping tea, and waiting on the Deacon to come down for breakfast. She hadn't expected it to be easy. Her life had been a whirlwind ever since Beck swept her off her feet and headed for Sacton. But push was coming to shove and the next few days would probably be the most important ones in their lives.

"What a pleasant surprise!" whispered the wizened little old man coming up behind her, mug of cocoa in his hands. He sat on the bench and gestured to the one next to it. "To what do I owe this honor?"

"Mornin' Deacon." she smiled, taking the proffered seat. They sat there in silence a while, both knowing that things had fundamentally changed since the last breakfast they had shared. She was no longer the inconsequential little 'serving girl', he no longer the benign mentor. She was a player now and that fact seemed to hang in the air between them.

"It's about Brother Owen." she began. "I've been told, by an eyewitness no less, that Sir Arthur was abducted right off the street two nights ago by Owen and a bunch of his bully-boys. He hasn't been seen since.

"Then, last night, Macy Blackwood, the sister of Arthur's squire, was seen leaving the feast with him. Now she can't be found. Something bad is going on here."

The Deacon avoided her gaze, the pain etching his features. Annie forced herself to keep her mouth shut and await his reply. She sipped her tea and continued to stare him down. Eventually, he spoke.

"Owen no longer listens to me. Owen no longer listens to anybody.... Maybe the voices in his head. Owen's pretty out there these days, but you probably figured that out for yourself.

"He has always harbored an irrational jealousy... No, not just jealousy... More like hatred, for his brother. It's why he left home all those years ago and ended up here.

"I pulled some strings to get him into the Brotherhood in the hope that there he would find some peace. But I fear the opposite has occurred. He has corrupted the Brotherhood, using it for his own ends, turning it away from God and God's work."

He stood up gingerly and shuffled, stoop-shouldered, over to the railing. Annie could almost feel the weight of the responsibilities he had carried on those shoulders all these years. She could almost taste what it must be like to be feared and loathed by most of those around you. She shuddered.

"I'm getting old." said a tired voice, back still to her as if it were too painful to both look at and talk to her at the same time.

"... too old for all of this. I'm tired. I'm ready to retire to my island and spend what time I have left in study and reflection." He sighed and turned around. If possible, he seemed to sag even further. He seemed to shrink before Annie's eyes.

"Mine has been a hard life, filled with hard decisions. You, of all people, ought to know I am not the man they think I am, not the monster they use to scare their kids to sleep. I've had a role to play and I've played it. Someone had to be strong around here. Someone had to keep their hand on the tiller. Lord knows our dear, departed Baron wasn't capable of it."

He stopped and crossed himself. Annie felt tears well up as the impact of his words hit home. She had never seen the Deacon

so frail and vulnerable looking. It frightened her. It threatened every truth she held sacred. It made her feel very alone. Just as she was about to tip over into despair, the old man smiled, shook his shoulders, and rubbed his hands together. He closed off the vulnerable side of himself so quickly that Annie had to doubt that it had ever been there in the first place.

"One thing's for certain..." he said, in his old, more powerful voice. "...after all the hard work I've put in, the sacrifices I've made, I'll be damned if I'm going to let that holier-than-thou, meaner-than-thou nut job ruin things. You have my word: Owen Camberly is not the future of this Barony. Now run along little girl, I've got things to do." With that, he was gone. Strangely enough, Annie felt confident and at peace for the first time since arriving back at the Castle.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

Beck was feeling kind of sorry for himself this morning. Annie had only gone downstairs half an hour ago, yet he already missed her desperately. It scared him how much weaker and indecisive he felt when he was out of her presence. Now she was down with the Deacon, fighting what seemed like should have been his battle. Beck was feeling kind of sorry for himself this morning. ...and afraid.

"Cheer up, loverboy!" admonished a Callie who looked none too cheerful herself. "You got it good. You could have a lifetime of being an old maid staring you in the face like I do. Or even worse: a female Owen Camberly."

The thought made them both cringe, which they covered with a nervous laugh. Beck looked across the forgotten chessboard at his sister. The sounds of the ocean that he heard coming through the grate at their feet seemed to mimic the turmoil he could see in her eyes.

He was worried about her. She had changed so much. And it had happened virtually overnight. Gone was the optimistic force of nature, spreading sunshine everywhere she went. In her

place was a cynical pessimist, driven by anger, and prone to tears at the drop of a hat. Worst of all, he didn't know what to do about it. So he listened to the water and made another let-her-win move on the chessboard.

"Do you think Annie will accomplish anything?" he asked.

"I had breakfast on the terrace with the Deacon when you were in Sacton," she answered, seemingly ignoring his question. "He said I was like mother. Or rather, mother used to be like me."

Seeing the dark cloud passed over his sister's features was an 'Aha!' moment for Beck. 'Now he understood.' He almost smiled. He had no doubt that being compared to her mother had pissed Callie off big-time. All the more so because he could see the truth in it. But he knew he dared not say so.

"That's crazy!" he said instead. "You are nothing like her."

"Oh yes I am. I'd better be if we are to have any chance of surviving this week. You do what you have to. I'll do what I have to, little brother."

"And what might that be?" Beck shot back sarcastically.

"Protect you from mother. ...and Owen Camberly. You fight fire with fire. My talk with the Deacon opened my eyes. I've been a foolish naïve little girl. ...selfish. All I thought about was myself. That has changed."

Beck didn't know what to say. This wasn't the Callie he knew and loved. She had always been mercurial, but never so negative. This wasn't Callie he was talking to. It was his mother. The thought tore at his heartstrings. He didn't know what to say.

He was spared his reply when the door crashed back on its hinges and the Baroness swept into the room at the head of her usual entourage. Beck didn't like the smug look on her face. Nor the steam coming out of Callie's ears. When these two had been in the same room lately, the fur had flown. He could see that this time would be no different.

When he stood in an attempt to come between them, the Baroness turned her withering gaze on him.

"Sit down, *boy*. I didn't come here to talk to you."

Beck did as he was told. She walked over, moved Callie's bishop, announced "Checkmate!", turned her back to Beck and her full attention on her daughter. Callie, who had yet to utter a sound, was by now as red as her hair and seeming to vibrate.

"I thought you ought to know," smirked the Baroness.

"Owen Camberly has agreed to leave the Brotherhood and has accepted the dowry offered for taking you off our hands. Isn't that wonderful? Criers are right now going into Friston posting notices that we we'll be celebrating a double wedding at the end of the week: you and Owen. Beck and that serving girl of his!"

The Baroness was no dummy. She had backpedaled toward the door by the time Callie launched herself at her, the entourage bearing the brunt of Callie's rage. By the time they extricated themselves from her grasp and made their way to the door, Beck was up and holding his sister tight. When the door closed behind them, she turned around and melted into his arms. She looked up into his eyes, her anger spent, and the floodgates opened.

"What am I gonna do?" she bawled.

He just held on tight, not knowing how to reply.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

Will was feeling kind of sorry for himself this morning. This hero business wasn't all it was cracked up to be. Halfway through the night he had managed to saw off his bindings, using a piece of rusty hinge. But here he sat, literally freezing is balls off, in a foot of fast-moving, frigid water that was the floor of his cell. He hadn't enough energy to stand up. He hadn't eaten for days. At least he was no longer thirsty. Yeah, Will was feeling kind of sorry for himself this morning. ...and cold.

'How did he get himself into this mess?' Could it have been only a week and a half ago that his greatest fear had been being screamed at by Cap'n Waldo? He brought his knees up and put his head in his hands. He didn't see how he was going to get out

of this alive. It didn't matter what he told Brother Owen. The crazy Paladin wasn't going to let him walk out of here. And no one even knew he was down here so no one was coming to the rescue.

'At least Macy was safe.' Thank God she didn't know he was here or she would probably do something stupid. The thought made him smile. In the short time that he had known her, she had made him feel more alive than at any time in his life. Her energy and enthusiasm were contagious. At least she was safe.

The thought made him sad. He wasn't ready to die, even though he was probably going to. He had always been a dreamer: dreaming of great deeds and great loves. But it hadn't been until this past week that he had actually had a taste of those things. A small taste, but a taste none the less. It made him want those things even more.

Macy was the first human being he had ever known whose welfare he put ahead of his own. 'Was that love?' Whatever it was, it felt good. If, by his passing, she would be safe, it would be a triumph of sorts. Somehow, it made him feel stronger. Somehow, it made it easier to face the hours and days that lay ahead of him. At least he wouldn't die for nothing. At least he wouldn't die all alone.

Will's life hadn't been an easy one. He had virtually been Cap'n Waldo's slave for the past five years. A less honorable man would have run away, but Will felt he owed the fat sea captain. Who knows what his fate would have been had he remained a captive of the Unwashed who had raided his father's armory and put the rest of his family to the sword.

But even before he had been taken by the Unwashed, his life hadn't been an easy one. His father had been a stern taskmaster, working him harder than old Waldo ever did. He became more than proficient in the myriad of weapons which came off his father's forge. He became more than knowledgeable about the wide range of books thrust at him to devour in front of the fireplace after the others had gone to bed.

Even as a kid, he had been a dreamer. Unlike his brothers, he took no real interest in the armorer's craft, nor was he

encouraged to do so. As a boy, he always seemed to be off on his own, doing his own thing, feeling different: feeling alone.

Will had felt a gaping void his whole life, a loneliness that no amount of daydreaming could fill. Now here he was, staring his own death in the face, forced to come to terms with the loneliness that had always set him apart. He began to weep for all the lost opportunities... all the unfulfilled potential.

He had never felt so weak, yet from this weakness he vowed to be strong. He would protect Macy. He would protect the legacy of the Red Knight, and the secrets that Hawkins carried. If the opportunity presented itself, he vowed to take Owen Camberly with him. Shivering, yet filled with a new resolve, he stood up, went to the bars, and waited.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

Cap'n Waldo was feeling kind of sorry for himself this morning. Huffin' and puffin', he was way too fat for this kind of adventure. He knew it. So did Madam. But that didn't seem to stop her as she determinedly waddled up the mildew-encrusted steps in front of him. His feet were killing him and his head was throbbing. Yeah, Cap'n Waldo was feeling kind of sorry for himself this morning. ...and hung over.

"Hold that torch up higher!" she called out from up ahead. Waldo smiled. The irony of his carrying a torch for her wasn't lost on him. In his own unique way, he had been carrying a torch for her his whole life. When she had recruited him for this latest scheme of hers, they both knew there was no way he would refuse her.

He had been in his room sleeping off the liquor-fueled ass-whipping Ellaye had laid on him last night when Madam burst in all a-flutter. Macy hadn't returned from the Castle last night. She had this crazy idea of going up there to save her. Waldo thought it was just talk as he consoled her from his alcohol-fueled haze. He had agreed to help in any way he could when he thought there was nothing she could do but talk.

Next thing he knew, he found himself in this secret passage, climbing a mountain's worth of steps, struggling to keep pace as she jiggled upward ahead of him. God only knows what she planned to do when they reached the top. In all honesty, he was afraid to ask her. She had told him that Annie had told her of the passage, but she forged ahead with a familiarity that told him there was more to the story.

But then again, with Madam, there was always more to the story. For as long as he had known her, he couldn't really say that he *knew* her. No one did. She ran a tight ship. She was a force of nature. She was a powerful friend and an even more powerful enemy. But to actually know her? ...understand what made her tick? Naaah! She didn't let that happen.

So Waldo sucked in another lung full of the musty air, switched the torch to his other hand, and plodded upward. When he reached the top, he saw her sitting in a small tack room, catching her breath. He placed the torch in a wall holder and plopped down beside her, panting. She reached out and squeezed his knee.

"We're getting too old for this." she said with a smile.

"...and too fat." he replied. The look they shared bespoke their many common memories and the deep truths of their recently uttered statements.

"You do have a plan?" he asked, eyebrows raised. She gave him her biggest smile, took his head in her hands, and planted a big sloppy kiss on the top of his head.

"Of coarse I do." she answered, pulling a key from the folds of her dress. "We are right now sitting in the pre-Dark Times sub-basement of Friston Castle. Somewhere down here is a huge area turned into a dungeon by the first Baron of Friston. It hadn't been used in recent years but I have a feeling that our dear Brother Owen has dusted it off and made it his own. If Macy disappeared at the Castle while following him, I'm betting this is where she will be found.

"What I have here is a skeleton key. If the locks haven't been changed it should give us access throughout. Come..."

With that, she gestured toward the torch, opened the door, turned right without hesitation, and strode off down the stone corridor. Waldo followed, taken aback and slightly ill at ease with the familiarity she seemed to show in this, the creepiest place he had ever been in. Somewhere up ahead, someone screamed. Waldo quickened his pace.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

Macy was feeling kinda sorry for herself this morning. 'It was morning, wasn't it?' She wasn't quite sure. It was pitch black. It was freezing cold. And she was trapped. She couldn't call for help and no one knew she was here. 'Yeah.' Macy was feeling kind of sorry for herself this morning. ...and disoriented.

When she had first been locked in, she'd made a cursory inspection of her predicament. She was in a fairly large room with a damp stone floor and a ceiling too high to reach. The walls to either side of the door, and along each side of the room, were also of stone. But the back wall was as smooth as a sheet of glass. There were no other doors or windows, no other means of escape, except the door which had locked her in. At least she was alone.

Except for the rats, that is. She had spent the night curled up against the door, a faint breeze from under it caressing her face. She lay there listening to the scritch of the rodents in the far corners of her cell. Some of the sound seemed to come from the ceiling. Once or twice she had sensed them come close. But as of yet they hadn't the courage to do more. She shuddered at the thought and curled herself into a tighter ball.

She should have told someone she was coming down here before plunging down those steps after crazy old Owen Camberly. But, if she had told anyone, they would have forbidden her to come down. 'Who would she have told anyway?' Eric? His Da? They were way over their heads on this one, a fact she was slowly and painfully beginning to realize.

'And what about Will?' Was he even down here? She had heard intermittent screams throughout the night, but none of them

sounded like him. Eric had told his Da about Owen's kidnapping of 'Sir Arthur'.

But, if what Eric said was true, his Da thought Sir Arthur was his brother. And noble brothers weren't like normal brothers. Maybe Hawkins would be better off if he let his brother die. It was all so confusing. It made her head spin.

'And what about Eric?' She really and truly did love him. The afternoon they had spent next to the spring was the most beautiful thing she had ever experienced. Did he feel the same? Or did boys just 'do it' and move on? She found that she was crying.

What would Mace do? This thought made her smile. She sat up and composed herself. She told herself that she had been in worse situations before, although she couldn't quite recall one at the moment. There must be a way out of here. Will was depending on her. Eric was undoubtedly frantic with worry.

She put her ear to the door and listened, but could hear nothing. She tried looking under the door, but could see nothing. She started making her way around the room again, working in a counter-clockwise direction. She tried climbing the wall, but the stone was too smooth. When she reached the middle of the glassy back wall, she slumped down in despair. Her mouth was dry and her belly was rumbling. She could hear the rats again. Now sound was coming from above and behind her. How strange. There must be something up there.

Standing, she turned toward the wall, put her hands up, and jumped. There was something up there! A ledge maybe? She jumped up and held on, but wasn't strong enough to pull herself up. Back on the ground, she went left to where the smooth back wall met with its perpendicular stone counterpart.

The back wall was glass. Working her fingers up the corner, she found three hinges anchoring it in place. Grabbing the top one, she gingerly wedged her toes into the bottom one and pulled up. It hurt but eventually she was able to pull herself up.

She found herself on a ledge, maybe a foot wide. The back wall was again of stone, while the ledge she knelt on felt like

wood. On her knees, stretching as high as she could go, she could now feel the ceiling. Carefully, she started crawling along the ledge toward the center of the room. The rats were now quiet.

Halfway across, she felt a slight breeze on the side of her face. When she put her hand up to the back wall, she encountered wood, not stone. Carefully inspecting it with both hands, she was fairly certain it was a shutter. The decay assaulting her nose told her the wood was rotted. She pounded on it and it splintered, light pouring through the cracks. She squinted, yet kept digging at the wood with her hands.

When her eyes adjusted to the light and she could again open them, her heart fell. Behind the rotted shutter had been a one foot hole bored into the mountain facing east. She could see the Eastbay hills, ...through the solid iron bars embedded in the bedrock. She wouldn't be getting out this way. 'At least she had light.'

Since she couldn't easily turned around, she returned to her hands and knees and crawled toward the far corner. In the dim light she could see that there was writing in foot high letters along the ledge as she crawled. "A-X-M-U-S-E-U"

"An Ax Museum?" What exactly an 'Ax Museum' might be escaped her, but somehow it seemed fitting in this creepy, below-ground dungeon. Toes still sore from her climb up, she eased over the edge and plopped down onto the floor.

She padded over to the door but it showed no more means of escape in the light than it had in the dark. When she again heard the scritch of the rats, she turned back to the back wall, let loose with a high-pitched scream, and backpedaled until she slammed up against the door. Staring back at her from behind the glass back wall were hundreds upon hundreds of severed heads. She screamed again.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

Callie was feeling kind of sorry for herself this morning. What was new? She seemed to be feeling sorry for herself most

of the time these days. If she wasn't lamenting the losses the past represented or dreading the gains the future promised, she was launching herself across the room, fangs bared, at her mother. Yeah, Callie was feeling kind of sorry for herself this morning. ... and trapped.

Beck held her in his arms but she wondered whether he would be more of a hindrance than a help. He had his moments, but he was no match for their mother. He knew it. She knew it. Worst of all, their mother knew it.

'Thank God for Annie.' What would they have done without her? She was more her own person than either of them could ever hope to be, raised as they were within the cocoon of their noble birth. Born to privilege all too often means born unable to take care of one's self. Thank goodness the lesser born bought into it. If not, nobles would probably starve to death naked because they wouldn't even know how to dress themselves. Callie shook her head. 'Thank God for Annie.' They'd be lost without her. As if on cue, the subject of her musings opened the door and walked in. She came up short, seeing Callie in the aftermath of what was obviously another flare-up.

"What now?" she asked, trying to keep the disapproval out of her voice. "I passed your mother in the hallway and she had that 'cat-that-ate-the-canary' look."

"It was a big one this time." squeaked Callie. Spent, and without fire, she proceeded to explain about the double wedding and the notices being tacked up even as they spoke.

This took the wind out of even Annie's sails as she plopped down on the bed next to Callie. Beck stood and went to the window. Callie put her head on Annie's breast and the tears flowed freely.

"Now. Now." consoled Annie. "We'll think of something."

"We have three days!" shot back Callie.

"I'll kill him." whispered Annie. Beck turned around.

"There might be a better way." he said. He walked over and sat beside Callie, wrapping his arms around the two people he loved more than any thing else in the world. It brought back

memories of the moment they had shared in this very bad the night before he dragged Annie off to Sacton. He had no doubt that the intimacies of that night were as present and real for them as they were for him at that very moment.

"There might be a better way." he repeated, waiting for Callie to compose herself.

"What if we could make Owen *not* want to marry you?" he threw out there. They gave him doubtful looks. He forged ahead.

"What does Owen want more than anything else? He wants the Barony. He wants power. I'm betting that he's even thinking he might be one of the lost twins.

"But, if what Eric tells us is true, the real twins are his Da and Sir Arthur. If so, that's what the will that Sir Edmund got father to sign will say. That will was lost. The Deacon might have one, but he's never going to show it."

"He promised me he'd never let Owen become Baron." interrupted Annie. "But I don't see how that saves Callie from being married off to that monster."

"A will could right a lot of wrongs." Beck replied mysteriously. "A will could see to it that the rightful heir takes over in the Barony. And, as for his younger brother, well..."

Annie's eyes narrowed. "Are you saying what I think you're saying? You can't be..."

"Why not? I'm certain that you could get a will forged. Madam must have contacts. Name Hawkins as the elder and let him become Baron. As the younger, Owen would be essentially powerless, but one thing is certain..."

"He couldn't marry his sister." whispered Callie, understanding fully for the first time.

"But Beck..."

"Hush now. You know I don't really want to be Baron. I would much rather go off and live a quiet life with..." Annie cleared her throat.

"But we'd need the Baron's Signet ring to seal the document."

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

There was something different about Brother Owen but Will couldn't quite put his finger on it. As he watched him approach across the dungeon floor, there was a spring in his step that wasn't there before. The slight curl at the corner of his lips might have even been a smile, a real smile, not the evil impersonation of one he usually affected. It caught Will off-guard. It made him uncomfortable. Whatever it was, it couldn't be good.

"So. How's my dear 'brother' doing this morning?" he boomed as he neared Will's cell. By the time he crouched down just out of Will's reach, he was practically beaming.

"Today will be a momentous day, a glorious day.... A momentous day for the both of us. Today I leave the Brotherhood to accept sweet Callie's hand in marriage. Aren't you happy for me?"

Will just gripped the bars tighter and glowered. Owen reached into a sack behind him, grabbed a handful of something, and threw it. Will flinched and turned his back. Owen threw another handful and Will was on fire. 'It was salt!' And since every inch of his skin was cut, abraded, or gouged, it was agony. Owen just laughed.

"Too bad you won't be able to return the favor by throwing rice at my wedding but, as I said, today we'll be a momentous day for the both of us. For me, it will be the beginning of my new life. For you, it will be the end of, well, your whole life."

With that he threw another handful of salt through the bars. Will let it bounce off his chest, standing tall, refusing to give his tormentor the satisfaction of a reaction. To himself, he prayed that the crazy Paladin would come close enough to the bars to be grabbed. Owen stayed back, bouncing on his haunches.

"Our little game is over, I guess," he said with mock sadness. "I'm guessing that you are going to go to your grave without my ever knowing who you were. Let's just pretend that you truly were Arthur. Then I'll get to kill you twice. I can live with that." He chuckled. "But you won't."

"After we bury that weakling of a Baron tonight, I can start preparing for the wedding. She thinks she has me wrapped around her finger, but I have a few surprises in store for her. No one has Owen Camberly wrapped around their finger. I have worked my whole life for this. That bitch will pay for mocking me all these years. Oh yeah. She's gonna pay.

"But first things first. How about some lunch?"

Owen got up, went across the room, and returned with a burlap sack. He threw it next to the bars and poked it through into the water with an iron pole.

"They say snake is some good eatin', if you can catch 'em." Owen chuckled.

Will watched wide-eyed as at least a dozen deadly snakes slithered from the bag into the water. He had checked the floor of the cell and there was a wire mesh along the baseboard through which the water flowed. There was no way out. As the snakes circled, Will jumped out of the water and clung to the bars. He just absolutely hated snakes. Brother Owen hunkered down to wait.

A far-off high-pitched scream cut the air. 'It sounded just like Macy.' Owen got up to investigate. Will held on tight.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

Eric's hopes were dashed as soon as he entered the room. From the way none of the three of them would look him in the eye, he knew they had been unsuccessful in rescuing Macy. He hurried to the window to hide the tears that were welling up in his eyes. He sensed Annie's approach.

"I spoke with the Deacon." she said, hand on his shoulder. "He made no promises but he said he would do what he could. I told him about Arthur, to. That seemed to give him some incentive.

"I'm afraid we may have judged him wrong all these years. He may not be quite the boogeyman we've all believed him to be. I'm afraid he's been blamed for a lot of Owen Camberly's excesses. He claims to have lost control of the good Brother."

"Do you believe him?" whispered Eric, afraid of the answer.

"Yeah, I think I do." was the reply.

"What about Macy?"

"She's probably down in the dungeon below the Castle.

Owen probably has her. It doesn't look good."

"Owen is crazy. ...out of control." wailed Eric. "Isn't there anything we can do? Da told the Gubnator about her and Sir Arthur. Madam knows too. We can't just sit here!"

"You haven't heard the worst of it yet." said Beck, joining them. "My mother, who just might be crazier than Owen, has given Callie's hand in marriage to him. They're to be married in a double ceremony with me and Annie."

"What!" screeched Eric. "That's crazy!"

"We need your help." said Beck, trying to get him to focus.

"We need you to trust us to get Macy rescued. We're doing everything we can for her."

Annie squeezed his arm and caught his eye.

"Because of the memorial service, I can't leave the Castle tonight. But we need to get a message to Madam. We need your help to save Callie from marrying that monster.... To save the Barony from someday being ruled by him."

"... to save me from someday being murdered by him." added Beck quietly.

Callie came up to join them and the three of them explained Beck's idea of forging a false will. Skeptical at first he warmed to the idea as he was bombarded by their enthusiasm. ...and desperation.

"But we're going to need his Signet ring." he protested.

The three of them smiled.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

"Douse that torch and be quiet!" hissed Madam. Heart pounding, Waldo did as he was told. A ring-filled hand snaked toward him in the darkness, reassuringly patting him on the arm. Moments later, the torch-carrying figure of Owen Camberly

appeared out of a passageway up on their left and hurried down the corridor away from them.

As the torch receded, Waldo's heartbeat filled the darkness. Tugging on his wrist, Madam dragged him forward. When she reached the cross-passage from which Owen had emerged, she took a left, dragging Waldo behind her. Up ahead they could see a dim flickering light so Waldo didn't bother re-lighting the torch. They advanced cautiously.

At the head of the passage, they rounded a corner and saw that the flickering light came through a barred window in a door just ahead of them. Approaching the door, Waldo jostled into position to see over Madam's shoulder and into the room beyond. She turned her head, lips only inches from his ear.

"Is that a cutlass in your pocket or are you just happy to see me?" she giggled. Waldo blushed. Turning back, they both stared into the room beyond.

It was a large room, lit by a big central fire pit with a ceiling that disappeared into the shadows above. The sound of rushing water could be heard. Weapons and instruments of torture were scattered about. The smell of putrefying flesh assaulted their nostrils.

The room appeared deserted so Madam tried the door handle. It was locked. She tried her skeleton key and it worked. They entered, closing the door and locking it behind them. Waldo leaned in close and whispered.

"If'n she's here, we better finds her 'n gits out. That nut job's gonna be coming back and I don't think it be a good idea to be here when 'e does."

Waldo was ashamed of the obvious fear in his voice. He knew how much Macy meant to his friend. 'After all she had done for him...' But she didn't know how crazy Brother Owen was. Sometimes fear is a good thing. Sometimes fear keeps you alive.

She patted his arm once again, and set out along the wall to their left, staying in the shadows. Waldo hustled to catch up. He could hear rats squealing somewhere over against the far wall. In the center of the room was what looked like a pile of body parts.

The back wall they were approaching was where the sound of rushing water was coming from, but since it was engulfed in darkness he couldn't make out its source. Spying an iron rod the length of a sword lying by the fire pit Waldo hurried over and grabbed it.

When he returned to Madam, in an act of chivalry, and against all his better judgment, he took position in front of her as they resumed their search of the shadowed periphery of the room. The sound of rushing water was very loud now.

Waldo crept forward, Madam's hand on his back, the iron bar tapping the wall to his left. Then the bar hit something soft and got stuck. When he reached in with his other hand to free it, he was grabbed by the wrist and dragged forward until his forehead slammed into the wall.

His head exploded with stars. He blacked out momentarily. And next thing he knew, the iron bar was pressed against his throat and he couldn't breathe. Then it was dark and he felt himself falling.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

The papers were spread out across the desk. Callie hovered near the door. Eric was unbuttoning his shirt. They had spent the past half hour going through papers in the Baron's office, looking for handwriting samples from both the Baron and Edmund Camberly. The first they found easily. The second proved much harder.

Spread out on the desk were numerous examples of her father's signature and handwriting. After scrounging through the property records, they had come upon Sir Edmund's signature on a deed to Santon Quento Castle. It wasn't until they were about to give up that they found a short note to the Baron in Sir Edmund's handwriting. It had been tucked into the family Bible and had been dated less than a month ago:

M'Lord, 'Tis my sincerest hope that reports of your ill health were greatly exaggerated and that this note finds you still with us. We must speak before you are called before your maker. I must set right the wrongs that were committed all those years ago. I have done you great disservice, allowing you to eat yourself away from the inside for wrongs you have falsely thought were committed in your name. Nothing, I repeat, nothing, that happened that night, happened as you think it did. To protect the many, I sacrificed the few. I sacrificed you.

"I expect to burn in Hell for the wrongs I have done you. I don't expect you to be joining me. I will see you soon to make amends. Your friend, your vassal, your servant.

Edmund of Camberly

Don De Santa Quento

Eric gathered up the papers, stuffed them into the top of his trousers, and re-buttoned his shirt. Looking around to make sure everything was left as they found it, he headed for the door that Callie now held open.

Shutting it behind them, they hurried up the carpeted corridor, rounded a corner, and bumped into the Baroness. Her eyes betrayed her surprise at finding Callie in this part of the Castle. Her recent encounters with her suddenly high-strung daughter made her hesitate.

Callie took advantage of her hesitation, pushed Eric in front of her, and headed for the staircase. Unable to resist a parting shot, she addressed Eric, just loud enough for her mother to hear.

"You'll have to excuse mother. She's kind of distraught today. She has a lot of preparations to make if she's going to be ready to leave for the convent dear Owen has picked out for her by this weekend.

"Thank you for helping me take measurements of her bedroom. We want to make sure the new furniture will fit, don't we?" She giggled.

"Whaa..." she heard the Baroness utter behind her.

"What?" said Callie from the top of the stairs. "He hasn't told you yet? Oops. My bad!" She tittered again.

Pushing Eric ahead of her, she turned on her heel and headed down the stairs.

"We still need that Signet." he whispered to her.

"That's where we're going now." she replied.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

"You know I hate it up there." protested Annie.

"Aaaaw. C'mon." wheedled Beck. "It'll probably be the last chance we have to be alone before the wedding. Besides, we don't have much time if we're gonna be ready for fathers interment mass.

"C'mon." he pleaded. Annie smiled, looking at the pained expression on his face. Then she grimaced, looking at the spiral staircase as it wound toward the heavens and the belltower above. Not without some trepidation, she placed her foot on the first step and took Beck's outstretched hand.

Together they raced upward. Round and round they went. Annie's irrational fears didn't disappear but, the higher she went, the more they were tempered by the anticipation of some alone time with Beck.

Though they had yet to 'do it', perhaps because they had yet to 'do it', the sensual time they had spent together had been by far the happiest times of Annie's life. Unfortunately there had been none of them since they had returned from Sacton.

'Was that what being Baroness was going to be like?' Someone always hovering nearby. Never having a moment alone. Always sacrificing your desires in the name of duty?

It made her sad to think that, many years from now, she may look back upon this past week as the happiest in her life. She had heard it whispered that Beck didn't want the Barony. He just wanted her. If she was honest with herself, the same applied to her. She sure hoped that something worked out with this twin

thing. She didn't know if she could handle a lifetime of someone always hovering nearby.

When they reached the carillon platform, both put their hands on their knees and gulped in great lungfuls of air. Neither could speak. But the look that they shared was all that needed being said. A greedy longing replaced whatever fear may have remained as Beck reached out and took her in his arms.

Far below they could hear the myriad of sounds as they wafted up from the festivities going on in the compound below. Animal sounds. Carney barkers. Sales pitches. The sound of kids. On the other side of the wall, scurrying sounds could be heard as the Unwashed gathered, curious as to what was going on atop Noble Hill. The only sound coming from atop the Friston Cathedral belltower was that of heavy breathing.

Annie could feel the laces of her bodice being loosened. When Beck slid it down around her waist, she could feel the stiff breeze as it hardened her nipples through the thin cotton of her blouse. She could feel Beck growing as he rubbed up against her thigh.

"Oh Beck!" she moaned, her disquiet forgotten as she dragged him down to the floor. His lips found hers and that became everything.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

Macy looked around frantically for a weapon. The footsteps drew closer. Torchlight flickered under the door. Both stopped moving, just outside, replaced by a jangling of keys.

No weapon to be found, Macy crouched in a runner's stance in the far corner facing the door. Oh well, Madam always said she had a hard head. When the door opened, she charged through head first, impacting at crotch level, receiving a satisfying "Oooof!" for her efforts. The torch went flying into the room. She went down in a tangle of limbs, already scrambling to make her escape up the corridor.

A hand clutched at her ankle, bringing her crashing back to the stone floor. She lashed out with her other foot, receiving another “Oooof!” and she was free.

“Macy: wait!” she heard from behind her. Then, two steps later: “No! Not that way!

“Owen’s coming.” is what finally stopped her.

She turned back to see her adversary sitting on the floor, rubbing at the various bruises she had caused. It was the Deacon. She followed his eyes, looking forward again, and could see the faint flickering of an approaching torch.

“Get back here girl!” commanded the Deacon. “Help me up if you want to get out of here. Do it before Owen gets here. Come on now.”

Macy was torn, but something in the old man’s voice made her go back. After helping him to his feet, he motioned for her to retrieve the fallen torch. By the time she had returned to him, Owen Camberly was striding toward them from up the corridor.

“Deacon?” he called out. “What are you doing down here?”

The old man motioned for Macy to stay close behind him as he limped toward the Paladin.

“The real question, Brother Owen, is what are you doing down here? I would have thought that you would have been upstairs preening for your role during the Baron’s interment mass. It’s getting late.”

“Plenty of time for that, Deacon.” He pressed: “Why are you down here?”

“I was, uh, down here... I, uh, brought this, uh, wench down to look through some of the pre-Dark Times archive rooms. Yeah. Uh. It has long been rumored that a room-sized quilt existed, hand-stitched and dedicated to love.

“I’ve been searching for it for days. I thought it would be a nice touch to hang it in the Cathedral for the wedding.”

“You mean weddings-s-s, don’t you?” challenged Owen. “Or haven’t you heard? It will be a double wedding. I will be joining the family. I have accepted the dowry offered for Callie and

will do my best to make an honest woman out of her. He chuckled. "...even if it kills her."

The Deacon blanched.

Macy was too stunned to move.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

Will gripped the bar tighter as his victim sputtered and choked his way to the ground. He could hear a woman's pleas but the blood pounded so loudly in his ears that he couldn't make out her words. Eventually he had to release his grip on the bar or the dead weight of the now-unconscious man would have dragged him back down into the snake-infested waters covering the floor of his cell.

"Will? Will Sutter? Is that you? Will? Macy's Will?" The woman's hushed screaming broke through his rage. "Will! Listen to me. We've come to help!"

He sensed a torch as she brought it closer. He squinted against it but could still make out the corpulent figure of Madam. ...Macy's Madam.

"What are you doing here?" he squeaked, confused, a confusion only heightened when he looked down upon the sprawled out figure of Cap'n Waldo.

"Cap'n Waldo?" he squeaked again.

"We're here to help you." offered Madam. "Or actually we're here to help Macy. Macy and Sir Arthur. It's a long story. First, let's get you out of there."

Stepping over a Waldo who was just starting to come around, she produced a big old-fashioned key and inserted it into the lock.

"Damn!" she muttered, jangling the key this way and that. "They must have changed the lock. Or this is a new addition. My master key won't work."

She nudged Waldo with her foot.

"Come on Waldo. Always sleeping on the job. Get yer fat ass up and help me get this cage open before Owen gets back."

Waldo hacked, coughed, rubbed his throat and hocked up a couple goobers. The folds of fat rippled along the side of his head as he turned an evil eye in Will's direction. With no little effort, and a helping hand from Madam, he managed to get up. He looked into the cell just as Madam's swung the torch around and his mouth fell open.

'It was his old apprentice, but not his old apprentices eyes.' His gut instinct told him to lunge for the young man and choke the life out of him. His survival instinct warned him that might not be such a good idea. This wasn't the same young man who had left *The Barnacle* headed for his now burnt-out warehouse just a few short weeks ago. Their day of reckoning would come, but it wasn't going to be today.

Grabbing the iron bar, Madam and the Cap'n tried to force the door open, with no luck. A quick search of the room turned up no keys.

"Owen must have them." grumbled Waldo, the other two silently nodding in agreement.

"Macy, too." mumbled Madam solemnly.

Before they could decide what to do, they heard the sound of approaching footsteps.

"Owen!" whispered Madam as she and the Cap'n did their best to melt into the shadows. No sooner had they done so than the door at the far end of the room opened and in strode the Gubnator and the Seneschal of the Flame.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

"It scares me when you rile up your mother like that." said Eric as he exited the Castle on Callie's heels. "She's a scary person."

"You're telling me?" harrumph Callie. "She has tried every trick she knows to keep me cowed and terrified of her my whole life. I'm sick and tired of it."

The compound was a cacophony of sight and sound as Eric did his best to stay close as Callie stormed her way across it. The

smell of animals, cooking, and unwashed bodies fought for her nostrils' attention. Callie brushed aside the offered condolences as she swept through the crowd. When they approached the Cathedral, rather than going up the steps to the guarded front doors, she led him around the side to a servants' entrance that accessed the rectory.

"The Signet is in the rectory?" asked Eric.

"Not exactly." answered Callie as she passed through the kitchen heading for the Cathedral proper. All around them servants were scurrying about, making preparations for tonight's mass. No one paid them any mind.

"I always thought that when a noble died, his Signet was destroyed." huffed Eric, panting to keep up. "...specifically so something like what we're doing couldn't happen."

"That's one way of ensuring it." answered Callie. "The Fristons follow another tradition."

Looking across the Cathedral, Eric's eyes fell upon the casket, still sitting in front of the altar, awaiting this evening's mass.

Things became clear. Eric's mouth hung open and he crossed himself.

"He's still wearing it." he whispered to himself, to himself because Callie already knew.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

"Only two more days." panted Beck as he lay atop Annie, rocking rhythmically, exploring her still-clothed body. Her legs were parted as far as her skirts and petticoats would allow and her breathing was ragged.

"K-kiss them." she begged and Beck slid lower, unbuttoned her blouse, and planted a kiss where the softness met in the middle. He used his hands to roll her breasts along the sides of his face, his thumbs teasing the engorged nipples. Annie let go with an audible gasp and thrust her hips up, actually lifting Beck up on his knees.

"T-touch me down there." she begged. Beck hesitated, having so far restrained himself from exploring her body below the warm softness which now engulfed his face.

"I-I'll touch you if you touch me." she squeaked, upping the ante. 'God how he loved this girl!' How she completed him. He wasn't quite sure where she left off and he began. He could feel her hands stroking his hips, awaiting his answer. All he had to do was roll to the side.

He felt like he was going to explode. He moved up, putting his mouth on hers, rubbing his potential explosion against hers. She grunted and spasmed, nearly biting his tongue.

He looked into her eyes but they were far, far, away. She moaned and arched her back. He rolled to his side and snaked his hand down between them, searching for the top of her skirt.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

Waldo Gump was a fat man but he knew better than to throw his weight around when heavyweights were in the room. So, as the Gubnator and Seneschal stormed towards them from across the room, he did his best to angle towards the shadows so that Madam's bulk stood between him and the onrushing pair.

"What is going on here!" fumed the Gubnator as they drew closer. The Seneschal was staring at the pile of body parts, looking like he was going to be sick. Will clung to the bars as Madam stepped into the light.

"Gubnator!" she exclaimed, catching him off guard. "...and Seneschal! How nice to see the both of you again."

They stopped in their tracks, eyes darting about nervously, each with that hand-in-the-cookie-jar look. The Gubnator recovered first.

"Ah-Madam! How nice to see you aga... What are you doing down here? Who's that fat man with you?"

"We were searching for my ward. She appears to have been abducted by Owen Camberly and brought down here. This is my dear friend, Waldo Gump." Waldo smiled, bowed, and

wrapped the shadows tighter about himself. Madam continued.

“What, pray tell, are *you* doing down here?”

“We were warned that Sir Arthur was down... Sir Arthur! Is that you?” exclaimed the Seneschal, just now noticing Will hanging for dear life onto the cell’s bars.

“He’s not... Oow!” yelped Waldo as Madam stomped his foot.

“He’s not out of there soon...” interjected Madam. “...those snakes are gonna get him.” She turned back to Will and winked. “Come on now, Arthur. Hold on just a little longer. We’ll get you out of there.” Giving Waldo the evil eye, she picked up the iron bar and handed it to the Gubnator.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

Will gritted his teeth and held on tight. Most of the pain had been replaced by numbness. The scene before him swam in and out of focus. He couldn’t hold on much longer.

He heard Madam send the Seneschal off in search of Owen Camberly and watched as she organized Waldo and the Gubnator’s efforts to pry the cell open. A peek over his shoulder confirmed that the snakes were still there.

Madam was poking something at his face. Looking down he could see that it was some sort of sausage. His teeth grabbed at it greedily as her hand disappeared into the folds of her dress to produce another. He ate four of them and felt much the better for it. Hold on. It wouldn’t be much longer now. He felt stronger in body and mind.

Unfortunately, they were having no luck springing the door opened. He could see that the massive strength of the Gubnator had bent the iron bar but had done nothing to budge the door.

“Don’t you worry.” consoled Madam. “The Seneschal has gone off in search of Owen. He will return with the key.”

Finally, the Gubnator gave up, throwing the bar aside in disgust. “Come on fat man.” he beckoned, “Let’s take another look around for a key.”

As they left the front of his cell, Will couldn't help but notice that the caged rats across the room were going crazy, screeching at the top of their lungs, frantic to be free. He could relate.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

Eric looked at her like she was crazy. Maybe she was, but she didn't have time to get into it with him now. She headed for the casket and hoped that he would follow. A false will, legitimized by the Baron's Signet, would be their only chance to out-manuever Owen. It could keep her from being married off to the monster and just might be able to get them back Macy and Sir Arthur. She just hoped that the lovesick young puppy trailing behind her could see that.

She jumped as a black cat jetted out from under the pews in a mewling panic to get somewhere in a hurry. 'Great!' She hoped Eric wasn't too superstitious.

When she got to the altar, she was dismayed to find that the movable stairs weren't fronting the catafalque. They would need a ladder to reach the casket. Beckoning for Eric to follow her, she headed for a janitor's closet tucked away along the far wall. Opening the door, she could hear the frantic chattering of rodents as they scurried for cover. Spying a folding ladder, she grabbed one end and Eric the other.

Back at the casket, they unfolded the ladder, and she started up it, only to be held back by Eric.

"No," he said. "You hold the ladder. I will get the ring. You shouldn't have to... Just hold the ladder." Callie did as she was told and breathed a silent sigh of relief. Eric started to climb.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

Macy kept her head down and made sure to keep the Deacon between her and Owen Camberly. She listened as they parried back and forth about each other's reasons for being down

here in the depths of the Castle. She followed behind as the Deacon slowly maneuvered them towards the stairs.

When they got there, the Deacon tried to get Owen to return upstairs with them. When he begged off, claiming unfinished business down here, Macy's ears perked up. 'He must be talking about Will.' As she was doing the mental calculations trying to figure out how she could follow him rather than return topside with the Deacon, she saw another torch hurrying down the corridor toward them.

As it approached, she was surprised, as were the others, to see that it was held aloft by the Seneschal. And from the looks of things, he was furious.

"Are you crazy!" he screamed at Owen, putting his torch in a wall scones and grabbing the younger man by the shoulders. "What the Hell is going on down here! Have you no conscience?"

Owen roughly pushed him away with his free hand, as his torch bounced firelight crazily off the walls. "Back off old man." he seethed, a threat made all the more frightening by its quiet calmness. "I am no longer your whipping boy. I have renounced my vows to the Brotherhood."

"Since when?" challenged the Seneschal.

"Since now." countered Owen.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

Annie's body was building toward a crescendo. As Beck's hand slid down her belly and inside her skirt, it was all she could do to keep from screaming out loud. She forced herself to slow the convulsions which were wracking her body. She forced herself back to the present so she could be there when Beck caressed her down there for the first time.

She could see the heady mix of emotions in his eyes as his hand snaked downward, into virgin territory. Shivering, she lifted up and gave him a peck on the lips. Her hands searched for him until his agonized grunt told her she'd found him. She forced him

back until he was on one elbow, leaning against the railing surrounding the belltower. Then she started undoing his belt.

The blood pounded in her ears. Her senses were so sharp they almost hurt. She could see hundreds of birds as they took flight and circled to the south as one. Her ears were assaulted by what seemed like the barking of every dog in Friston. Beck's muskiness mixed with her own to virtually assault her nostrils.

"I love you." she panted, grabbing Beck's head and drawing it close to hers. When Beck's hand found where the down ended and the wetness began, she convulsed. It rolled across her like a rogue wave. Her head snapped back, hitting the floor. Her heels dug in and her body bucked. Beck was slammed into the rail as the waves kept coming and coming and coming.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

"Quit shaking the ladder!" Eric yelled down at Callie. He almost had it. Pulling a ring off a dead man's finger without touching the dead man wasn't the easiest thing to do. Spitting on the finger to lubricate it was kind of disgusting but what choice did he have? Thank God the Baron had lost weight in his old age rather than gained it. Eric was glad he had offered to do this in Callie's place. He couldn't imagine doing what he was doing if he actually knew and cared about the person inside the casket.

There was a reason caskets were airtight. He had almost passed out and fell off the ladder when he had finally managed to pry the casket lid open. The smell had hit him in the face like a sledgehammer between the eyes. The Baron had been in there more than a week and smelled like a pantry full of bad pork.

Using a cloth to avoid touching the skin, he finally managed to slide the Signet off. He wrapped it in another piece of cloth and slipped it in his pocket. He pulled out the replacement ring Callie had given him and had just managed to slip it on the Baron's finger when the ladder shook again, more violently this time.

"I thought I told you... to..." he trailed off, looking down to see that Callie was nowhere near the ladder. It shook again,

bouncing him to the floor. The floor shook too. As did the walls. The huge circular stained glass window at the back of the Cathedral creaked, groaned, then came crashing down. Looking up the aisle, he caught Callie's eye as she crawled toward him. Their lips mouthed the word, both at the same time.

"Earthshake!"

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

"Earthshake!" groaned Waldo as the bucking floor bounced him off the walls of the corridor. When his and the Gubnator's search hadn't turned up a key for Will, uh, Arthur's cell, he'd been told, not asked, told to go help the Seneschal in his search for Owen.

But Waldo had no interest what-so-fucking-ever in renewing that acquaintance. The further away from the crazy Brother Owen he stayed, the better. His plan had been to take a short stroll, then head back and tell them he couldn't find him. "Mrs. Gump didn't raise no fool!" he snorted to himself.

But, as the earth continued to shake, Waldo was more interested in a way out than a way back. From up ahead, he could hear voices, angry voices. He headed toward them. Approaching a corner, he placed his torch in a wall sconce and peeked around it.

He found himself looking into a circular room at least three stories high with a staircase curling upward along its outer wall. About two-thirds of the way up he saw the Deacon crawling on his hands and knees, helped along by a servant.

The angry voices came from behind them, where Owen and the Seneschal crawled up the stairs, screaming at each other the whole way. The structure was shaking, bricks falling off and dust clouds being raised. As Waldo watched, Owen turned and thrust his torch toward the Seneschal's face. The holy man jerked backward, lost his footing, and plunged off the side of the stairs. With a scream, he plummeted downward, only quieting when he splashed into the stone floor with a bone-breaking finality. Waldo

crawled forward on his hands and knees as the other three disappeared through a door at the top of the stairs.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

Beck found himself holding on for dear life. Underneath him, Annie thrashed about like a wild animal. He banged his head against the belltower railing so hard that he saw stars.

“D-o-o-o-n’t stop! Don’t stop! Don’t stop! Don’t stop!” she screeched as his hand continued its caresses under her skirt. But he was being bounced around so roughly that he was unable to obey. The best he could do was grab for her open thigh and try to hold on. But her thigh was so slippery that he lost his grip with the next big bounce and was bounced against the wooden railing with such force that it split with a loud ‘cra-a-a-ck’.

He felt the wood give. He tried to re-grab Annie’s thigh but his hand slipped off again. ‘What was going on here?’ He searched out Annie’s far-away eyes, eyes that seemed to be struggling to come back to the present. He saw her lips mouth something just before his head bounced off the railing again. The next time she said it, through the stars, he understood.

‘O my God! It was an earthquake!’ As he clutched for Annie, he came up with air and was thrown into the railing again. With a loud crash it gave way and his shoulders were in open space, his arms flailing for something to grab onto. He was falling.

At the last moment, Annie rolled him atop her and splashed him down onto the deck on the other side of her. ‘Whew! That was close!’ Still shaking, Beck looked into her eyes as yet another aftershock shook the tower.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

Waldo looked longingly toward the door at the top of the circular stairway. Then, with resignation, he looked over his shoulder and back down the corridor towards where he’d left Madam and the Gubnator.

After crawling over and relieving the Seneschal of those valuables he wouldn't be needing in the next life, the shaking had stopped. No sooner had the Cap'n managed to drag himself to his feet than a powerful aftershock came along, knocking him down again. Crawling to his feet a second time, he was now faced with a decision.

With a shake of his head and a last look towards the door at the top of the stairs, he turned and went to fetch Madam. If he hadn't he knew he would never again be able to face her. ...or himself. Waldo was no hero, but he wasn't a coward either. He knew which side his bread was buttered on.

The corridor had held up to all the shaking and in no time he was back at the big dungeon room. When he entered he saw a flicker of hope pass across Madam's face, a flicker doused by a slight nod of his head.

"Owen's gone. I see'd 'im go upstairs meself. Seneschal's dead." Waldo relayed. Waddling over to Will's cell, he could see the Gubnator still pitting his brute strength against the iron bars. To no avail. Will was still caged in. There was a huge crack in the wall behind him, but the bars held fast.

"Come on Madam." Waldo whispered, putting an arm around her shoulder. "We got's to git you upstairs afore Owen's lil version of Hell here comes crashing down on our heads. Let's go finds us a key."

With a silent goodbye cast over his shoulder in Will's direction, Waldo guided a teary Madam toward the stairs.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

Callie picked her way through the broken glass littering the Cathedral floor and headed for the door. Eric was right behind her. Mission accomplished, it was time to get outside and assess the damage.

This had been a big one, the biggest earthquake Callie had ever experienced. From outside she could hear the cries of those

still filling the Noble Hill compound. She opened the doors onto a scene of total chaos. Eric pulled up beside her.

At the foot of the stairs, the guards who had been stationed at the door were helping to pull an overturned cart off the legs of a wailing woman. Off to the right, the commoners' market was ablaze as cooking fires were overturned, setting the hay-strewn ground alight. Across the way, Frismont Castle looked alright but many windows appeared to be missing.

"It's a mess," mumbled Eric beside her. All she could do was nod in agreement.

"You have what you need," she added. "Go see after your family. Don't forget about that will. Find Madam. We still need it."

"Maybe Brother Owen had a building fall on him," offered Eric hopefully.

"No such luck," answered Callie as she watched Owen Camberly stepped from the Castle across the way and survey the mayhem and death spread out before him. Even from this distance, Callie could see that he was smiling.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

Will was fighting a losing battle. He couldn't hold on much longer. For all the Gubnator's efforts, the bars imprisoning him were no looser than before he had started. 'And as for Waldo returning in time with a key?' Well, that just wasn't going to happen. They'd both known it as the fat man escorted Madam to the door.

It wasn't supposed to end like this. The past week had given him a taste of what life could be like: beautiful damsels in distress. Brave warriors riding to their rescue. History in the balance.

Will felt himself slipping. A peek over his shoulder told him the snakes were still there. God how he hated snakes. It just wasn't fair. He felt so all alone.

His head banged into the bars and he lost his grip. A massive aftershock rolled across the room. As he was falling

toward the water, he could see the Gubnator scurrying for the door, pieces of the ceiling crashing to the floor around him. He could hear the stone break apart and see the bars of his cell bent by the crushing weight. The ceiling of his cell was falling around him. The back wall came crashing down. A wall of water engulfed him and swept him along. He held his breath for as long as he could. He gasped for air but there was only water. It filled his mouth, then his lungs. There was a light in the distance but he was no longer part of his body once his body reached it. Ashes to ashes. Dust to dust. Will Sutter was once again all alone.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-
-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

-----Chapter Eleven-----
 -----RAMBLINGS-----

Eric sniffed as Father Tom droned on.

“...Gathered here tyuday, not to mourn a passing, but to schelebrate...”

Eric sniffed again. Try as he might, he couldn't get the smell of 'dead' out of his nostrils. ...Even though every seat in the Great Cathedral was filled with mourners decked out in their finest funeral clothes, liberally splashed with their favorite perfumes and colognes. ...Even though floral arrangements virtually swamped the casket up front and rose to the height of the stained glass windows down the side of both aisles. 'Nope!' Once the smell of death invaded your nostrils, it didn't go easily away.

He reached into an inside pocket and tapped the fake will and signet ring, reassuring himself they were still there. It had been a hectic three days since the earthquake rumbled through Friston. The fires had all been put out but the town was still filled with smoldering rubble. Noble Hill had been cleared but the so-called festivities yet to be staged there had a 'get-it-over-and-done-with' cloud hanging over them.

“...It is not how one dies, but how one hash lived...”

When Eric had parted with Callie the night of the 'shake, he'd taken the signet, hurried down the hill, and gone straight to his Da. After the stresses of the whole Mace/Macy thing, he'd decided there would be no more secrets between him and the man who called him 'son'.

When he'd sat down and explained to the older man the will deception as it had been proposed to him by Beck and Callie, a long silence ensued, followed by an 'it just might work'. So, with an earthquake-ravaged Friston burning down around them, he and his Da had set off in search of Madam. Her place had been relatively undamaged so they'd found her in the front parlor, doing her best to turn the ground floor into a temporary hospital.

“...Not our place to, 'hiccup', questshun His will...”

After assigning her the task of coming up with a suitable facsimile of a Will and entrusting her with the signet, his Da had returned to Sacton to assess the damage up there and make preparations for the craziness sure to follow the revealing of the will. He had yet to return when Madam had burst into his room this morning to return the signet along with the forged will.

Eric had waited for him as long as he could and had to eventually run up the hill to be on time for the funeral mass. Arriving late, he'd managed to squeeze in amongst the commoners in the back pews just as Father Tom had stumbled to the altar.

"...Not ours to question Hissh will, but..."

Eric again tapped the will secreted away inside his pocket as he searched the congregation for Macy. She would be seated up front, among the nobility, a fact that caused him more than a little concern. Noble and common blood did not mix. Everyone knew that. Nobility claimed that its' blood was better. ...purer'. But Eric had a hunch that the zealousness with which nobility protected its blood lines had a lot more to do with ensuring futures for its idiot offspring. But that was neither here nor there at the moment.

He loved Macy so much that it hurt, but if his Da weren't accepted as the son of the Baron, and therefore of noble blood, chances are that his and Macy's love would go tragically unfulfilled. It wasn't fair but 'life isn't fair' as his Da had told him often enough.

'There she was!'

Macy was sitting up front with Callie; the latter's flaming tresses standing out in a sea of black. Almost as if she were aware of his searching eyes, Macy turned around to survey the congregation but didn't see him.

"...The Lord is continually teshting us..."

Eric smiled, knowing deep down in his heart that Macy loved him just as much as he loved her. He tapped the Will again. They would find a way to make it work. He was certain of it: For the moment at least. Father Tom droned on.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

Callie yawned as Father Tom droned on.

“...Lord worksh in myshterious ways...”

Callie yawned again. She hadn't gotten much sleep these past few days and what little she had hadn't been restful. Recriminations for the past and fears for the future had assaulted her the minute she closed her eyes.

She looked past Father Tom and into the reptilian eyes that filled her future with fear. If her new friend Macy was to be believed, Owen Camberly had, by his own hand, killed the Seneschal of the Flame in the chaos during the earthquake. Yet there he sat, in the throne-like chair reserved for the head of the Brotherhood, staring at her. ...through her. ...in a way grossly inappropriate considering the setting and circumstances. She shivered.

Ever since it had been announced that they would be married, he had been looking at her differently, acting towards her differently. Gone was the somewhat bumbling, shy, moonstruck puppy-dog to whom she had grown accustomed. For the first time, she felt as though she wasn't in control. 'Had it all been an act?' 'Could she have been so wrong about him?' As he stared at her she felt like, there was no other word for it: prey.

“...pray for the Eternal Salvation of...”

Before the mass began, she had searched the arriving faces, looking for Eric. She hadn't heard from him since the night of the 'shake and could only hope that he had managed to do something about the will. Two days from now she was due to marry a monster. 'That just wasn't going to happen.' Hopefully this will thing will work out.

She sniffed, then shuddered. For the past three days she hadn't been able to get away from the smell that had poured forth when Eric opened the casket to retrieve the signet. Then came the 'shake. So much death. She began to weep for all she had lost.

“...our lives are in His hands...”

Macy reached across and gave her hand a squeeze. Thank God for Macy. She didn't know how she could have gotten through these past few days without her. She was a bit rough around the edges, being from the hinterlands and all, but her soaring spirit and unbridled optimism had gone a long way toward getting her through these past few days.

Callie squeezed back. Her young friend seemed to have no doubt that Eric and Madam would handle their end of things. She also had no doubt that Callie could handle the crazy Brother Owen. Callie only wished she could be so sure.

“...make the best of the few short years we are given...”

The changes in Owen Camberly worried her more than she was willing to admit, even to herself. If he could have played the fool for her all these years, she feared he was capable of anything. As he sat there smiling wolfishly down at her, she realized, perhaps for the first time, that he had no feelings whatsoever for her. She was just an object to him, a means to an end. And now that he was almost there, he no longer had to hide his feelings, or lack of them. The tears flowed more freely. She was too young to know so much loss.

A wracking sob caught her Mother's attention from the first row. Seated next to Beck, the Baroness turned around at the sound and smiled. Macy squeezed her hand tighter.

“...Barony will go on, life will go on, we will go on...”

The earthquake that had caused so much pain and suffering to the people of Friston seemed to have just re-energized the Baroness. Oblivious to the devastation around her, she had spent the past three days scheming and plotting, or so it seemed to Callie. She hadn't shed one tear. Come to think of it, Callie couldn't remember her ever having cried. Callie wiped her eyes as Macy handed her a handkerchief.

“...nestled to His bosom...”

Callie dabbed her nose and brought herself under control. She had to be strong. She glared daggers back at Owen Camberly until he averted his gaze. Macy tapped her and pointed

over her shoulder. Following her gaze, she looked to the back of the cathedral until she set eyes on Eric Hawkins. He tapped his pocket. She smiled. Father Tom droned on.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

Macy pointed as Father Tom droned on.

“...not always ours to see...”

Macy pointed again. Callie followed her finger until she set eyes on Eric, seated in the back pews. When he tapped his pocket and smiled, Callie smiled back. Macy smiled too. It was the first time she had ever seen her newfound friend smile. The past few days hadn't been days for smiling.

The moment passed and they returned their attention to the front. Macy squeezed Callie's hand, each of them enveloped in their own little world of loss. A tear escaped Macy's eye and trickled down her cheek. She had tried to stay strong for Callie these past few days, but every time she drew back into herself, she tumbled down into the void left by the passing of Will.

He was buried somewhere in the rubble beneath Frismont Castle. No body had been found but Madam had been there as the walls had come crashing down around him. She had tried to rescue him but, all things considered, it had been a miracle that she had made it out alive. Macy crossed herself.

She and Madam had gone nose-to-nose the day after the 'shake. Madam was concerned that the subterfuge Macy was perpetrating on the Fristons was going to come back to haunt her. Aware of her feelings for young Eric, Madam had feared that even he might get fed up with all the lies and deceptions. Unfortunately, Macy was in too deep to get out now. Total honesty would have to wait until at least after the wedding and Beck's ascension to the Baronetcy. Madam reluctantly agreed.

But it was all happening too fast. If she got one more expression of condolence for 'dear departed Sir Arthur', she was going to scream.

“...Heavenly choir that awaits us...”

She felt the squeeze and looked toward Callie who was looking back with concern in her eyes. Macy felt guilty. Macy's pains paled in comparison to the burdens carried by the fiery redhead. A glance in Owen Camberly's direction was all it took to jolt Macy back to the present. He was something they might just be able to do something about.

She glanced over her shoulder again towards Eric, but he too seemed lost in reverie. She glanced up at the big circular hole in the back wall that had been filled with stained glass before the 'shake. At least the glass in the side windows was still intact.

"...must focus our, hiccup, energies on what remains, not, hiccup, on what we have lost..."

Macy heard a blubbering wail from the back that could only have come from Madam. She smiled, not able to help herself. Madam wasn't much good at blending in. That she had spent the whole day up here, most of it blubbering away, had surprised Macy. Madam could be high-strung and overly emotional at times, but Macy had never seen her consumed with grief the way she was today. It just didn't compute. Macy felt guilty that she couldn't be there to comfort her, but surprisingly, fat Cap'n Waldo seemed to be doing a good job of it in her stead.

"...loss is God's way of clearing space..."

Macy wished Father Tom would just get on with it. She needed to get away from all the tensions, fears, and hatreds being thrown about. Every time Owen glanced in her direction, she wanted to take a bath. When the Baroness smiled, it made her want to cry. The fear rolled off poor Beck in waves.

As befitted his position, the young heir sat front and center, next to his mother, the Baroness, and flanked by the Deacon. Even though he was taller than either of them, the slump of his shoulders and the hanging of his head made him seem smaller as he sat next to the real power in the Barony.

"...a season for everything, a, hiccup, a time for..."

Macy had her doubts about the young Friston heir. She liked him. Everybody *liked* him. But that wasn't necessarily the recipe for a good Baron. Macy vowed to help him and Callie in

any way she could. He was a very powerful speaker but was that going to be enough? As she watched, he stood up and gathered himself. Unawares, Father Tom droned on.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

Beck cleared his throat as Father Tom droned on obliviously.

“...when religion gets in the, hiccup, way of faith...”

Beck cleared his throat again. Finally taking notice, Father Tom’s lips stumbled to silence. Beck stood there composing himself until the rippling murmur behind him subsided. The breeze coming through the open back window fluttered his shirt, as if to cool the hole being burned there by the concentrated gaze of every eye in the Cathedral.

Even as he stood there, he wasn’t sure if he could follow through with this. He’d never wanted to be Baron in the first place. And now...? He willed his knees to be steady and studiously avoided the smirk his mother was casting up at him.

Like it or not, this was his moment. No one could do it for him. He had to be strong. ...for his Father. ...for Callie. ...for the Barony. ...and, most of all, for Annie. He willed himself to be strong and forced himself forward toward the eulogy only he could give.

At the foot of the red velvet stairs fronting the catafalque he stopped and stared up at the casket. Out of the corner of his eye he could see Father Tom stumbling down from the pulpit. Further on he could see a sneering Owen Camberly willing him to fail.

Drawing strength from Owen’s doubt, Beck returned the stare, steeled himself, and turned to face the congregation. It was quiet in the Cathedral, very quiet.

Beck looked out across the sea of faces that seemed to reflect back at him every emotion in the human repertoire. He saw compassion and contempt, pity and pride, support and opposition. He looked down at his mother and the Deacon, Callie and Macy, the Gubnator and the CeeEeeHo. In the back he locked eyes with

Eric Hawkins. When the young man patted his pocket, nodded, and smiled, Beck felt a great burden lifted from his shoulders.

Clearing his throat yet again, the sound seemed to reverberate throughout the room. Locking eyes with Callie, he drew upon her strength and forced his lips into action.

"Th-thank you for coming here today to share our grief and ease our burdens," he began. "Today has undoubtedly been one of the saddest days in our history. ...one of the hardest days we've had to endure since the Friston family, with help from many of your ancestors, rebuilt civilization out of the ashes of the rubble remaining from the Dark Times.

"It is certainly the most difficult day I've had to endure in my admittedly short life."

His voice cracked but did not break. As he paused he could begin to see the tears starting to fall among his audience: Mostly women, but here and there sat men with cloudy eyes. Every ear was on him. The silence was deafening.

"It is not every day that we commit the soul of our liege lord to the open, yet unknown, arms of our Maker. Today is a day of passing. ...for me. ...for the Barony. ...for all of us.

"Today marks a disconnect from our yesterdays, a 'not quite yet' when it comes to our tomorrows. Today stands alone.

"Someday we will look back upon this gathering. Will we see it as the end of our beginning? ...or the beginning of our end?"

His eyes flicked back over his shoulder in the direction of Brother Owen. Every eye in the cathedral followed, then quickly looked away. Leaving them with their thoughts, Beck turned his back to them and, step-by-painful-step, ascended the stairs to stand before the ornate coffin. In the silence, a muffled sob could be heard. Shoulders softly heaving, he stood there for what seemed like forever, but in truth was only a moment. From somewhere in the rectory, the chiming of a clock could be heard.

When he turned around to again face the congregation, he was composed and there was fire in his eyes. His fists were clenched.

“Again... I want to thank you for coming here today. Your heartfelt blessings have helped me and mine through a very trying day. Again... Thank you.”

With that he turned and dropped to his knees in front of the casket. Claspings his hands, he dropped his head onto them and let the tears flow freely. Floodgates having been opened, the sobs poured forth. Starting slowly, they rose to a crescendo as those behind him filed out of the church.

Leaning forward over the open casket, his tears cascaded down. Blurry eyed, he bent down closer and kissed the forehead lying in soft repose before him. His whole world was reduced to that physical contact between the living and the dead. At that very moment he had no idea how he could possibly go on living. He kissed his fingers and placed them on Annie's cold lips. Then he said his good-byes, stood up, and turned toward a now empty Cathedral and a life that no longer made sense.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

Waldo farted as Father Tom droned on.

“... coming. Thank you for coming. Thank...”

Waldo farted again, this time wetter and louder. The throng tried to make space, hurrying out the door, past Father Tom and down the steps. Waldo didn't blame them. That last one made him tear up and go weak in the knees. He knew he shouldn't have had those six sardine burritos for breakfast, or at least done without the fresh peppers and refried beans. Oh, well. Too late now. He let another one rip just before leaving the building. He couldn't help but smile at the groans and at least one audible gag coming from behind him.

From the top of the cathedral steps he could see across the Noble Hill compound to the now-windowless Friston Castle. Between stretched the silent jousting pitch, scene of tomorrow's festivities. Most of the black-clad mourners leaving the Cathedral were heading either left toward the stables or right toward the

cooking smells drifting up from the victualers. Steering a still-sobbing Madam by the elbow, Waldo followed his nose and led her toward a table with a red-checked tablecloth set up next to a whole ox slowly rotating on a spit.

"Wha' kin I git ya Guv'na?" squeaked the wiry little man who came hurrying over, drooling at the seven hundred pounds of potential represented by he and Madam. After a bit of kibbutzing over price, he left and returned with two tubs of beer and a platter of ox parts bigger than he was.

As Waldo and Madam dug in, the tables around them began to fill up. Out of the corner of his eye he kept watch over the chomping-away Madam. He'd never seen her like this. It unnerved him a bit, if he was truly honest with himself. He had never seen her anything but strong.

Annie's death had hit her hard. Waldo understood that. It had been unexpected and it had been terrible. ,,,and with all her dreams seemingly about to come true. Waldo shuddered and reached for another slab of the greasy ox meat. He stole a glance at the belltower rising above them and shook his head.

They say she was still alive when young Beck made his way down to her. But her body had been broken beyond repair and life was leaving her fast. Thankfully, she fell on her back, preserving that angelic face. Supposedly her last words were: "Make it work... For me..." Then she died in his arms.

Shoving another fistful of greasy ox meat into his mouth, the Cap'n looked across the table at his similarly gorging and distracted friend. She had been unusually withdrawn these past few days. After setting up the ground floor of her place for tending the wounded, she had withdrawn to her rooms. Not even Waldo could draw her out.

When Macy showed up, that helped a bit. But, for some reason Waldo sure couldn't understand, the death of his apprentice seemed to affect the both of them almost as much as that of Annie.

He was afraid she was losing it. This morning she had emerged from her rooms while Waldo was in the middle of his

sardine burrito breakfast and asked him to take her to the funeral masses. Going to Annie's mass was understandable. After all, she had thought of Annie as the daughter she never had. But why she wanted to sit there, blubbering the whole time, for the three hours it took to send the Baron on his way to posterity was beyond the Cap'n.

Now that they'd done right by the dead, it was time to do right by the living. He ordered two more tubs of beer and handed another greasy slab of ribs to Madam. She hadn't said a word since they'd entered the Cathedral all those hours ago, but at least now she was eating. She'd be OK.

When he looked across at her, he followed her eyes to a space somewhere over his right shoulder. Turning, he found himself staring up into the grinning countenance of Owen Camberly. He choked, spewing little bits of hal-chewed ox all over the table in front of him. Still choking, he reached for his beer.

"Well. Well." began Owen. "If'n it ain't Cap'n Waldo. And might this be Mrs. Waldo?" he asked, nodding toward Madam. She just kept on eating, looking up at the Paladin as she gnawed a haunch of meat like an ear of corn.

"N-No..." sputtered Waldo, working to regain his composure. "She's jus' me friend." Owen smirked and nodded knowingly.

"Where's my manners?", he added, stepping sideways, revealing the diminutive figure of the Deacon standing behind him. Waldo gulped and couldn't help but notice Madam's eyes go wide.

"Assuredly you know the Deacon?" The little man nodded at the both of them but kept his eyes fixed on Madam. "But we must be on our way Cap'n Waldo. Hopefully we'll see you tomorrow at the joust and I'd better see you at my wedding. I'm on my way to see my bride-to-be now. I'll make sure you're on the guest list. Be there."

Waldo gulped and nodded as they turned away. After a few paces the Deacon stopped and turned back.

“Madam”, he asked, eyebrows raised, “Is it possible we have met before?” She just shook her head, lowered her eyes, and continued gnawing away at her lunch.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

Macy steered the still distraught Callie down the steps and left, towards the stables and away from the retreating figures of Owen Camberly and the Deacon. Behind them Father Tom droned the last of his good-byes. Macy kept her head down and did her best to blend into the black-clad crowd.

With a squeeze of Callie’s upper arm and a creasing of the brow, Macy conveyed to her the need to compose herself if they hoped to slip into the stable unnoticed. Off to the side, the stablemaster was busy collecting gold and barking orders. Horses and rigs were being matched up with their owners, then ridden away. Heading for the shadows, Macy hurried down the stairs, prodding Callie before her. At the bottom, they headed across the basement to the hole in the wall that led through to the rookery.

No sooner had they stepped through than a sob wracked Callie. Macy looked to her friend and the tortured look in her eyes. Understanding dawned and Macy felt stupid. They both mouthed it at the same time:

“Annie...”

‘How could she have been so stupid?’ In her haste to get Callie back to the castle without having to run the gauntlet of well-wishers filling Noble Hill, she had led her here, a place filled with memories of Annie. Macy reached out, hugged her new friend, shrugged her shoulders in apology, and nodded toward the door in the far wall. Callie nodded, turned, and headed for the door. Moments later they found themselves in the servants’ cloakroom in the basement of the Castle. Macy mumbled a hastily accepted apology as they headed upstairs.

Closing the door behind them Macy turned just in time to see a figure flash by at the far end of the hall, a figure she could have sworn was Eric. Tugging Callie along with her, she hurried

off in pursuit. Rushing along the corridor, they didn't see the Baroness emerge from a side room until it was too late. By the time they realized what had happened, all three of them were flying through the air, arms and legs pinwheeling to a cacophony of astonished shrieks.

As they skidded to a stop in a tangle of limbs, it was the Baroness who recovered first.

"Get off of me!" she squealed.

"Whatever you say...Mother!" shot back Callie, placing a palm in the middle of her mother's face and using it for support to scramble up to her knees.

"Ooof!" grunted the older woman, face contorted by the twisting pressure of Callie's hand. Standing, Callie removed it and offered it to Macy. Macy stood, staring down open-mouthed at the red-faced Baroness, then down the corridor towards where she'd spotted Eic. Knowing which side her bread was buttered on, she said, "C'mon", offered her hand to Callie, and the two of them hurried off down the hallway. She could feel the hatred burning a hole in her back.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

Beck lay sprawled across Callie's bed, surrounded by memories of Annie, hiding from the multitudes who were seeking him out to offer their condolences. He didn't want their condolences. He wanted Annie.

His mind drifted among the myriad of memories he had shared with her in this very room, lingering on the bedtime story he had told her and Callie the night before he had worked up the courage to propose. He closed his eyes and smelled the tang of her lustrous blond locks. He could feel the warmth of her soft, heaving breast as it lay in his trembling palm. He could hear her voice.

He had grown up with these things, watching as a skittish, lanky colt grew into a beautiful, assured young woman. These

were things that had always been there. Annie had always been there. He had never felt so all alone.

The devastation from the 'shake and preparations for the funeral had kept him going these past few days. At least a thousand times he must have asked himself: 'What would Annie do?' That may have gotten him through these past few days, but it certainly wasn't a foundation upon which to build a Barony.

Hopefully it wouldn't have to be. He had never really wanted to be Baron in the first place and he sure as Hell didn't want it now. He prayed yet again that Eric would come through with the false will and that somehow Hawkins would relieve him of his burdens.

A pang of guilt for Callie's situation washed over him. He had been so consumed by his own grief these past few days that he'd had precious little emotion to spare for Callie's plight. It was two days until she was due to marry Owen Camberly and here he was grieving over things he could not change.

He realized he was crying. He forced himself to listen to the ocean sound coming through the grate and slow his breathing. He pulled out a kerchief and blew his nose. Climbing off the bed, he went over to the basin of water on the dresser and washed the tears from his face.

Like it or not, ready or not, he needed to quit hiding out here in Callie's room and go out and deal with his guests. His father was dead. Annie was dead. Rather than lamenting those he had loved and lost, he had better start being there for those he loved who were still here.

Drying his face, he put down the towel and headed for the door. Halfway there, there came a knock. When he opened the door, Eric rushed into the room.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

"Do you have it?" asked a Beck who had obviously been crying. Nodding, Eric pulled a leather pouch from inside his jacket and handed it over.

He could see the young nobleman's hands tremble as they removed the papers from the pouch. They were shaking so bad, he almost dropped the signet ring as he poured it into his palm.

Eric's heart melted at the desperate glance Beck shot him before unfolding the forged will. Eric understood. That paper held, not just Beck's, but all of their futures captive: His. Macy's. His Da's. Callie's. Owen's. In its own way, that paper held hostage the future of every living soul in the Barony.

Eric feared for Beck's life, especially now with Annie gone. Owen Camberly already had blood on his hands if Macy were to be believed: The Seneschal. Sir Arthur. Even the Red Knight's Lady, Sarah. Maybe even the Red Knight himself. With marriage to Callie already arranged, Beck was the last remaining obstacle standing between crazy Brother Owen and control of the Barony.

Eric shuddered. They couldn't allow that to happen. If it did he would move far, far away. Hopefully Macy would go with him. It was all so confusing.

Having finished reading it, Beck replaced the will in its leather pouch and pocketed the signet. He looked at Eric with hope in his eyes, but it was a hope tempered with a heavy dose of fear.

"Do you think it'll work?" he whispered.

"It has to," Eric replied. They both nodded.

A racket from the hallway invaded the ensuing silence. As it drew closer, they could hear the Baroness' voice, ranting at the top of her lungs. They couldn't hear most of it, but it sounded like it was directed at Callie.

"Put it under the mattress!" yelled Eric over his shoulder, heading for the door. Before he got there, it went crashing back on its hinges and there stood the Baroness, filling the doorway, hands on her hips.

"Where. Is. She!" she screeched. Noticing Eric for the first time, she looked down her nose at him. "and what is this... this... this commoner doing in her room?"

Eric looked back at Beck who was sitting on the bed, the will nowhere in sight. He stood up and approached the doorway.

“C’mon, let’s go find her,” he said, shooving Eric in front of him. Their eyes met and a furtive glance towards the mattress told Eric where the leather pouch now was. Barging through the doorway, Beck turned back towards his mother.

“Wellll...are you coming? She’s obviously not in there.”

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

Waldo gulped down his beer as he watched the retreating backs of Brother Owen and the Deacon. When he looked across at Madam, he was struck by the look of malevolence she too cast in their direction. Today had been a day of revelation for Waldo: at least as far as Madam was concerned. For someone he had known most of his life, maybe he didn’t know her all that well after all.

He watched as she licked the last of the ox grease from her fingers and gulped down the dregs of her beer. All the while her gaze kept flickering to the retreating figures until they disappeared into Friston Castle. No sooner had the door closed behind them than she turned her attentions back to Waldo.

“You and the Paladin: Buddies?” she chuckled. “Who woulda thunk it.” Her eyes bored into him, demanding answers. Waldo gulped, not sure where to begin.

“No. No.” he began, “We ain’t buddies. Cain’t be buddies wid da likes o’ him. No. No. ‘e scares me witless ‘e does, tell ya da troof.” Waldo crossed himself and Madam chuckled.

“I know what you mean. He has the coldest eyes I ever seen. I only hope they know what they’re doing up here on Noble Hill. I helped ‘em put that fake will together. No way was I gonna let that holier-than-thou shitbag marry Miss Callie. But it worries me.”

Waldo raised his eyebrows and motioned for more beer. Madam continued.

“It worries me because that fake will puts that psycho only a heartbeat away from ruling this Barony. We might save Callie only to doom us all.”

She grew quiet as the little man returned with their fresh tubs of beer. Each of them took a hearty pull. When they raised their hands in unison to wipe the foam from their lips, they smiled at the synchronicity. She continued.

"But I've made sure that Brother Owen can't use the will for his own evil purposes. One thing I know for certain..." she paused for effect. "He is not one of the twins. Edmund assured me that last night before he rode off to die in ValleyHo that he had set things right and gotten the Baron to sign over his title to the twins. He didn't tell me who they were and his copy of the real will was lost at the battle site.

"He said the Deacon has a copy. We can only hope this fake will forces him to show it. Richard Hawkins, the cripple, is the rightful heir. But without the will to legitimize him, he'll never prove it. As for the younger twin, Edmund had lost track of him early on. I fear he's been swallowed up by the sands of time. It's Hawkins or Beck, I fear. Let us hope poor Beck and Callie aren't caught in the crossfire."

"Amen." muttered the Cap'n.

"Amen." replied Madam.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

"Over here!" hissed Macy to Eric, motioning for Callie to go on ahead without her. Eric's eyes lit up when he saw her and he hurried over, allowing Beck and the Baroness to continue arguing their way along the corridor without him.

Slipping into a darkened, empty drawing room, he swept her up into his arms. Macy melted into his embrace and ground her body into his. Her eyes closed and her mouth opened. His lips found hers and they were one.

Panting, she dropped down to a sofa, pulling him down with her. She felt his hands reaching for her buttons and she slapped them away, giggling.

"Not here. Not now." She chided. Taking his chastised hands, she placed one inside her blouse and the other around her waist. Then she held him tight.

"I've missed you so much," she whispered in his ear. He just grunted and looked at her with that stupid look most boys get when they're doing most of their thinking below the waist.

"Do you have it?" she asked. "...the will?" she added to dispel the confused look in his eyes.

"It's in Callie's room." He answered. "The Baroness came in just as I was giving it to Beck."

Seeing the worried look in her eyes, he shook his head. "Oh. No. Don't worry. We hid it so it won't fall into the wrong hands. It was good. Beck seemed pleased."

"How's Beck holding up?" Macy knew it was a stupid question even as it rolled off her lips. Maybe not exactly stupid, but certainly unanswerable. Macy was young and resilient. She had spent much of her life fending for herself. Yet, though she'd known him for only a few weeks, she couldn't envision a future that didn't somehow wrap itself around Eric. She couldn't begin to understand what it must be like to lose someone you have known, and loved, since you were in diapers. She shivered.

Mistaking her shiver for reaction to the ministrations of his hand inside her blouse, Eric smiled down at her. She pulled him closer and wrapped her lips around his in an unsuccessful attempt to banish her fears.

She understood the ruse that was the fake will. She understood the need to save Callie from Owen's clutches and turn the Barony over to its proper heir: Eric's Da.

But what did that mean for her? ...for her and Eric? If Eric's Da were made Baron, that would make Eric his heir. ...and Baron's heirs didn't go around marrying street urchins. They just didn't.

And, like it or not, that's what she was. She was a nobody from nowhere and Eric was heir to a Barony. She began to sob. Eric held her tighter. She hugged him back. Callie could survive without her for a bit.

Callie clicked the door shut behind her and went over to the mirror. It was her room, but without Annie's presence, it somehow felt foreign. It was as if all the life had been sucked out of it. Annie's absence was one of the most overwhelming presences Callie had ever experienced.

So, as she stood there in her mourning clothes, in front of the mirror, Callie could almost feel her buttons being unbuttoned by fingers that were no longer there. Closing her eyes, she could feel Annie's warm breath on her now bare shoulders.

Feeling her dress and petticoats fall to the floor, she could feel the warmth of the fire to her right and the cool breeze blowing in from the window to her left.

Eyes still closed, she reached up to knead the tension from her shoulders. Stepping out of her dress, she slipped off her shoes and padded over to the fireplace. As she warmed her backside, her hands roamed lower. Cupping her small breasts, she could feel her nipples growing into her palms.

Pleasurable sensations fought to replace the tensions that wracked her body. Giving in to the experience, her hands roamed lower, across her flat belly, seeking out the down-covered mound below it.

She seemed to be watching herself from far away as she rocked back on her heels, moaning softly. She was unaware of the fact that she was muttering Annie's name over and over, nor of the tears as they poured down her cheeks.

She surrendered to her senses in an effort to quiet her mind. She grew quiet, concentrating on the crackling fire and the sound of rushing water. She licked her lips and tasted the salt there. She breathed deep of the fire's smokiness and her own musk. Her body tingled from the heat, the cold, and the touch of her fingers.

She stood there for what seemed like a long time, long enough for her heart to slow and her mind to quiet. Annie was still with her, probably always would be. But, at least for the moment, it didn't hurt quite so much.

Thoughts of Beck brought on feelings of guilt over his loss. ...her selfishness. But it also brought on feelings of strength. And strong she was going to have to be to get through these next few days. Annie wasn't here anymore but she was. Life would go on. What happened these next few days could very well lay the foundation for the rest of her life. 'What would Annie do?' She sure as Hell wouldn't give up. That's for sure.

A sharp intake of breath brought her out of her reverie. Standing in the open doorway, mouth hanging open, was Owen Camberly. She looked about unsuccessfully for something at hand with which to cover her nakedness. Failing that, she turned toward him and thrust out her chin, her little breasts quivering in angry accusation.

"Get out of here!" she commanded.

He just smiled, stepped into the room, and closed the door behind him.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

Smiling, Eric looked back up the hall behind them, stepped into Macy's room, then closed the door behind. Warming herself in front of the fire, Macy's fingers were undoing buttons as fast as they could. When her mourning dress dropped to the floor, revealing her boyish curves in the flickering firelight, Eric's breath caught in his throat.

Rushing over, he swept her up in his arms and headed for the bed. Giggling in anticipation, she threw her arms around his neck and sought out his lips with her own. Stumbling, he launched her toward the bed, where she landed in a gangly pile of arms and legs.

She stared up at him, hands roaming, as he fumbled with his own buttons. She licked her lips lasciviously. When he attempted to drop down onto her, she brought up her feet and planted them in the middle of his chest. He reached up and ran his hands along the length of her long legs, teasing her inner

thighs with his nails. She reached around, grabbing his hips, and drew him in closer.

He leaned forward until her legs yielded and her knees came in contact with her shoulders. Leaning down between those knees, his mouth sought out hers and his tongue went exploring. He moaned in response to the rhythmic ministrations of her unseen hands. He looked into her eyes but they were far, far away.

When he felt her attempts to join them down below, he rolled off in an effort to prolong the joyous agony. He scrambled away from her touch, spread her legs, and sought to return the favor. She moaned from someplace deep down and surrendered to his touch. Just as she was about to explode, he stopped and drew her tight to him, holding on for dear life. She bucked in his grasp and gave him an evil look.

He encompassed her in his arms, stared toward the fire, and started counting backwards from a hundred. His breathing slowed. He could feel the syncopations of their hearts through chests pressed tightly together and heat building from down below.

‘...sixty-eight, sixty-seven, sixty-six...’

He looked around the nicely appointed castle guest room Macy had been given. It was on the same floor but in the opposite wing of the castle from Callie’s and the other family rooms. Its big oak furniture had a masculine feel, but bedclothes, throw pillows, and other touches seemed to make it more appropriate for its current occupant.

It was finer than anything Eric had ever experienced, either growing up or as a ward of his Da out in Sacton. He imagined that Macy must take this kind of luxury for granted and it made him sad for the prospect of their future together.

‘...thirty-seven, thirty-six, thirty-five...’

He could feel her squirming in his arms so he squirmed back, sufficiently calmed down to banish the future for these few precious moments to concentrate on the present.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

He was across the room in a heartbeat. Callie's scream was cut off by a calloused hand clamped over her mouth, another clutching at her throat.

"Bad idea," he said, more with his eyes than his lips. "If I remove my hands, will you talk with me like the good little wife I expect you to be?" Scared witless, all Callie could do was nod.

He removed his hands and took a step back. When she tried to cover herself, he slapped her hands away. A tear rolled down her cheek.

"Is that any way to greet your husband-to-be?" he mocked. "Yer a bit scrawny for my tastes but I have to admit that you give a whole new meaning to the term 'burning bush'." He chuckled, but whether it was from his joke, or her discomfort, she couldn't tell.

Callie wanted to lash out but this new Owen Camberly terrified her. This wasn't the Owen Camberly she thought she had wrapped around her little finger. This wasn't the Owen Camberly who masqueraded as a gentleman at court. No. This was a wolf with no pretense of sheep's clothing.

"G-Go away." Was all she could manage. He laughed, reached out, and roughly grabbed her breast.

"Ouch! That hurts!" she cried, twisting away.

He reached out and pushed her onto the bed. His eyes devoured her nakedness greedily. She tried to control her tears since they only seemed to arouse him. He began unbuckling his belt.

"No... No... Please don't do this." She whimpered. "I've... I've never..."

He just continued to undress. Callie couldn't believe this was happening. She was too shocked to cry out, too scared to resist.

When he'd undressed, she was mesmerized by what stood before her. While she'd seen men naked before, she'd never seen one in a state of angry arousal. Even as she hated him for what

was about to happen to her, she also hated herself for the feelings that stirred within at the sight before her.

“No! No! No!” she wailed, the tears now flowing freely. She scrambled away from him to the farthest corner of the bed and curled up protectively.

He just seemed to grow bigger the more fear she showed. He stood there for what seemed like forever, stroking himself and raping her with his eyes.

When he knelt on the far corner of the bed, she yelled and started praying through her tears. She listened to the sound of rushing water and the pounding of her heart. When he roughly grabbed her legs and spread them wide, she surrendered to the inevitable and looked for someplace deep within in which to hide.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

Macy surrendered to Eric's caresses, and gave in to the roar of orgasm as it built from deep within her. As her animal cries burst forth, he clamped his lips over hers in an effort to avoid sharing the experience with the rest of the Castle.

He laughed down at her with his eyes, even as he fought to keep his tongue from being bitten off. He wondered what it was that contorted a man's face into its ugliest at his moment of release while giving a woman the face of an angel. Whatever it was, he wasn't complaining about it as he stared at the face of his angel. ...his Macy.

“You are so beautiful.” He whispered as he rearranged her tousled bangs across her forehead. Still unable to speak, she smiled up at him. His fingers traced the contours of her high cheekbones and graceful neck, dipping down into the valley created by her collarbone. They continued down her flat chest, reveling in the slight softness surrounding her angry pink nipples. She squirmed under his touch.

“Make love to me.” She whispered. “I have to get back to Callie. She shouldn't be left alone today.”

“What about me?” Eric teased. “I’m about to become heir to a Baron. That ought to count for something.”

Macy heard the words but they didn’t seem in sync with the look in his eyes.

“Is there something the matter? She asked. Rolling away from her and onto his back, Eric just shrugged and looked to the ceiling and the lights now cast thereby the dancing firelight. Macy rolled toward him and lay in the crook of his shoulder.

“Why so sad, my boy Baron?”

“I dunno. Things are happening too fast. A couple of weeks ago I was just the son of a merchant out in Sacton. I had dreams of being a somebody. I thought about girls until it darned near drove me crazy. I felt like a kid. I felt like my whole life was in front of me. Now...”

Macy held on tight, not daring to open her mouth, not daring to admit how close to home his words hit. He could have been talking about her.

“Now I am surrounded by intrigue. A Barony hangs in the balance. I’m up against just about the scariest person I’ve ever known in Owen Camberly. I’ve made better friends than I’ve ever had in my life and have just come from the funeral of one of them. And then there’s you...”

He trailed off. Macy didn’t press him. She didn’t have to: she knew what he was going to say. She was afraid too: Afraid of losing him. Afraid of Owen Camberly. Afraid for Callie and Beck.

A couple of weeks ago... She dared not even think about it or none of the futures she could envision for herself even seemed possible.

She could certainly relate to where Eric was coming from. Overcome by his feelings of doom and gloom, she just held on tight, banished the future, and clung to the present.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

Callie heard her name being called from far away. But she didn’t answer. She told herself that as long as she stayed ‘here’,

as long as she stayed quiet, she'd be safe. She knew that somewhere out 'there' loomed Owen Camberly.

'Here' was a special place. In it Annie still breathed and her father still walked the halls of Frismont Castle. In it tomorrow was much like today. ...like yesterday. Nothing hurt and the biggest decision she'd have to make was what to wear to dinner.

It was a place that revolved around her, her every whim catered to, her every wish fulfilled. The days were always sunny and the bath water always warm. It was a place filled with smiles and laughter, a place filled with people who loved her.

She could hear grunting and a man's voice but, since it came from out 'there' and not in 'here', she paid it no mind. She could feel physical pain at the core of her being tempered by a throbbing wave of pleasure building toward a guilty climax. She could feel an all-encompassing hatred that she put in its own special little place, the better to be savored fully at a later date.

As she lay there, Callie jumped between the past and the future, anything to avoid the present. Somewhere deep down, without putting it into words, she vowed that she wouldn't let what was happening out 'there' change her. A small part of her understood that it would be impossible to keep that vow. It would be impossible not to be changed after killing someone. And kill Owen Camberly she would. She vowed that too.

If that monster thought he was going to walk her down the aisle, destroy generations of her family's hard work, then grunt himself to satisfaction at the end of every day, he had another thing coming. Probably something sharp. Probably between the ribs.

"Bastard!" she seethed, coming back to the present with such vehemence that he hesitated, a cloud passing before his eyes. She smiled up at him and could feel control of the situation return to her. She raked his back with her long nails until they came away bloody. She thrust up at him with a hatred that softened his assault.

He didn't resist when she shoved him off of her. When he started to speak, all it took was a narrowing of her eyes to stumble

his lips to silence. Blood pounding in her ears, she used his shirt to wipe the shame from her thighs. Then she picked up his clothes and threw them into the fire.

Again, she heard her name being called from far away. But when she looked over to the bed, she saw that Owen too was listening, not speaking.

"Miss Callie." The ethereal voice repeated, coming from nowhere and everywhere at once. Her name seemed to bounce off the walls. Then his. She saw terror in Owen Camberly's eyes and realized that this was why he had stopped his assault.

"Owen Camberly," the voice echoed. "Thou are damned!"

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

"Well, I'll be damned!" muttered Waldo as he stood in Madam's storeroom, staring across at the suit of red armor standing in the corner. He shook his head in disbelief. He seemed to know his lifelong friend less and less with each passing hour.

"Madam, you got some 'splainin' to do."

She just nodded, shut the door, and shambled off toward her office. Waldo set his bulk in motion and followed. They climbed up from the basement and shuffled down the hallway, the grunting sounds of business being conducted assaulting them from the closed doors along either side.

As soon as the out-of-breath Waldo had settled himself into the sturdy but creaking chair across from Madam's desk, the door opened and the bare breasted Chinee girl floated into the room carrying a huge tray of sweets with a pot of steaming cocoa balanced in the middle of it. With a wave of dismissal from Madam, she curtsied toward Waldo and let herself out of the room.

Waldo was on his third cake, Madam her fourth, before a word was spoken. She drained the dregs of her second cup of cocoa, set her cup down, and fixed her gaze on the Cap'n.

“Yer right Waldo. I do got some ‘*splainin*’ to do, as you put it. Things are not always what they seem, nor are they what we wish them to be.

“We’ve been friends, even more than that, for many years. I hope that friendship survives what I’m about to tell you. ...what I’m about to ask of you.”

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

“So, what aren’t you telling me?” asked Eric as he lay beside Macy, stroking her flat belly. He could tell from the look in her eyes that he wasn’t going to receive an honest answer. He could see her racking her brain for a lie that would be acceptable. Somehow, the secrets she kept from him only made the secrets he kept from her worse, not better.

His fear of losing her was almost crippling. He couldn’t envision a future without her. Yet hadn’t he just attended a requiem for every future that poor Beck Friston could envision? Hadn’t he just seen Beck walk zombie-like through a day that held no joy, had no meaning for him? Life goes on, but living doesn’t. The distinction might be small, but it was everything.

As if sensing his gloom, Macy leaned up and gave him a peck on the lips. He almost didn’t notice that she hadn’t answered his question: Almost, but not quite. The look in her eyes ensured that it hung in the air between them.

“Make love to me.” She whispered. “I have to get back. Callie will be missing me.”

With the backs of his fingers, he toyed with her nipples until they grew hard, then plunged them into the river now flowing between her legs. Questions forgotten, he rolled her over onto her back and climbed aboard.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

“Owen Camberly,” echoed the voice. “Thou are damned ... damned ...damned.”

The ethereal voice came from nowhere and everywhere at once. It spooked Callie but she took solace in the fact that it seemed to downright terrify her attacker.

“W-Who are you? W-Where are you?” he cried, crouching naked in the middle of the floor, eyes darting warily in all directions. A crazy, rumbling laugh filled the room and Callie watched as Owen seemed to shrink before her eyes.

“I’m – I’m – I’m Callie’s, uh, Guardian Angel. Where do you think I am? I know where you are. ...and where you are going! Owen Camberly. Thou are damned! ...damned! ...damned!”

The accusation seemed to echo off the walls.

“Owen Camberly. You have taken what was not yours to have. You have defiled what was yours to cherish and protect ... protect. ...protect.

“Owen Camberly! You have cost yourself everything that you have ever desired in this life. ...life. ...life.

“Owen Camberly! Take what has been left for you under your sister’s mattress...” Owen jerked his head in Callie’s direction, she in his. “...and leave her alone. Do not darken her path again. ...again. ...again.”

“Owen Camberly. Thou are damned! ...damned! ...damned!”

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

Eric rolled off of her panting. She just lay there, trying to slow her still-pounding heart. Somewhere in the distance, church bells pealed.

“I love you.” she squeaked.

“I love you, too.” he replied. Yet one look up at him confirmed for her the sadness and uncertainty which underly that love.

“I have to get back.” she added.

“I know.” he muttered. With great reluctance, she sat up and reached for her clothes. She could feel his fingers dance their

way up her spine. She stopped, shrunk in on herself, and took a deep breath.

"Is your Da going to make it back in time? You do realize that will puts his life in danger? Once Owen Camberly finds out about it, he's gonna want your Da dead. And what if the Deacon isn't tricked into showing the real will. That leaves Owen next in line for succession. Things could go very wrong."

"Don't you worry." cooed Eric, curling up against her back. "Simon and Richmond will keep Da safe until he gets back. And Madam said she had a trick or two of her own to ensure that Brother Owen never becomes Baron."

"Like what?"

"I don't know. I guess we're just gonna have to trust her. She sure is a character. I'm not sure what to make of her. But I'll never underestimate her."

"I know what you mean." muttered Macy as she reached for her clothes.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

Callie drew the covers up around her, heart beating wildly. She watched Owen read the fake will, eyes bulging out of his head. She held her breath, afraid to move, afraid to draw attention to herself. She felt chilled at the smile that spread slowly across his lips. The chuckle that followed froze her heart.

"Well. Well. Sis!" he chuckled again, managing to soil the last word. "Seems like you been holding out on me. Probably protecting that weakling of a brother of yours. Foolish, foolish child. Tsk. Tsk. Tsk. I ought to put you over my knee."

He chuckled again as he folded the will and replaced it in its leather pouch. He looked to the fireplace, then back at Callie.

"Looks like I'm gonna need to borrow a cloak. Seems my clothes were a victim of your fiery temper."

He strode naked over to her wardrobe and threw it open. Withdrawing a floor length leather cloak, he wrapped it around himself and headed for the door.

"Looks like I'll have to stop by the guardhouse for a pair of pants before heading out." He turned to her. "Should I tell them I left mine in your room? ...in your fireplace?" He chuckled again. "No. I think not."

Reaching the door, he turned back to a silent Callie still clutching the covers under her chin.

"By the way," he drawled. "This changes nothing. See you at the wedding." With that, the door opened, closed, and he was gone.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

Beck sat slumped on the terrace, nervously awaiting Eric's return. He'd managed to ditch his mother and her single-minded effort to find Callie and make her life miserable. A part of him wanted to jump over the railing and end his life dashed on the rocks below. Another part didn't have the energy to do even that.

The will might help. But then what? He wouldn't have to be Baron, but he still wouldn't know what to do with the empty life stretching before him. A day at a time. An hour at a time. A minute at a time. He'd have to settle for that and hope the future took care of itself.

Just as he was about to get up and go off in search of Eric, the door from the dining hall opened and in strode the Deacon and the Bishop of Sacton. Beck settled back, unnoticed, as they went to the rail in the gathering dusk.

"The Seneschal's death was suspicious, to say the least." whined the fat little cleric from the Inland Sea.

"You think Owen's to blame?" asked the Deacon.

"I-I didn't say that." stammered the Bishop, the fear in his voice palpable. "I'm not going to make accusations against that one. No. No. No. But..."

Beck could almost hear the gears in his head grinding, looking for the right way to phrase what he wanted to say. The Bishop forged ahead.

"But I just think we'd all be better off if he went back to Marinwood to manage the Camberly estates. If the will they say you have...?" The Deacon cut him off. "What will? I have no will."

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

"What do you mean: He has it!" screeched Macy. "He can't have it!" She paced around the room, consumed by guilt, hurling questions at the back of a sheet-clad Callie kneeling before her small altar.

"Owen can't have... He can't... I just can't believe..." Macy flustered on, pacing up a fury. The darkening twilight filled the room with shadows, horrors lurking in every one. The crackling of the fire and the sound of rushing water forebodingly pounded in her ears. She realized that her hands were clenched so tight that her fingernails were digging into her palms. Macy felt ready to explode.

When Callie turned from the altar to face her, Macy crashed to her knees beside her. She opened her mouth to continue her ranting but the beatific look of peace on Callie's face was so incongruous, so unexpected, that no words came out. Callie filled the silence.

"I was saved. ...saved by an angel.." she mumbled reverently. Macy looked at her, brows furrowed, more than a little skeptical.

"...an angel?" she prompted.

"Yeah. An angel. I know it's hard to believe, but I heard him. Owen heard him too. That's why he stopped.... stopped... stopped what he was doing. That's why I've been praying: Giving thanks."

"...an angel, huh? So, where's this angel now?"

"Gone. I don't know. After Owen left, I called out, but there was no answer. But he was here. You gotta believe me."

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

“Uh – Excuse me.” said Eric as he barged out onto the terrace in search of Beck. The Deacon and Bishop of Sacton turned toward him.

“Good evening, Master Hawkins.” offered the Bishop. “You’ve met the Deacon, I assume. Come, join us.”

Eric walked over to the rail, and the two older men made room for him to stand between them. Eric felt a bit like the lamb being led to slaughter, but he could think of no polite way to decline their invitation. Shoulders tensed, he held onto the rail and looked down upon the twilit port of Friston.

“Think you could get used to this view?” asked the Deacon, eyes twinkling. “I’ve been hearing rumors.”

“Rumors?” choked Eric. “What rumors?”

“Surely you’ve heard rumors that there is a will out there? Twin boys?” added the Bishop.

“Well – well, yeah. Everybody’s heard those.”

The Deacon fixed him with his hard gaze.

“What do you think about the rumors that your Da is one of the twins? ...that your Da is the legitimate heir to the Barony?”

“My Da?” stuttered Eric, none too convincingly.

“...that there might even be a fake will out there? Mark my words...” intoned the Deacon. “If someone has faked a will, that would be treason. If it were found out, we’d have no option but to hang the conspirators.”

Eric gulped and searched for a reply. Before he could come up with one, there was a commotion behind them and Beck stepped into view.

“Now. Now. Deacon. Don’t go scaring the boy. I’m gonna be the next Baron around here unless you know something I don’t. Do you?” he challenged. The Deacon smiled, but only shook his head.

“Very well then.” Continued Beck. “If there’s gonna be any hanging done around here, I’m gonna be the one doing it. Do I make myself clear?” They nodded as he turned and headed for the door.

“C’mon Eric. Let’s leave these holy men to their scheming. Let’s find Callie and Macy. We’ve kept them waiting long enough. Come.”

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

“Daly! Daly!” screamed Waldo at his first mate as he rolled across the quay in the direction of *The Baroness’ Revenge*.

“Lower the damn gangway. I’m comin’ aboard!”

Waldo was in a hurry. He sure could use a drink and could already taste the bottle he knew was waiting for him in his cabin. After a day of listening to the preachers he had planned on an evening of talking to the bartenders. ‘Oh, well. He’d have to settle for plan B.’

He wasn’t quite ready to wrap his mind around everything he learned about Madam this day. She was up to her eyeballs in troubles he wanted no part of, but he was in no position to refuse her anything she asked. If he were truly honest with himself, he’d have to admit she was the only human being in this whole cruel world he actually gave a damn about. It hit him as a revelation that, though that might not say much about him, it spoke volumes about her.

If she wanted him to drop everything and sail for Sacton, he couldn’t say no. If she wanted to implicate him in her intrigues, again, he couldn’t say no. It never crossed his mind to resent her for it. It was the nature of their relationship. It just was.

With a final bellow, a sleepy-eyed Daly finally stumbled to the rail.

“Lower that damn gangplank!” screamed Waldo up at him. “We’re off to Sacton. Now move yer ass!”

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

Beck sat on the bed, head in hands, eyes unable to meet those of his sister. His mind couldn’t process what Owen had done to her, nor any of the potential futures that seemed to lie

before them. He didn't know how to tell her that he'd overheard the Deacon denying that he even had a copy of the will.

If the only will in existence was the fake one that Owen now possessed, they were all in trouble. No telling what Owen would do, but it gave him all the power. All their lives were in danger. Eric's Da was all that stood in the way of him using the will to claim the Barony. Beck was all that stood in the way of him taking it by marriage. Then there was the Deacon. They had all assumed that he was maneuvering to put Owen in power, but that went against all that he had told them. It was all so confusing.

Beck looked up, watching as Macy supervised the filling of Callie's bath by the servant girls. He gazed toward Callie, curled up on herself at her altar. Eric was looking out the window, probably feeling as out of place as he was.

There was much to talk about but this didn't seem to be the time or place. There had been enough bad tidings for one day. Discussion of the will could wait 'til tomorrow. And as far as talk of 'angels', well, he didn't have a clue as to where to go with that. Seeing that the bath was almost full, he gestured to Eric and they uncomfortably slunk out of the room, mumbling their goodnights.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

Macy guided Callie toward the bath and lowered her into the steaming water. Grabbing a soapy sponge, she reached up under the red tresses to knead the tension from her friend's shoulders. As the tension left her body, so did the tears. The soft sobbing coming from the tub melted Macy's heart. She wanted to ease Callie's pain but didn't know where to start.

"It's beautiful when it's with someone you love." she offered. Bad choice. Callie's sobs turned to wails. She began rocking back and forth, stirring the water.

"I'll never know love." she cried. Looking over her shoulder, she sought out Macy with her eyes.

"Don't contradict me. You know it's true. I'm not free to love. I'm a Baron's daughter. I'm just a brood mare. Even if, by

some miracle I get out of marrying Owen, they'll just find someone else who's *in the best interests of the Barony*. We're women. You better get it through that thick skull of yours.

"Sure. Go ahead and have your little fling with Eric. But that's all it is. ...or ever will be. Do you honestly see a 'happily ever after' in your future? Baaaah! Get real!"

By now they were both crying. Callie reached up and cradled Macy's head in her dripping arms.

"I'm sorry." she whispered in her ear. "I'm having a bad day and here I am taking it out on you. Please forgive me."

They cradled each other like that until the tears stopped. Callie reached up and wiped Macy's eyes.

"You better go if you're gonna catch that man of yours before he heads back down the hill. Enjoy it while you can. Go now. I'll be OK. I'd like to be alone for a while anyway. Now: go!"

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

Eric rounded the corner, bumping into a Beck who had come up short at the sight that awaited them. Sitting in the middle of the entry hall floor was the Deacon, holding an eye that was already starting to swell. The door stood open and the sound of retreating hoof beats could be heard. He looked up at them.

"He punched me. He said 'Get out of the way, old man.' Then he punched me."

They'd never seen the Deacon like this. He seemed to be in shock. They rushed over and helped him to his feet. Eric shut the door as Beck steered the old cleric toward an impressive redwood-burl bench sitting under crossed swords and a shield bearing the three yellow roses of the Friston family crest.

"He punched me..." repeated the Deacon. They didn't need to ask who had hit the old man. Beck put a hand on his shoulder and tried to bring him back to the present.

"Deacon. He's a bad man. You must know that by now. If you have a copy of the will my father signed on his deathbed, you

must make it public. If that madman marries my sister, I fear for both of our lives.

"If the rumors are true and Eric's Da is the rightful heir, we've gotta make that happen."

The Deacon looked at him, painful expression on his face. He took the younger man's hand in both of his, then patted it reassuringly.

"If it were only so easy." he began cryptically. "Yes. Eric's Da is the rightful heir." He stopped, seeming to shrink before their eyes, searching for the words to continue.

"He is the rightful heir. Rumors of the twins are true. I-I ordered him killed all those years ago. I was young. ...full of zeal. My faith was the faith of a young man. Everything was so black and white.

"He was deformed, you see. He was a cripple. It seemed like a sign from God. Or maybe even the mark of the devil. You must understand. The Baroness had grown ill, burning with fevers. The Baron had withdrawn into himself, unwilling to acknowledge the imperfection. ...unwilling to accept the babe as his own: Blaming it for the fevers racking the woman he loved so much.

"The whole Barony seemed to be waiting outside the gates. A decision had to be made. So I made one, a decision that felt like the right one after a night spent on my knees, hands clasped in prayer.

"The Baron had withdrawn into his chambers and refused to come out. So I asked Sir Edmund to help me. ...loyal Sir Edmund. He nursed the Baroness through her last few days. Then he uh - uh - uh – disposed of the bodies."

The old man stopped his story and a roaring silence filled the room. His eyes were long ago and far away. With a sign of the cross, he forced himself to continue. Eric realized he was holding his breath.

"Or so I thought until I overheard him at your father's deathbed." He glanced up at Beck, then hurriedly looked away. "When I heard that the twins hadn't died that night long ago, it

made my heart soar. It eased a burden of guilt I have carried with me all these years.

“Oh, sure. I had my doubts just like everybody else. When Edmund retreated up to Marinwood, then fathered twins less than a year later, how could I not? I thought it likely that he had, uh, disposed of the crippled elder brother and raised the healthy younger one as his own. It seemed obvious. The only question was: ‘Which one was the Baron’s: Arthur or Owen?’ Since Arthur was raised as Sir Edmund’s heir, I had always assumed that Owen was the un-crippled twin.

“It’s why I took him under my wing, steered him toward the Brotherhood, when he left home. But, because of my own guilt, I all too often looked the other way when... ..all too often ignored what my eyes were seeing.

“Yes. Owen Camberly is a bad man. I do see that now. But I fear it is too late.

By now the old man was crying, bereft, head in hands. Beck and Eric each had an arm draped across his bony shoulders, waiting for him to continue. But it was Beck who eventually filled the silence.

“All you have to do then is show the will and Eric’s Da can take his rightful place. I never wanted to be Baron anyway.” The Deacon raised his head. There was that look again.

“You don’t understand.” He sighed. “I don’t have the will. I had left it on my desk out on Pelican Island. It was stolen. I fear Owen has it. And without that will... Without that will the twins are just another fairy tale: No more real than the rumors that have flooded the Barony for years. I fear it is too late. We have lost. Owen has won.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

The door clicked shut behind Macy as Callie slumped into the warm water up to her chin. Now that she was alone the enormity of what had happened to her washed over her in a tsunami of grief. The enormity of what she had lost left a gaping

hole she knew could never be filled. Once the anguished cries commenced, they increased in volume and tempo until they reverberated off the walls.

As if summoned by her pain, the soothing voice of her guardian fought for purchase among her anguished wails.

“Callie!... Callie!... Miss Callie: Don’t cry!” It rode the waves of her grief, softly calling her back from the madness. It was nowhere and everywhere all at once. “Callie!... Callie!... Miss Callie: Don’t cry!”

She willed herself to overcome the racking sobs and float along on the soothing timbre of solace the voice represented. Snuffling and mewling, she managed to quiet herself and find her voice.

“Who – who – who are you? She managed, but the voice was now quiet. Sitting up in the tub, she felt a tingle of cold as it danced along her wet shoulders. She called out again, louder this time.

“Who’s there? Is anybody there? Am I losing my mind?” Just as the sobbing threatened to commence again, she received a reply:

“You aren’t mad. I’m really here. But I fear I am a dead man doing his last good deed. G’bye now.”

Though she tried the rest of the night, hers was the only voice heard in her increasingly lonely room. Somewhere near dawn, she cried herself to sleep.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-
-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

-----Chapter Twelve-----
-----TREMBLINGS-----

Macy flinched at the bone-jarring, nerve-jangling impact. On the jousting pitch below, yet another heavily armored warrior crashed to the ground, victim of the Gubnator's lance. A roar went up in support of the bigger-than-life crowd favorite. Ever the showman, the Gubnator raised his lance and trotted off toward his handlers.

Macy surveyed the crowd from her place of honor at Callie's side. The raised, canopied, dais in the center of the pitch faced the south and held all the most important personages attending the joust. On Callie's other side sat her brother Beck, his gloom accentuated by the empty chair next to him screaming of Annie's absence. That little bit of protocol was engineered by the Baroness, who sat above and behind, flanked by the Deacon and another empty chair representing the as yet unfilled Baronial seat. The central dais also held the Bishop of Sacton, Father Tom, and yet another empty seat, this one representing the recently departed Seneschal of the Flame. There were also seats for the Gubness, the CeeEffHo, and their entourages.

On either side of the central dais were seating sections reserved for the lesser nobility of the Barony and the surrounding lands. Out at the ends, in the seating areas closest to Castle and Cathedral were the wealthy and influential commoners. Macy knew that was where Eric sat, even though she couldn't see him.

'Eric. Eric. Eric.' she muttered to herself, a faraway look in her eyes. What was she going to do about Eric, the happy days they'd spent up in Sacton already seeming like a distant memory. Since their return to Friston, her posturing as a noble had made their times together few and far between. The seating arrangements here only served to graphically emphasize the chasm between noble and common blood.

At least they were both sitting. Her gaze drifted across the pitch to the standing-room-only rabble sandwiched between the jousting lanes and the victualers tents. That was the Friston she

knew and was used to: the Friston of the streets. ...the Friston of those without either blood or money.

She knew she had to eventually tell Eric the truth, but she kept putting it off, knowing it would be the end of any hope they had of sharing a future together. She'd tell him tomorrow. 'Hah!' Tomorrow was when you planned to do the things you never planned to do. Tomorrow never comes. But she knew that one of her tomorrows was going to turn into a today, imprisoning her every hope for happiness into a yesterday that could never again be.

She sighed. She knew that Eric loved her just as much as she loved him. 'But so what?' That mattered little in this world they occupied. Macy had no doubt that she would trade everything she knew for a future spent with Eric. But for her it was an easy decision to make. After her little charade here was over, what did she have to look forward to: a life spent on Madam's second floor, hoping to be spirited away by someone to a side of the fence where the grass was greener? ...a life spent hoping?

And where could they go? Until these past few weeks, she had never even left the streets of Friston. Eric's life had, in many ways, been just as sheltered. After the tragedies of his youth, he had been raised in Sacton under the protective wing of his sister's husband, Hawkins.

Macy education was, to put it kindly, limited. She knew nothing of the civilized world beyond the Western Enclaves. Nor did Eric. Maybe there was nothing out there but ruins and the Unwashed. Maybe there was nothing out there but the aftermath of the Dark Times.

'And so what if there was?' She might not have anything to lose by running off, but Eric sure as Hell did. At worst he was heir to one of the biggest business enterprises in the western lands. At best, he was heir to a Barony. Even if he was stupid enough to run off with her... Even if there was somewhere to run off to... Even if he was willing to leave it all behind for her... Even if... 'Aw, Hell!' She loved him too much to let him throw his future away on her.

A single tear formed in the corner of her eye before rolling slowly down her cheek. The roars from the crowd around her seemed far, far away. She could feel Callie reach for her but it felt like someone else's hand she found and squeezed. Macy knew what she had to do.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

Callie grimaced at the bone-jarring, nerve jangling impact. Then she turned back to her newfound friend. She squeezed her hand tighter as she watched a single tear roll slowly down Macy's cheek. She wasn't sure what caused it but she could feel its burn, see the pain in the eyes of her friend.

She could also feel that it was a private moment, best left un-commented on. She gave a last reassuring squeeze to let Macy know that she was there for her, then turned back toward the festivities. Seeking out the reason for the crowd's sudden quiet, her heart fell.

Approaching the pitch from the far side of the Cathedral were the next two contestants. Wearing the Friston's yellow roses was the second in command of the palace guard. And, wearing the red and gold of the Brotherhood for the last time, was Owen Camberly.

The two heavily encumbered warriors cantered to the center of the pitch, lances held high. Flipping their facemasks up, they faced the Baronial party and boomed the customary salute:

"Hail Barony! We who are about to joust, salute you!"

As the Friston knight lowered his visor and rode off toward the Castle end of the pitch, Owen urged his steed toward the rail of the Baronial box and lowered his lance until it virtually lay in Callie's lap.

"M'Lady, my bride-to-be," he boomed for all to hear. "Would you do me the honor of allowing me to enter this clash of arms in your name?"

Callie clenched her teeth, said not a word, and picked a green ribbon off the floor next to her to tie on the end of his lance.

With a blood-curdling war cry, he lowered his visor, cruelly yanked his steed to the left, and raced off toward the Cathedral end of the pitch. Hatred in her heart, Callie's eyes were glued to the green ribbon as it rode the tip of Owen's lance toward his starting position. She could feel Macy's hand squeezing hers, returning the silent promises she'd made to her friend only moments before.

When the handkerchief dropped to begin the joust, it was as if the earthquake had returned. As the massive armored steeds bore down upon each other, the whole grandstand shook from the impact of their hooves. As the ball-tipped lances made their minor adjustments upon galloped approach, the surrounding tensions grew to a high-pitched crescendo Callie could feel in her loins.

When, at the last minute, Owen's lance twitched upward to find the vulnerable spot between helm and shoulder, the tension in the crowd was expelled in a collective gasp. The Friston knight's helm flew off his head, even as he flew off his horse. Blood spurted through the air from a gash along the side of his neck and the finality with which he slammed into the ground silenced the crowd. Eerily, the Cathedral bells filled the silence with their tolling of the hour. Callie held her breath as the medical personnel rushed to the aid of the fallen warrior. Callie glanced off to her left. Still sitting astride his destrier, helm now off, she caught Owen smirking in her direction. She felt nauseous.

What was she getting herself into? Where was she going to find the strength to do what needed being done? How was she going to deal with the overwhelming loneliness that was going to be the rest of her life?

She stole a glance at Beck. After losing her father and Annie within a space of weeks, he was all that she had left. She would do it for him. She would do it so that he could live. She looked down at the pitch, where the latest victim of Owen's wrath still lay unmoving. As they scraped the body from the turf, Callie found new resolve. 'Yeah. She could do it for Beck.'

She turned back toward Owen and threw his smirk back at him. Then she blew him a kiss before flipping him the bird. 'Be careful what you ask for Owen Camberly. Don't bite off more than

you can chew.’ If Callie was going to spend the rest of her life without love, she knew she was going to have to find other ways to amuse herself. ‘Yeah. It might not be the life she had wished for herself, but it was the life she was dealt. ‘Bring it on, Owen Camberly. Bring it on.’

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

Waldo groaned at the bone-jarring, nerve-jangling impact. Rousing himself from a head-throbbing stupor, he cast his eyes about the deck in search of his shiftless first mate, Daly. Looking over his shoulder initiated the domino-ing of many necks, shooting a pain up his neck that threatened to pop his eyeballs out of his head. With a painful squawk, he settled back onto his coil of rope and allowed himself to droop to the deck in all directions.

At his feet he spied the empty rotgut bottle that was responsible for much of his current pain. A quick inventory of last night’s search dashed any hopes he might entertain of finding the hair of the dog anytime soon. If he’d have found it, he’d have drunk it. At least they were at the Sacton docks. That’s what the bumping was that woke him up.

“Daly!” he screamed, a scream that began in anger and ended in agony. Stars danced before his eyes. His brain danced against the inside of his skull. He contemplated puking up an internal organ or two, then thought better of it.

When the young fool finally came running, Waldo yelled at him to get them tied off, then get his ass into town in search of another bottle. As the dimwitted young seaman scurried about with the mooring lines, Waldo set about the prodigious task of dragging himself to his feet.

Once there, he shambled over to the rail to oversee the tying off of *The Baroness’ Revenge*. After some unnecessary badgering, Daly managed to get them tied off, then Waldo threw some coins at him and sent him off in search of a bottle. He licked his lips, already tasting it, as he surveyed the scene spread out before him.

The ring road atop Sacton's levee was, as usual, packed with people, animals, and vehicles of every description. He could see the Hawkins warehouses below him, with the keep from the Gubnator's castle rising beyond. Various church spires dotted city, a city encircled by the sailing masts of the ships docked along its ring road.

Just as he was about to return to his coil of rope, he heard a shout from the dock below. Squinting down, he could see a short, black man, hands on hips, staring up at him. Waldo thought he looked familiar. Shading his eyes for a better look, he recognized him as one of Hawkins' men. 'Rich Man was it? No: Richmond.'

"You cain't dock here, Fat Man!" he yelled up at Waldo. Just as the Cap'n was about to reply with a clever, scathing retort, he was cut short by an appearance of the huge, silent monster who seemed to have a thing for mangling Waldo's hands. It ached just to think about it. As the two of them stood staring up at him, Waldo reached in his pocket, fingered Madam's letter, and waited for his courage to re-kindle.

"Dis is da Hawkins dock, ain't it?" he spat, knowing full well that it was. "I gots bidness wid Hawkins. ...a letter. ...not wid youse. Youse is his, ah, servants, right?" Waldo paused and donned his most disrespectful gaze. He looked the big guy in the eye.

"So, since you and yer monkey friend here forgot the organ, why don' we jist skip da enntertainment portion o' da program an' git right down to bidness? Why don't you run along like da good lil lackeys youse are, an' tells yer boss I gots an important letter here for him from Madam." With a dismissive wave of his fingers, he cast them a final 'Run along now!' and turned away from the railing.

By the time he'd splashed some cold water on his face and run his fingers through his hair, Daly had returned with a bottle. Waldo groaned. It was the same cheap brand of rotgut that he'd drunk before passing out last night. 'Ah, Hell! It was the hair of the dog, but it was a pretty mangy dog. Drinking greedily, he managed to quiet the demons in his head at the price of re-

energizing the ones in his belly. After a few 100 proof belches, he returned to the rail. Just as he was about to hurl some fresh insults down at Hawkins' men, he noticed they'd been joined by a lady. It was Hawkins wife, Siarra, in all her plump beauty. 'That was the kind of woman... Uh, best to not go there.'

"Mizz Hawkins." He yelled down. "I have an important letter here for yer husband. I bin sailin' all night from Friston. Things is happenin' fast an' furious back there. May I come ashore?"

"Why didn't you say so in the first place?" she admonished, waving him ashore and turning on her heel in the direction of the Hawkins residence. Waddling down the gangplank, Waldo stuffed a few coppers in Richmond's pocket. "Git yer organ." He smiled. "Youse kin dance fer me when I gits back."

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

Eric winced at the bone-jarring, nerve-jangling impact. The collective groan that went up from the crowd left no doubt who they'd been rooting for as the Gubnator crashed to the ground. Seemingly impervious to their cries, Owen flipped up his visor and trotted back to his handlers. Once there, he turned back to the crowd and just glared.

With a helping hand, the Gubnator was soon back on his feet and playing to the sympathies of the crowd. Limping off, he bowed grandiosely in Brother Owen's direction, drawing a roar from the crowd and a scowl from the Brother. From his commoners seat down here at the Castle end of the pitch, Eric could almost feel the hatred pouring off Owen in waves. For the briefest of moments, Eric felt sorry for his nemesis. But then it passed. Owen was one messed-up human being.

A glance towards the Baroness' box caught him a glimpse of Macy, standing shoulder-to-shoulder with Callie. Eric waved, but they didn't see him. It made him sad and set his mind wandering.

His Da had been due to arrive yesterday, the first day of the joust. His delay was no great cause for concern, but Eric worried

nonetheless. A few short weeks ago they were just Sacton merchants and it seemed they were very good at what they did. They didn't have to contend with the likes of the Deacon or Owen Camberly. He wasn't filled with desire for the aristocratic Macy Blackwood. ...just a few short weeks ago, but life sure was a lot simpler.

If his Da became Baron, Eric would be heir. Would he even be allowed to choose his own mate? Would he be married off for political reasons? The CeeEffHo's homely brood flashed before his eyes, and he shuddered.

On the other hand, if his Da didn't become Baron, how could they possibly reconcile her noble lineage with his common one? After the festivities tomorrow, she would be whisked back to Marinwood as he sailed back to Sacton to pick up his life as though these past few weeks never happened at all. ...except for the pain he knew he'd be carrying in his heart.

Maybe she would run away with him. But to where? And besides, he had nothing to offer her. He couldn't ask her to leave behind the comforts and opportunities that were hers by birthright. He was so confused. The phrase, 'if you love something, then set it free', went through his mind, but it went through in a language his heart just couldn't comprehend.

With downcast eyes, he watched as Owen Camberly took a victory lap before a silent crowd. Glaring the whole way, he rode up the commoners' side of the pitch, turned at the Cathedral, and returned to the central Baronial dais. Standing on tiptoes, Eric fought to see the awarding of the victory laurel. With bated breath, he and the rest of the crowd strained to hear the exchange between him and his bride-to-be. To none of their surprise, the Baroness barged to the fore and took command of the situation.

"My dear Owen," she smarmed. "Congratulations on your victory here today. You fought brilliantly. You fought fiercely." She paused, staring out over the crowd. "You fought almost as if my dear daughter Callie's hand were at stake." She tittered like the young girl she no longer was. "So, let me just say that, in

addition to this victory wreath, I am proud to award to the victor of this test of arms, my dear Callie's hand in marriage."

Callie glared. Owen lowered his lance. A murmuring could be heard from the back of the crowd.

"So without further ado, and unless there are any further objections, I hereby award this..."

A tumultuous roar from the crowd cut her off. It seemed to emanate from the back of the commoners side, over at the top of Sacton Street. Eric jumped up on his seat to see if he could see what was causing the outburst. His eyes were drawn to a lance, pointed heavenward, sporting a long, thin red pennant. Eyes following the lance downward, his mouth dropped open. The lance was being held aloft by a knight clad in red armor, astride a huge black charger. It was being held by the Red Knight.

As he cantered toward the Baronial dais and a slack-jawed Owen Camberly, the crowd murmured itself to silence. When he dropped his lance next to Owen's, in Callie's lap, the chirping of birds could be heard. When Callie took a green ribbon from her hair and affixed it to his lance, the roar was deafening. Without a word, the Red Knight trotted to his end of the pitch and waited for Brother Owen to assume the position.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

Beck grinned at the bone-jarring, nerve-jangling impact. Two lances were shattered, but neither Brother Owen, nor the Red Knight, was dismounted as their huge warhorses thundered past each other. Continuing on to the opposite ends of the pitch, both riders exchanged broken lances for new ones, turned to face each other, and awaited the hankie's second drop.

Beck stole a glance at his sister. She was smiling for the first time in days. Beck hoped she wouldn't regret the disrespect she'd shown her future husband but he knew it was a futile hope. Her green ribbon still fluttered from the crest of the Red Knight's helm. There would be Hell to pay for that, Beck feared.

As she dropped the handkerchief for the second time, the two warriors again slowly accelerated toward each other. The ground shook with each step. Every breath was held. No one spoke. Nails were bitten.

The two riders crashed into each other again. The Red Knight wobbled precariously but managed to stay in the saddle. Again, the only casualties were the lances. The collective intake of breath when the Red knight had almost toppled had been replaced with a respectful smattering of applause by the time both riders reached the end of the pitch and turned.

When Owen lifted his visor to take a drink, Beck got caught in the crossfire between future husband and wife. Glancing at his sister, he was no less shaken by the look of unadulterated loathing coming from her face than he had been by the look coming from Owen. He sure hoped Callie knew what she was doing. Once he stood and spoke, there would be no turning back.

Callie had come to him early this morning with that wild, crazy look in her eyes. She begged, pleaded, and cajoled him into going along with her plan. She said it was the only way they could both get what they wanted. ...the only way they could avoid the potentially fatal danger that was Owen Camberly.

She'd said that she and Camberly had come to an understanding. She'd said that she agreed to marry him willingly and share the power that union afforded. In return, he promised to leave Beck alone after today's announcement. He sure hoped she knew what she was doing. Beck trusted her. He thought she was the best schemer in a family full of schemers. Today would tell.

Everything would be made right when Eric's Da showed up to claim his title. Sure, they figured Owen had both wills, but both announced Hawkins as the heir. Callie's 'deal' was contingent upon him giving her the will. She figured he'd keep the one that named him the younger twin and made her his half-sister. She figured he'd give her the original, instead. What Brother Owen won't have counted on will be the appearance of the crippled true heir at the last minute.

It was a good plan. It just might work. Leave it up to Callie to be devious enough to come up with it. He stole another sideways glance at her and, as if reading his mind, she winked back at him in reassurance. Then she let the handkerchief drop for the third time.

Again the ground shook, the crowd held its breath, and the warhorses lumbered towards each other. Halfway there, the protective ball on the end of Owen's deadly lance fell to the ground. As one, the crowd gasped. Both riders continued towards each other.

Owen's deadly lance point was deflected high by a sudden uplift of the red shield, its lethal point coming close enough to bounce off the side of the Red Knight's helm. With every eye in the pitch following that metal tip of impending death, few saw the ball at the tip of the other lance as it made solid contact with the Paladin's thigh, jerking his leg sideways, and ramming into his crotch.

With a high-pitched cry that could be heard halfway to Sacton, Owen Camberly crashed to the ground. Slowing his steed with a yank on the reins, the Red Knight raised his lance, bowed in Callie's direction, and left by the way he had come.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

Macy watched until the Red Knight disappeared over the rise, stole a glance at the still-fallen Owen, then turned and nudged Callie.

"That was stupid," she whispered. "Disrespecting Owen like that. ...in front of everybody!"

Callie turned to her and smiled, eyes a-twinkling.

I couldn't help myself. Tomorrow I might be Callie Camberly but today I'm still Callie Friston. Besides, me and Brother Owen have an understanding." she snorted. "We need each other."

"What are you talking about?" shot back Macy. What do you mean: 'understanding'?"

"Me and my future husband had a good long heart-to-heart talk this morning. Everything's gonna work out. Don't you worry."

"I am worried. You're talking like a crazy person because only a crazy person could come to 'an understanding' with a crazy person!"

"You underestimate me, my cynical friend. I'll bet you a gold piece that our favorite Paladin will walk over here and hand me the will as soon as he scrapes his aching balls off the ground."

"No way! Which will?"

"The real one, I'm hoping. No way is he going to part with the one that names him heir. ...the one that makes it impossible for him to have his way with me.

"The younger twin disappeared twenty years ago and neither will specifically name Hawkins as the heir. In his mind, he'll have nothing to lose by giving me that one. Then he can hold the fake one over my head to ensure I'll be a good little wife. Since they both have my father's seal, both will seem legitimate."

"And then Hawkins shows to contest the succession..."

"Now you're catching on, my furry-brained little friend: 'And then Hawkins shows to contest the succession...' ...and we all live happily ever after. Well, sort of."

With a smile on her face, Macy turned back to the pitch. Owen Camberly had managed to scrape himself off the turf and was headed their way with a noticeable limp. He had managed to suppress his true feelings and was once again wearing his public consumption face. Every eye was upon him. He smiled up at Callie. In a gesture every bit as false as any of his, she applauded him, encouraging the crowd to join her.

"Let's hear it for my courageous husband-to-be, as well as all the others who fought here these past two days. Owen Camberly: Number Two in all of our hearts!" she shouted, and their tepid applause grew warmer. As Owen stopped at the foot of the Baronial dais, she held the victory laurel high over her head. He scowled.

"Friends," she addressed the crowd. "I guess it's a good thing my mother was only joking when she suggested my hand in

marriage would be going to the winner of this tournament.” The crowd tittered nervously.

“I guess I’m just gonna have to hold onto this victory laurel for pick-up at a later date. Maybe I’ll hang it above my bed!” The crowd roared as Owen turned red.

“Since the victor is not here to join us for this momentous occasion, would you, Brother Owen, come up here and join us in a prayer to close these festivities?”

Macy looked down on an Owen visibly trembling to keep his rage contained. With a plastered-on smile and crooked gait, he ascended the dais looking like he’d just soiled himself, and took his position next to Callie. She leaned in close.

“Don’t worry, hubby-poo. I’ll live up to my end of the bargain. Did you bring it?”

Macy looked down and saw him pass her an envelope, presumably containing the will. That’s when it hit her. “What did Callie offer in return?”

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

Beck stepped forward and cleared his throat. He shot a glance at Callie and she replied with a vigorous nod and a slap on the back with the papers she’d just been handed by Owen Camberly.

‘Oh well. Here goes nothing.’ he thought. ‘Sure hope she knows what she’s doing.’ He had been following Callie’s lead his whole life. She had been the adventurous one. He had been the word of caution. She had been the doer. He had been the thinker. She had marched them into trouble. He had talked them out of it. But he knew that as soon as he opened his mouth, the future would change and there would be no turning back.

He cleared his throat, took a sip of water, and looked out over an expectant crowd. Reputation of his ability as a speaker had obviously spread. These days, when he spoke, people listened. But, then again, that was usually because he was telling them what they wanted to hear. Today was going to be different.

They weren't going to want to hear what he was about to say. He had no illusions about that. For seemingly the thousandth time today, he prayed Callie knew what she was doing.

He cleared his throat again, took another sip, and focused.

"Friends, fellow Fristonians, honored guests," he began.

"These past few weeks have been trying ones for me, for my family, for all of us... When historians look back upon them from the warm safety of the future, they will be seen as a dividing point, a *defining* point, in the Enclaves' struggle to distance themselves from the Dark Times.

"A series of seemingly unrelated events have been set in motion by the death of my father, the fourth Baron of Friston: ... the terrible fires that raged that night. ...the rumors of a will and twin heirs, as yet unsubstantiated, mind you. ...the war drums of the Unwashed.

"The following day a great battle was fought on a plain just outside ValleyHo. It was a great victory, but a costly one. Many of our loved ones will not be returning from that field. We must assume that, included among those who won't be returning, is the father of my future brother-in-law, Sir Edmund Camberly.

"Any secrets he may have had..." Beck paused and stole a glance in Owen's direction. "Any secrets he may have had were buried along with him. ...buried along with him in a mass grave he now shares, if the rumors are to be believed, with his eldest son and heir, Arthur." Another glance at a glassy eyed Owen.

"Yes, these past few weeks have been trying ones." He paused, visible pain on his face, and continued with a crack in his voice. "J-Just as we were about to lay my father to rest, M-Mother Nature intervened."

He paused again. The crowd was silent, solemn except for the occasional muffled sob. They all knew where he was going and none were in a hurry to get there. He took a deep breath, blinked away the tears, and reached deep down inside himself for the strength to continue.

"Yes, these past few weeks have been trying ones. Just when we thought we had made our way through the tribulations

strewn in our path, God saw fit to further test our resolve in the form of the earthquake.

“The Seneschal lost his life that day...” Another glance in Owen’s direction. “...or I would be asking him why God has seen fit to test us so. I can see in your eyes that many of you also traded loved ones that day for questions that can never be answered.

“That day you also lost a Baroness. I lost a friend and the only woman I will ever love.” A sob escaped his lips and his eyes looked to the heavens, willing the tears gathered there not to fall. Many in the crowd were now openly weeping.

“Annie!” he cried. “I will always love you.”

It was a cathartic moment. Having said it, he felt better for it and was able to compose himself enough to continue.

“Friends, fellow Fristonians, honored guests. God seems to have been working overtime here lately to make His will known to us. It is our duty to be open to his message and adjust our actions accordingly. To that end, I have spent much time in prayer.” He looked to Callie and she urged him to continue. He cleared his throat, took another sip of water and, not without some trepidation, did so.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

Waldo waddled into the drawing room and into Hawkins’ presence. Doing his best impersonation of ‘dignified’, he gathered in his bulk and attempted to bow. He told himself he was doing it for Madam, but Waldo Gump wasn’t a fool. If what she’d told him was correct, the gimpy cripple standing before him was going to be the next Baron. ‘Wouldn’t hurt to get on his good side.’

“M’Lord,” mumbled Waldo. “I have a letter for you from Madam in Friston. My vessel, *The Baroness’ Revenge*, is at yer disposal and awaits yer orders.”

“Up. UP.” tsked Hawkins, stepping forward to retrieve Madam’s missive. Waldo straightened up and fumbled about inside his tunic to retrieve it, all the while keeping one eye on the

huge, hand-crunching moron and the other on the dark, shifty, stupid-looking one. Wisely so, he thought it best to keep both eyes off the shapely Mrs. Hawkins.

Finally locating the letter, he handed it to Hawkins, then stepped back, keeping his eyes downcast. Hawkins clumped over to a desk, sat on its corner, and broke Madam's seal. Two songbirds could be heard fussing from their cage in the far corner as all eyes zeroed in on Hawkins as he read the letter.

"Well. Well. Cap'n Waldo," he said when he'd finished. "It seems as though our paths cross yet again. Madam seems to think that my life is in danger and that, if I'm going to claim my Barony, I need to sneak back into Friston to do so. What do you think, Cap'n?"

Waldo shuffled his feet and rubbed his vast expanse of sweaty forehead. He wasn't sure what to say, nor where to begin. Before he'd left Friston, Madam told him to trust Hawkins with his life if it came to that. It wasn't something that came easy to the corpulent seaman. Like usual, he took the easy way out.

"If Madam says it, it must be true."

Hawkins laughed at the diplomatic reply.

"Do *you* think my life is in danger?" he asked.

Again Waldo attempted to wiggle off he hook.

"I've 'ad dealins wid Brudder Owen, M'Lord. I tolds meself I'd nebber wanna be on 'is bad side."

"Who said anything about Brother Owen?"

Waldo fumbled for words. Four sets of eyes bored into him. 'Sure was hot in here.' He tugged at his collar.

"I cain't see fearin' Beck Friston, M'Lord. Widout knowin' what Madam wrote up, who else could it be? Round these parts, nuttin's scarier'n Owen Camberly."

Hawkins laughed and jumped off the desk.

"You got that right, Cap'n Waldo. Madam wrote that I could trust you and your judgment. In her words, 'the book has a lot more substance than the comic book cover would suggest'!" Waldo wrinkled his brow at the left-handed compliment.

“She wrote emphatically that I should trust *no one* but you. So, c’mon Simon... Richmond... Looks like we’re taking *The Baroness’ Revenge* express to Friston. ASAP.”

Waldo scrunched his eyebrows and looked to the ‘organ grinder’ and his ‘monkey’. He thought about mentioning that Madam warned Hawkins to ‘*trust no one*’, but then thought better of it. He’d keep his eyes and ears open. He never did trust the strong, silent types.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

Callie clutched the will to her bosom and prayed that she knew what she was doing. She could feel the grief coming off of Beck in waves as he fought for the strength to continue. Eyes heavenward, he fought back the tears that threatened to overwhelm him. She placed a reassuring hand on his shoulder, gave it a squeeze, and willed them both to ignore the dark, hovering presence that was Owen Camberly. Beck cleared his throat and continued.

“Friends, fellow Fristonians, honored guests. God’s will is never an easy thing to decipher. Nor is its purpose always readily apparent. All too often we are resistant to the obvious, clinging to that which is safe and comfortable. Rarely is God’s path the easy path.”

He paused yet again and looked back at Callie, flinching at the glare thrown his way by Owen. Exasperated, Callie waggled the will at him and took Owen by the upper arm, drawing him close.

“Be nice!” she whispered to her future husband. “You’re getting what you want. Let him be. As Beck turned to once again address the crowd, she slowly withdrew the will from its envelope.

“The Enclaves are facing dangerous times, times during which the Unwashed problem must be dealt with once and for all. We are the strongest we have ever been, while they are the weakest. Sacton and San Hoton have great warriors leading them in the Gubnator and the CeeEeeHo. After years of being an

adjunct province, Marinwood is back on the path to rejoining Friston and the other Bay Area Enclaves. We have clawed our way up out of the Dark Times. We cannot allow ourselves to slip back into chaos. We are finally strong. We must stay strong.

“Rarely is God’s path the easy path. After much soul-searching and prayer, I feel deep down in my soul that I am not the man to lead Friston through these upcoming, troubling times. Therefore I am withdrawing myself from consideration to succeed my father.”

A murmur arose, starting at the back of the crowd and building to a small roar. As Beck allowed their reaction to run its course, Callie opened the will to sneak a peek. She gasped so loudly that Beck turned around, eyebrows full of questions. She bade him to continue as she fought to process what she was seeing. Owen gave her the fake will, not the real one. ‘Did he know which one was the fake?’ This changed everything but she wasn’t quite sure how. Everything would still be OK when Eric’s Da showed up, she assured herself.

Misinterpreting her confusion, Owen leaned in to be heard above the crowd.

“You now hold our marriage in your hands. You could dissolve it, but I don’t think you will. I’m betting that you would rather be married to your half-brother than give up the power of becoming Baroness. After all, you are your mother’s daughter. You might as well just lie back and enjoy it.” He chuckled and reached behind, grabbing a handful of ass. Still holding on, he leaned in closer.

“We are the choices we make, my dear, we are the choices we make.” Callie wanted to cry.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

Eric fought his way toward the dais and Macy. Everything was happening too fast. ‘What was this nonsense about Beck abdicating his claim on the Barony?’ Sure, everything would be set right when his Da arrived, but what was going to happen when

this crowd figured out that Beck's stepping aside cleared the way for Owen Camberly to become their next Baron? They would turn into a mob, that's what. And what of that damn Red Knight? Where did he fit into all of this?

Up on the dais, he could see Beck trying to quiet the crowd enough to continue. Owen was whispering into the ear of a white-faced Callie. The Baroness looked surprised and overjoyed; The Deacon like he'd just eaten a canary.

When his eyes locked in on Macys, she looked as confused as he felt. Obviously, she hadn't been made privy to Beck's bombshell either. Eventually the crowd quieted enough for Beck to continue. Packed in as he was, Eric had to abandon his efforts to ascend the dais until Beck finished. He settled in to listen.

"My fellow Fristonians," he began. "We need strength to lead us through these coming times. We need a warrior, yet we also need wisdom. Before Annie's death, I had told myself that I could be whatever I needed to be, supported as I was by the intense warmth of her love. I could be Beck, Baron of Friston and all that entails and is needed to be." He paused.

"But since her passing I've had to admit that I'm just plain old Beck. I am who I am and, unfortunately, who I am is not very good Baron material.

"Through prayer, I've tried to understand God's will. I've tried to understand the message that was Annie's death. After countless hours of soul searching, I had to conclude that her death was God's way of telling me I wasn't meant to be the fifth Baron of Friston.

"By a quirk of nature, the fire, passion, and leadership of the fifth generation of Fristons seems to have been bestowed upon my sister, Callie. It is no secret. It has been a running joke for years that she would make a better Baron than I. To that end, my stepping aside clears the way for her and her future husband, Owen Camberly..."

Eric was deafened by the spontaneous uproar from the crowd, hisses and catcalls hurled at the dais from the back of a crowd threatening to turn into a mob. Only after Callie strode

forward and raised both arms to the heavens did the tumult die down. She stepped back and allowed Beck to continue. Eric looked to Macy, fearing for her safety should the crowd rush the dais.

“Brother Owen is a feared warrior. My sister Callie is a very strong person, loved by you all. *It will work!*”

“And as for me? I’m not going away. A second position, in many ways every bit as important to the future of Friston as the Baron’s, has recently been vacated. After consultation with the leadership of the Brotherhood, I have agreed to fill the vacated seat of the Seneschal of the Flame.”

Eric could see a dark anger pass across Owen’s countenance. Obviously this was news to him. The self-satisfied look on the Deacon’s face told Eric that, to him, it was not.

“So,” continued Beck. “In a secret ceremony late last night, I was initiated into the secrets of the Brotherhood.”

He turned to Owen and beckoned him forward.

“So, as my first official duty as Seneschal of the Flame, I would like to congratulate our Paladin, Brother Owen Camberly, on his fine showing here today on this field of honor. And, as my second official duty, I would like to announce that Brother Owen’s resignation from the Order has duly been registered, accepted, and finalized.”

The crowd got a measure of solace out of that as Owen stared slack-jawed at Beck. ‘If looks could kill...’

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

Macy motioned Eric toward the Castle as she and the others on the dais were hustled down the back steps by the Friston guards. With the crowd still abuzz, they were hurried along the back of the grandstand and into the safety of Frismont Castle. The doors were locked and they were herded into the great dining hall where a lavish post-tournament spread had been laid out.

As she was leaving Eric’s name with the Captain of the Guard, she saw Owen clank upstairs to remove his armor, his ear

being bent by a fawning, chattering Baroness. Re-entering the dining hall, she saw nervous, hushed conversations going on all around her. The Gubnator, the CeeEeeHo, their spouses and retainers were animatedly sharing their opinions over by the buffet table. The Bishop of Sacton was using a drumstick to emphasize a point to Father Tom. Beck and Callie were huddled in what looked like a private conversation with her doing most of the talking and him looking none-too-convinced.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw the Deacon glide through the open doors leading to the terrace. She decided to follow. Catching up, she leaned on the rail next to him. He gazed out onto the eastern foothills, his eyes betraying his fatigue, the slump of his shoulders betraying his age. He seemed to b shrinking before her very eyes.

“So, what’s out there Deacon?” she prompted. “What are you looking at?”

“Huh?” he replied. Whaddya mean, my dear?”

“What’s out there? What’s beyond the Enclaves? ...the horizon we can’t see?” He looked at her with great sadness in his eyes.

“Nothing, m’dear. Nothing. This is all there is.”

“No way!” she scoffed. There must be other towns, other Enclaves, down the coast or over the hills. Surely?” He pointed over the wall to the rubble-strewn, Unwashed-infested south.

“That is what is left of humanity. Once you leave the foothills to the east of the Inland Sea, you can walk for a thousand days and encounter nothing but wasteland. Sail beyond the gate and you can go up and down the coast for weeks: Again, nothing but wasteland.

“In the early days of the Enclaves we tried. We found nothing. Civilization, as it is, begins and ends here. I have read the journals of those who have explored the lands beyond our borders. They returned with nothing but heartache. There may be a few other pockets of humanity left here and there, but the cataclysm that reduced us to this...” He waved his hand. “... seems to have been pretty thorough.”

"That can't be..." she whispered. "We've always been told..."

"Sure you have!" he interrupted. "Could you live with the fact that this is all there is? Could you handle the burden of knowing that *everything* depended on you? ...that there was no one or nothing out there with which to share the credit or blame?"

"Sure you were told that there was more to life than just your banal, selfish existence. Could you have found purpose otherwise?"

"If the Enclaves had had to assume the burden for steering the rudder of the entire future of humanity, it would have seemed overwhelming. It would have seemed hopeless. It would have driven them mad generations ago. We, as a species, seem to need something greater than ourselves take credit for our successes and blame for our failures. We are not yet evolved enough to be accountable for our own actions."

Macy was nearly in tears. If there was nothing out there, then there was nowhere to run to with Eric. She and Eric had no future. Misunderstanding her pain, the Deacon put a hand on her shoulder.

"There. There." He consoled. I fear I have said too much."

No Deacon." Came a voice from behind them. "I fear you haven't yet said enough."

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

Waldo stood in the bow with Hawkins as *The Baroness' Revenge* followed the power lines toward ValleyHo. Simon and Richmond hovered protectively nearby. Daly was below decks doing what Daly did.

"D'yer ever wonder wha' da world musta bin like afore the Dark Times flooded half of it and filled da other half wid Unwashed?" asked the Cap'n as he stared out across the dead, black, oily expanse of the Inland Sea.

"They didn't happen at the same time." answered the Baron-to-be. "'Oh no. The Inland Sea was formed long before the events that devastated these lands.

"Wha' happened down there?" asked Waldo, cocking an eye in Hawkins direction. There was a moment of silence and a faraway look in his eyes as the taller man warmed to his subject.

"The Enclaves used to be on the western edge of a great nation thousands and thousands of times larger than the area we call 'civilized' today. But it was a greedy selfish nation that lived for today, never planning for tomorrow. The area we now sail over was one of the great breadbaskets of that nation. ...agricultural land so rich it is the stuff of legend.

"But then the weather changed. Instead of rainfall, the land below us had to be irrigated from huge, man-made reservoirs. More had to be built every year as it rained less and less. But they weren't built to solve tomorrow's problems, only today's. So. yesterday's levees weren't properly maintained.

"Sacton was a center of power so its levees were some of the few that were. But eventually things got worse: The seas began to rise. Whole cities were wiped out. Coastal areas were devastated. All the while, like the mythical Nero, the politicians continued to fiddle.

"For many years a courageous battle was fought out near ValleyHo to hold the seas back. But..."

He trailed off, a faraway look in his eyes. Even Waldo was sobered at the thought of what must surely come next. He wanted to hear more and yet he didn't. Eventually he did.

"It was an earthquake that did it. After more than fifty years of fighting a battle they knew they would eventually lose, the waters came pouring through in a catastrophe every bit as great as the Biblical flood. A tsunami of seawater washed over these lands as far as the eye could see. All in the blink of an eye.

"Millions were killed and poisons were unleashed that have kept this water dead and lifeless to this very day. Under these waters... On the bottom of this sea... Down there is humanity's future. And it's past.

"Only Sacton survived."

Waldo gulped and looked down at the dead waters being spliced by *The Baroness' Revenge* with a new respect. ...a reverence even. It was as if he could hear millions of ghosts calling out for help, calling out for reason. Hawkins turned away from the water, a disgusted look on his face.

"...a greedy, selfish nation that lived for today, never planning for tomorrow." he mumbled.

"At least we learned our lesson." replied Waldo.

"Have we?" Hawkins replied with a harrumph before clumping away.

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"No Deacon." said Beck, making his presence known. "I fear you haven't yet said enough."

Macy and the Deacon turned toward him, tears in the former's eyes, sadness in the latter's.

"Come here, my boy." said the old man. "That was a powerful speech you just gave. It took great courage."

Beck just snorted.

"What courage does it take to run away?"

"Sometimes a man is thought brave, only because he is too afraid to run away. Do not mistake foolishness for courage. You are a good person, an honorable young man. There is no shame in running toward your strengths ...away from your weaknesses.

"You will make a fine Seneschal. Perhaps the best we've ever had. But, as for the Barony... Do you honestly think you have in you the kind of bastard it might take to be Baron of these lands?"

The Deacon smiled. "The look in your eyes gives me all the answer I need."

Macy put her hand on Beck's shoulder and gave it a squeeze.

"You'll make a good Seneschal." she added. "You're the smartest person I ever met."

"If I'm so smart, how come I'm just finding out that nothing... NOTHING!...exists beyond the Enclaves?" he turns to the Deacon. "How can that be? What happened?"

The little old holy man motioned them to join him on one of the benches nestled in amongst the trees. Claspings a young hand in each of his gnarled ones, he cast his sad eyes first in Macy's direction, then in Beck's.

"You would be finding out what I'm about to tell you soon enough anyway. It is all in the Seneschal's library. In many ways, it is the guarding of this history that has been the Seneschal's primary duty since those first days after we emerged from the Dark Times.

"But we cannot move forward until we understand the forces that have put us where we are today. I say what I have to say in front of this young lady because it is time to bring our past into the light. No more secrets.

"So where do I start?"

"Why not at the beginning?" answered Beck, waving toward the devastation south of the city walls.

"Oh. That's not the beginning." replied the Deacon with a shake of his head. "Oh no. That's more like the last ending. You see..." he fidgeted and squeezed tighter the hands he held.

"You see... Once, the Enclaves were part of a great nation, a powerful nation, a nation much more advanced than anything we can imagine today. You both were raised on tales of ships that flew through the air and under the water. ...buildings that scraped the sky. ...fire at your fingertips. You've both seen the oily rainbow that covers the dead waters of the Inland Sea." They nodded.

"In time, this great nation became so dependant on machines that its people grew fat and lazy. They could no longer even feed themselves without machines. The costs to keep these machines were great, but they felt it was their right. So, what was once a peaceful, prosperous people turned into a warlike one driven by strongmen and ideologues.

“They became a nation that the other nations of the world both envied and hated. Then the fuel that kept the machines running ran out. The machines ground to a halt. While the rest of the world went about its business, these lands descended into chaos, pillaged by rich warlords and religious zealots. The rest of the world quarantined these lands and let the Four Horsemen run amok.

“This continued for decades. Then things turned bad.”

“...turned bad?” croaked a Callie who had just joined them.

“What could be worse than that?”

The look in his eye made them all uncomfortable.

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“There was a great war on the other side of the planet, west of here.” continued the Deacon. Callie quietly took a seat next to Macy and draped an arm across her sobbing friend’s shoulders. The look of terror on Beck’s face made her shudder. The Deacon continued.

“From what we have been able to piece together, some kind of weapon was used that created mushrooms. These mushrooms killed every living thing on a huge continent across the Great Western Ocean. We believe this continent may have been called ChiQuaedaStan. There is also reason to believe that this cataclysm was foreshadowed by one tens of thousands of years earlier on another continent, one named Atlantis. But we’re not sure.”

The Deacon paused to wet his lips. Callie found herself trembling. She was concerned for a Macy whose grief seemed to be all out of proportion. Callie couldn’t seem to reach her. All she could do was hold on and let her know she was there for her. They were kindred, fiery souls that had grown close very quickly. This caused Callie no little amount of guilt since it seemed to somehow dishonor Annie’s memory. The Deacon coughed into a hankie before continuing.

“What we do know is that somehow these mushrooms made their way to our shores. By this time most of these lands suffered under the yoke of a harsh theocratic rule. Books were burned. Weapons were confiscated. Anything having to do with the machine-dependant society that preceeded was outlawed. Feudalism had returned. All things so-called ‘modern’ were deemed ‘un-Godly’ and ruthlessly suppressed. These were either destroyed or confiscated and stored away in secret warehouses, off limits to all but the clergy.

“Somehow, the breezes off the Great Western Ocean lessened the effect of the mushrooms here in the Bay Area. Rather than suffer the near total ravages of sickness and dementia that spawned the Unwashed, there were small pockets of survivors here who managed to make it through the Dark Times and hold onto a semblance of their humanity. These were our ancestors. This is where Enclave history begins.

“Are you sure?” whispered Beck.

“Sure of what?”

“Sure that this is all there is. Sure that the Enclaves are all that stand in the way of the Unwashed and their rapaciousness. Sure that there’s no hope.”

“Hope?” shot back the Deacon. “I never said there was no hope. The Enclaves are humanity’s spark. They have a choice. They can allow themselves to be washed away in a tide of chaos. Or they can set about rebuilding human civilization.”

“But what’s the use?” mumbled Macy. “We never seem to learn. Atlantis... ChiQuaedaStan... The Enclaves...”

“We still seem set in the old ways. We’re still greedy, selfish, and driven by hate. We’ll never change!”

With that, she jumped up and headed for the terrace rail. Slow to respond, Callie was traumatized, sure that her friend was going to jump. Instead, she turned around, choked out: “Never forget. I love you all!”, then rushed through the terrace doors, bawling her eyes out.

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"Well. Aren't you going to go see if she's alright?" asked Beck, sensing his sister's concern.

"Uhh-h. I better give her a few minutes." she answered, somewhat uncertainly. "She's just worried about Eric and what all this might mean for the two of them."

"That might not be all." added the Deacon, somewhat cryptically. they both looked at him. He continued, seemingly out of context.

"Did you get it?"

It took Callie a minute to realize he was talking about the will. Reluctantly reaching into her bodice, she pulled it out, a frown on her face.

"...the strangest thing. He gave me the fake, the one that had him as the younger twin. It makes no sense. I could use it to call off our marriage."

"And let him rule all by himself? Take yourself out of the power picture?" The Deacon chuckled. I fear our dear Brother Owen knows you better than you know yourself. Expose that will and you just blow away, leaving him with everything. By not exposing it, he marries into the power and paints you into a moral corner...sister!"

"But what about the real one?"

"My guess is he destroyed it. It gives physical descriptions of the twins, neither of which fit him. But don't worry my girl. He doesn't know about Hawkins. Go along with the charade and everything will be made right when Eric's Da shows up tomorrow.

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Waldo was a nervous wreck, a nervous wreck in need of a drink. All this babysitting made him thirsty. Since ValleyHo, the Cap'n had lay here, sprawled on his rope coil, watching the immobile figure of Friston's next Baron as he stood in the bow, gazing out at God-only-knows-what.

Not much longer. Waldo could see the sun setting behind Pelican Island, just off the starboard bow. The Brotherhood's tower loomed over *The Baroness' Revenge* from its perch high atop Signal Fire Hill. The fires of Friston twinkled in the distance, promising warmth, sustenance, and an end to this latest adventure.

Waldo shook his head and licked his dry, puffy lips. He was getting too old for this. Maybe he ought to make an honest woman out of Madam and start easing his way into the 'twilight years'. He snorted at the thought. If she'd allow herself to settle for the besotted wreck he'd allowed himself to become, he'd immediately lose all respect for her: that old joke about not wanting to belong to anything that'd have you. He snorted again. 'What strange creatures we are.'

Waldo knew it would never happen. He loved the sea too much: the wind, the stars, above all the quiet as his ship, *his* ship, cut through the water. He looked around. Daly was at the helm. Hawkins was still gazing into an unseen distance. The big one and the shifty one were catching forty winks in the crew cabin. Things were quiet.

There was one last place that he'd forgotten to check where a bottle might just be squirreled away. He eased his bulk off the coil and went below in search of it.

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Eric shouldered his way through the throng and made toward the Castle courtyard. After fighting through the pitch to get near the center dais for Beck's speech, he'd spent the last half hour fighting his way back towards the Castle.

The crowd was in an ugly mood. Soldiers from the Castle had swept through the victualers' area, closing things down and curtailing alcohol sales. Thank goodness for that. Now they kept a wary eye on the masses still atop Noble Hill, and a wary eye was being returned at them.

Violence had not broken out, at least not much anyway. But the crowd was slow to disperse. It was taking time to sink in. They all loved Callie. But it wasn't every day that one finds out that the human incarnation of the Boogeyman was going to be holding sway over your life for the next couple of decades.

Even as Eric was talking his way past the guards and into the castle, he was hearing behind him the first efforts of the Captain of the Guard to get the crowd dispersed. He wished him luck.

He worked his way toward the terrace, stopping only at the buffet table for a glass of wine to calm his nerves. Beck, Callie, and the Deacon greeted him warmly and told him of the distraught Macy's flight upstairs to her room. He told them of the crowd's ugly mood and asked permission to follow Macy. He told them everything was going to be OK, and when they asked him how he could be so sure, he just pointed out into the bay: "Isn't that *The Baroness' Revenge*?" he said. "Here comes my Da. Now let's go find Macy."

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Shooing a tired Beck and a worried Eric on ahead, Callie planted herself in the middle of the wide staircase to await the descending Owen Camberly.

"Going upstairs so soon, my dear?" He smiled. "We should mingle with our guests a bit, don't you think?"

"Oh, Owen," she cooed falsely. "You know us girls need our beauty rest. Even you should know that the most important day in a woman's life is her wedding day."

"I take it you've decided to keep the will to yourself then?"

"And miss the opportunity to be Mrs. Owen Camberly, Baroness of Friston? No way! I fear it is my destiny to walk in my mother's loveless footsteps."

"It doesn't have to be that way."

"What way?"

"The loveless way. You have fire. I've seen you breathe it. We could make a good team, you and I." He reached out and tweaked a nipple. She yelped.

"See. They're hard." He smiled down at her. "The possibilities are endless if you're willing to grow up. ...if you're willing to be all you can be. ...if you're willing to be all that you already *are*."

"Like it or not Callie Friston, as of tomorrow, you are mine. You might as well lie back and enjoy it."

With a throaty laugh, he swept her up in his arms, pulled her roughly to his hardness, and harshly clamped his mouth over hers. As she fought a gag reflex in response to his thrusting tongue, she heard a clapping in her ears. Pulling back and gasping for breath, she was appalled to see every eye in the entry hall staring at her with pity. She felt In need of a bath.

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Eric skidded to a halt in front of Macy's door and rapped sharply three times. Beck pulled up behind him.

"I'll wait out here, loverboy." he said. Make sure she's OK, but make it quick. We gotta get over to Callie's room."

Eric knocked again, and softly called out her name. Receiving no reply, he slowly pushed the door open. Stepping inside to find it unoccupied, he was about to retreat and close the door behind him when he noticed the clothes that were laid out on the bed. They were the ones Macy had worn to the joust. Atop them sat her jewelry and what looked like a letter. Going over to inspect, he found that it had been addressed to him. Tearing it open, he went and knelt by the fire.

Dearest Eric,

The time we have spent together has been the most beautiful I have ever known. I love you. I will always love you. But that makes what I have to say harder, not easier. That makes what I have to say hurt more than anything I have ever done.

It has all been a lie. Everything! I cannot explain it, but I know I must leave you before I hurt you. And hurt you I will if I stay around. Someday you will make a fine Baron and I can't stand in the way of that. If only it were another time, another place... But it is not.

This is good-bye. Good-bye is forever. Please don't look for me. You will never find me. Pass my love along to Beck and Callie. Tell them I am sorry.

All my love,

Macy

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

She padded barefoot down Sacton Street, headed for the familiar safety of Madam's. Wearing a nondescript shift she had lifted from the servants' quarters, Macy joined the still angry townspeople as they streamed down from Noble Hill. Two hours earlier she was a somebody, sitting on the Baronial Dais, looked up to by the very crowd she was now part of. Now she was invisible, just another nobody jockeying for position in their race down the hill. It made her sad.

She told herself she wouldn't cry. She was tough. She was used to being alone. It had been nice to play pretend and dress-up, but that's all it was: pretend. Now it was over and it was time to grow up and move on.

The one good thing that came of all of it was that she had seen the world beyond Friston's walls. She played her options over in her mind. That she had to leave Friston wasn't in doubt. Staying would be too painful. But where would she go and how would she get there?

As she sleepwalked down the hill, a sight in the harbor gave her reason to pause. *The Baroness' Revenge*. Aaah, crazyboy. How she missed him. She smiled remembering their flight to ValleyHo. It had been the first time she'd seen Eric. She chuckled, remembering the look on his face when she'd mooned him. Aaah, Eric. A tear came to her eye.

If she was going to get out of Friston, it had to be by water. Barely realizing she was doing it, she walked right past the street to Madam's and headed for the dock and Cap'n Waldo.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

"I'm not my mother! I'm not my mother! I'm not my mother!"

Callie lay across her bed, using tears to wash away the encounter with Owen Camberly. Between him and the Deacon, they had managed to again make her question whether or not she wasn't just like her mother. 'Was she?'

Deep down, she had to admit that the thought of being Baroness appealed to her, regardless of the price. The realization made her feel dirty. Not all that long ago she still fantasized about leading a life full of love, using whatever power she might attain in ways that would make others love her. 'Who was she kidding?' Childish fantasies. The world doesn't work that way.

The harsh reality of the situation was that she had a choice. For the first time in her life, the power was in her hands. 'Expose the will, turn power over to Hawkins, blend into the background, then wake up every morning looking for love and wondering what could have been. Or, destroy the will, marry Owen, share the power, and become her mother.' It was her choice. It was the kind of choice where one learns an awful lot about themselves. And Callie wasn't sure she liked what she was learning.

Drowning in a wave of self-pity, she forced herself to roll over and sit up. No sooner had she done so than the door burst open and in rushed Beck and Eric.

"Macy's gone. She's run away. ...a letter. She left a letter." tumbled out the words.

"Why?" was all she could manage in reply.

"She says... She says it's because she loves me." squeaked Eric.

"Foolish girl." replied Callie, already feeling the loss.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

"Well, let's go get her." said Beck, staring out the window, back to them.

"What?" asked Eric.

"Let's go get her. If she's running away, the only place she can run to is the docks. While we're there, we can check on your Da. ...make sure he got in OK. But we oughta hurry. ...looks like *The Baroness' Revenge* is about to dock."

Beck went over, sat by his sister, and drew her close. She melted into him, no sign of her usual fire.

"You oughta go." she said. "Don't worry about me, I'll be OK. There's a lot riding on tomorrow."

"You still have it?" asked Beck.

"Right here." she answered, tapping her breast. "Now go get Eric's Da so we can put an end to all of this. I need a bath and a good night's sleep." She snorted. "After all: Tomorrow's my wedding day. I need to look my best."

"Don't even joke like that!" reprimanded Beck. "We haven't done all this for nothing. Eric's Da is a good man. He'll set things straight."

"Yeah." chimed in Eric. "You get your rest and we'll put Owen Camberly in his place tomorrow. Pretend it's a real wedding. He sure is in for a surprise. I can't wait to see the look on his face."

"You're rambling." chuckled Beck as he headed for the door. "C'mon, we'll borrow a couple of the guards' horses. We can be down at the docks in minutes. C'mon, time's a'wastin'."

With a last, concerned look at a worn-out Callie, he was through the door and off in pursuit of Macy and a Baron. .

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Head spinning, stomach churning, Waldo drained the last drop of the good stuff, dropped the bottle, and reached out to steady himself.

“Whooooa!” he exclaimed, as the buzz kicked in and the cabin started spinning. After a 100 proof belch that darn near burned the hair out of his nostrils, he managed to get things under control, get the rubber out of his legs, and get back to his usual, drunken self. ‘Yep, that was the good stuff.’

He needed to get back up on deck. They would be docking soon and he needed to oversee that idiot, Daly. He wanted to keep an eye on Hawkins, too. As he headed for the cabin door, a shadow flitted across the open porthole. Glancing in that direction, he saw a huge form stealthily moving along the railing, headed for the bow. A glint of steel told him that the twilight-shrouded figure was carrying a knife. ‘Oh, shit!’

Waldo waddled his way toward the cabin door. Through its window he could still see the shape of Hawkins leaning on the rail, mind far away. The dock was just ahead. He had to do something and he had to do it fast.

Grabbing a hold of either side of the cabin door, Waldo launched himself up, out, and into the back of the knees of the big man. With an ‘Ooooff!’ they hit the deck rolling. Bracing himself for a knife thrust that never came, Waldo saw stars when he was kicked in the head by a size fifteen.

Just as things were about to go black, he gazed through the stars, across the deck, and realized he’d made a huge mistake, perhaps the biggest in his mistake-filled life. Then he passed out. .

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“Macy! Long time: No see.”

“Macy! Where ya been?”

“Macy! Wanna do me!”

She couldn’t help but smile at the ribald shouts of endearment hurled at her as she headed toward the docks. ‘Who was she kidding?’ This was her world. These were her people. The streets were what she knew. The streets were what she was good at.

At dockside she climbed up to a familiar perch on one of the pilings, balancing herself by clinging to the thick rope with her long toes. Just to her right was the empty berth toward which *The Baroness' Revenge* was headed. It was her favorite time of day as sunlight was quickly being replaced by firelight.

She willed herself to not look uphill towards the Castle. They should have found her letter by now. 'What would they do? What could they do?' Life would go on. In a few minutes Eric's Da would be arriving to claim his inheritance. He was Eric's future. She was his past. She forced herself not to cry. Her time in the fancy clothes had made her grow soft. ...sentimental. She left that side of herself behind when she'd snuck out of the Castle. It was scary how quickly she reverted to her former, harder self.

A motion on *The Baroness' Revenge* caught her eye as it smoothly slipped into its berth. There was a tussle up on deck, the glint of a knife. ...a spray of black that must have been blood. Then a body was heaved overboard, splashing into the bay below. A shadowy figure climbed up onto the rail, then jumped to the dock and tore off, heading for a darkened side street. Seconds later a much larger figure, knife in his teeth, leapt over the rail and gave pursuit.

The second the gangplank crashed to the dock, Cap'n Waldo staggered down it, bloody knife in hand. Paralyzed, Macy just sat there and watched as the fat man weaved his way across the quay towards the tavern. She was still sitting there when two horsemen came thundering around the corner, pulling up in front of *The Baroness' Revenge*.

From her perch in the shadows, she watched as they dismounted and hurried up the gangway. When they came back down, hurling questions at her, she choked out, in her thickest street urchin accent, answers that didn't answer any of them. When they obviously mounted up and rode back up the hill, her first tear escaped.

"G'bye my love. G'bye Eric." she whispered to herself as they disappeared around the corner.

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-----Chapter 13-----
-----PARTINGS-----

Callie yawned. She hadn't slept well last night. Nor much. She just couldn't close her mind down. The terrible choices that confronted her from the moment Owen slipped the will into her hands seemed to give her spiritual indigestion. She found out things about herself that did more than leave a bad taste in her mouth. They shook her to her very core.

Sitting in her wedding dress, all prim and proper on the edge of her bed, she steeled herself against the tears that threatened to make a mess of her makeup. Having kicked out her ladies in waiting, she had an hour to herself before they came to drag her off to the Cathedral ...off to her future. One hour. As if on cue, the Cathedral bells began to chime. Rather than improve her mood, they just seem to accentuate Annie's loss.

Looking down into her lap at the sweat stained will clutched tightly in her grasp, she fleetingly sensed the freedom it represented. ...and the power. 'Damn Owen Camberly!' Did he know her better than she knew herself? The piece of paper she held in her hands removed any pretense that she was being forced into a marriage against her will. With one bold stroke, Owen had removed the only psychological defense she had against him. If she marched down the aisle to him she could never again claim the moral high ground. 'Damn Owen Camberly! Damn him to Hell!'

Jumping up, she padded over to the window. Below her Friston was a-bustle in a holiday sort of way. No one would be working today. The signs of rebirth in the burnt out southern sections of town weren't accompanied by the sounds of hammering and sawing for the first time in weeks. The air was filled with the pealing of bells as seemingly every church in town followed the Cathedral's lead. The skeletal masts of ships going nowhere line the harbor, including that of *The Baroness' Revenge*.

Callie looked down again at the will, now clutched tightly to her breast. Decisions had always come easy to her: 'go to the deep end, dive in, and deal with the consequences later'. Annie had once said that 'impetuous' was her middle name. Looking back on it now, she realized that it was only because her nice little ordered life had never really left her faced with any choices of consequence, beyond what to wear to dinner.

She never felt so all alone. First: her dad. Then: Annie. Now: Macy.

"Get used to it, kid." She muttered to herself. For the briefest of seconds, she saw her mother in a different, more sympathetic light, but it quickly passed. Turning on her heel, she went back inside.

She had to make her decision, and she had to make it soon. Taking a seat on the edge of the bed, she willed her mind to silence. She stared across the room at her little altar, mesmerized by the flames from its candles as they danced in the breeze from the open windows. She inhaled deeply of the sandalwood smoke as it curled upward from the incense cone she had lit earlier. In the center of the altar, a golden, jewel-encrusted ceremonial wine goblet beckoned.

In the silence, she could hear the guttering of the candle flames, the pealing of the bells, and the scurry of servants as they rushed about outside her door. Underlying all of this was the sound of rushing water coming from the grate in the wall.

She had tried to ignore it. Like a punch, it hit her that she had spent most of the night trying to block it out. It was a sound that had always soothed her, a sound that had been the last thing she had heard every night of her life. Now all it represented was the safe place she'd tried to get to as Owen Camberly savaged her.

"Thank God for my guardian angel." she whispered, crossing herself. "I pray for the strength to do what I must."

Rising without a sound, she padded over to the altar, dropped to her knees, and crossed herself again. With an "I hope I know what I'm doing.", she held the will out to the flame and

watched as her last chance of calling off the marriage went up in flames. Crossing herself a last time, she picked up the goblet with both hands and downed the wine in one gulp, grimacing at its unfamiliar bitterness

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Macy yawned. She hadn't slept well last night, nor much. As she plodded down the hill towards Madam's, all she could think about was curling up in her little room under the stairs and going to sleep until all this was over. She needed to get off the streets and away from the festive mood that only served to deepen her depression. When the town's church bells joined in with those of the Cathedral she increased her pace without even being aware of it.

After seeing Beck and Eric ride back up the Hill last night, she had found a hay-filled wagon and cried herself to sleep. She couldn't have slept much for the moon was barely up when her tear encrusted eyes popped open. Popping out of the wagon, she crossed the quay to the tavern in search of Cap'n Waldo and passage out of town.

The Cap'n was in his cups and blubbering like a baby. When she had suggested that maybe he ought to head up to Madam's and sleep it off, he just wailed all the louder. When he finally passed out and splashed to the floor, Macy was able to get him as far as Madam's front door by enlisting the aid of three young stalwarts and a wheelbarrow.

It was the middle of the night by the time she entrusted the Cap'n to the sobering ministrations of Ellaye. Just as she was about to head for under the stairs and her little room to collapse into a fetal ball, Madam had awakened and made her appearance. She was all over Macy, smooching and jigging, twittering for joy over her young charge's reappearance. Lilly and the other girls were there, providing the chorus. If only for a moment, Macy was able to forget her troubles. ...her pain. ...her loss. It was good to be home again.

She didn't know whether to laugh or cry at that. 'Home?' Was this home? It had surprised her how quickly she'd become accustomed to the fancy foods and clothes. ...the being waited on hand and foot. ...the wanting for nothing. After a lifetime of staring up the hill at them, it had been surprising how much like her they all were: Beck, Annie, Callie, Eric. Like her, they were just people. 'Well, not really.'

And that was the crux of the matter, was it not? While she might be able to look at them and admit that they were 'just like her', they could never look at her and admit she was 'just like them'. For if they did, they would have to admit that they had no more right to the fancy foods and fancy clothes than she did: that they had no more right to rule her than she had to rule them. ... that their blood was no better than hers. It was just blood.

So, as Madam and the girls fussed over her, Macy had found herself very far away. She found herself wondering if, at some point in the future, she would look back on this very moment as the moment she grew up, the moment she turned from a child into a woman. Being slapped upside the head with reality does have a way of beating the child out of one, she thought.

So, as Madam and the girls went off to assist in the sobering up of Cap'n Waldo, Macy had plopped down on the couch to contemplate her next move.

"Get over it," she muttered to herself, looking around. The past few weeks had been a nice little vacation from her life, but that's all they were: a vacation. The question was: how could she use what she had learned on her 'vacation' in this, her real-life?

So, as she had sat there on that couch in Madam's darkened front parlor in the predawn hours, she had said her final goodbyes to Eric. Not the racking, painful goodbyes of a childish puppy love, but the reasoned, mature goodbyes of a self-aware woman.

She was not part of that world, but neither was she in awe of it. Though that world would never accept her for who she was, she vowed to herself that, in the future, she would treat that world, and those in it, as she herself would wish to be treated.

Having come to that conclusion she knew what she had to do. Rising from the couch, she headed for the front door and, after closing it behind her, disappeared into the darkness

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

Beck yawned. He hadn't slept well last night. Nor much. After scouring the port for signs of Macy or Eric's Da, the two of them had dragged themselves back up the hill well after midnight. His distraught friend had rambled on for another hour before excusing himself and heading off to the guest room that Beck had arranged for him. When Beck's head finally hit the pillow, he felt like he'd been assaulted by every fear, insecurity, and nightmare he'd ever known. He had awoken at dawn, drenched in sweat, without realizing that he'd ever even fallen asleep.

He leaned his head against the padded back of the Seneschal's chair, but he dared not close his eyes. Spread out before him, the pews of the Cathedral were slowly filling, the expectant hum of voices rising from the crowd like an early morning ground fog. The organist's opening chops cut through the buzz like rays of sunshine and the deep ringing of the Cathedral bells reverberated in the air like distant thunder. 'Or was that his heart?'

Today was the day. Looking down stoically, Beck couldn't help but reflect upon how differently things could have turned out. Today should have been his wedding day: The day he was crowned Baron, the woman he loved at his side. 'Aw, Hell! 'Shoulda... Coulda... Woulda... 'Is' is all that matters. He sure hoped Callie knew what she was doing.

If Eric's Da didn't get here soon, things were going to turn bad real quick. He seems to have disappeared without a trace, along with the two who had accompanied him from Sacton on *The Baroness' Revenge*. Cap'n Waldo, too. Maybe it was for the best. If they couldn't find him, then neither could Owen.

Speaking of Owen, there he was now, sweeping through the doors, sun at his back, future mother-in-law chattering away at his side. The Deacon followed in their slipstream. 'Only God knew what the three of them were plotting,' he thought. 'Or maybe it was the other guy, the one down below.' If nothing else good came of today, at least he was out from under his mother's roof and influence. 'Good riddance,' he muttered under his breath, then crossed himself and glanced to the heavens guiltily.

It was getting close now. The crossbow bearing honor guard had entered the Cathedral just behind the groom, with the other front pew personages just behind them. The Gubnator and Gubness were there, him playing the crowd in his usual bigger-than-life way. The CeeEeeHo and CeeEffHo followed in all their skinny sternness, trailed by their birdlike, homely offspring. The Bishop of Sacton and his syncophantic entourage had slowed up just enough to make their entrance seem like another first rather than just another.

The organ music had picked up its pace and Beck could now hear additional church bells tolling forth from down the hill. 'Where was Eric?' He had left the Castle after breakfast to head down the hill and resume his search for Macy and his Da. Beck would have joined him, but as Seneschal of the Flame, his morning had been filled with ceremonial duties he couldn't shirk. Besides, his well-known face would have been more of a hindrance than a help, given the clandestine nature of Eric's quest. So, here he sat, worried to a frazzle.

"You look like you've seen a ghost."

Beck whirled around, startled by the voice in his ear. He was surprised to see Owen standing there with a cat-that-ate-the-canary look on his face.

"Are you waiting for some knight in shining armor to come to you and your sisters rescue?" Owen chuckled. "That kind of thing only happens in fairy tales. In the real world, might makes right." He leaned in closer.

“As in I ‘might’ not send your sister to a convent after she’s bred me an heir. As in Callie ‘might’ walk through that door with some last minute will that lets everyone live happily ever after.”

Owen laughed out loud and grasped Beck’s shoulder so hard it hurt. Beck saw his eyes roam the crowd, dart left, dart right, then bore in on him so hard that it caused whiplash.

“As in, instead of being dead, some gimp named Hawkins ‘might’ walk through those doors at the last minute to save your sorry ass because you’re too weak to save it yourself!” With a whirl, he turned and strode off towards the rectory. Aghast Beck knew that they had gambled and lost.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

Eric yawned. He hadn’t slept well last night. Nor much. After exhausting every search option available to them last night, he and Beck had returned to the Castle in the hope that good news awaited them there. It hadn’t. So after running his mouth at Beck to cast off excess nervous energy, he’d gone upstairs to try and get some rest. It was as if his eyes had been sewn open. He’d heard the bells chime two, three, and four. Somewhere around dawn he had gotten up and gotten dressed to resume his search.

As he rounded the corner onto the quay, *The Baroness’ Revenge* came into sight. Last night that idiot, Daly had told them he knew nothing. He said he’d gone below as the ship drew into its moorings, and when he’d returned topside everyone was gone. He had confirmed that Eric’s Da had sailed with them from Sacton, accompanied by, as he’d put it, ‘the big dude and the dark fella’. It was as if they had vanished into thin air.

Now, as he approached dockside, Eric could see a commotion at the foot of *The Baroness’ Revenge’s* gangplank. Drawing nearer, he could see that they were pulling something from the water. Standing on tiptoes, he could see that it was his Da.

His knees, weakened and his mind raced. He staggered over to a piling and plopped down on it. 'What did this mean? Where did this leave them? 'Neither the harbormaster nor any of the other Samaritans fishing the body out of the bay seemed to realize its identity, nor its importance. Eric staggered away, not trusting himself to answer any questions should any be asked. Crossing the quay, he found himself at the front doors of a tavern and decided that a drink might just steady his nerves and give him time to think.

After downing the first shot in one fiery, grimacing gulp, he ordered a second and settled down to nurse it. When news of the body reached the bar, drunken speculation ran rampant. Conspiracy theories abounded. But none were close to the truth.

When he heard Cap'n Waldo's name mentioned, his ears perked up. When he heard that the Cap'n had stumbled in here, late last night, bloody knife in hand, he drained his drink and motioned the tavern keeper for another. When it was served, he motioned the older man closer.

"Rumor has it the Seneschal ...huh? No, not Owen, the new one, Beck Friston, was looking for the Cap'n last night. I'd be betting there'd be a gold piece in it for you if'n you knew where to find him."

The barkeep harrumphed and turned away, only turning back when a gold piece magically appeared in Eric's palm.

"As I was saying...?" questioned Eric, eyebrows raised. The barkeep avoided Eric's gaze, studiously concentrating on the circular motions of his none-too-clean cleaning rag. Eric rolled the gold piece between his fingers. As a silence settled over them, separating them from the others like a snowfall in the forest, Eric knew he had won this battle of wills as he saw the other man's eyes dart to the other end of the bar, then back again. He leaned in closer.

"Yep, he was here last night. Drank himself into a puddle, as usual." Eyes left. Eyes right. "Splashed to the floor from the very stole you're sitting on. Seemed worried. More withdrawn than usual. Not 'imself."

He reached for the coin. Eric closed his fist around it.

"That was last night," he responded. "Don't care where he was last night." He waved an arm towards the others. "They already told me where he was last night."

The barman eyed the gold piece possessively and continued shining a whole into the bar top.

"He got hauled out of here in the middle of the night in a barrow, he did. Honest!" He crossed himself. "Was that little urchin works for Madam came for him, it was. You know the one. Pretty little thing. Shorthair. Always underfoot. A wheeler-dealer you ask me. But cute.

"She come rushing in after midnight. I figured Madam sent her. I was surprised. First time I'd seen her in weeks.... Let's see? At least since the Baron died... She handed out a couple coppers to the boys and they loaded him up and hauled him away."

Eric drained his third drink, left the gold piece on the bar, and staggered drunkenly toward the door.

"Oh yeah," called out the barman after him. "Now I remember. When you get to Madam's, ask for Macy, yeah, that's her name." Eric stumbled into the street as if the barman had thrown a brick at the back of his head.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

Waldo burped. He hadn't slept well last night. Nor much. Passed out was more like it. One minute he was sitting in his favorite dockside tavern hoisting a few, next thing he knows he's screaming like a little girl to get out of a tub full of icy water at Madam's. Ellaye is there, standing over him, snickering like a demon from Hell. 'Oh, the indignity of it all.'

Dried off and semi-sober, Waldo sat there downcast, a Buddha's-worth of naked flesh. He assiduously avoided Madam's gaze and no amount of prodding could seem to get his tongue working on replies to the questions she was hurling at him.

Madam's appearance wasn't helping her cause any. Already dressed for the wedding, Waldo couldn't help but notice that there was something different about her this morning. Her makeup was less garish. She wore only half as many rings and jewelry as usual. The cut of her gown was more conservative. 'She looked less, uh, 'whore-ish', than usual'. Waldo berated himself for the thought.

He continued to stare down at the tufts of hair rising from his protruding belly, consumed by emotions that were new and foreign to him. He was ashamed. 'Yeah, he was used to not knowing where he was when his eyes first fluttered open. He was used to being told of exploits from the previous evening for which he had no recollection. What he wasn't used to was letting Madam down.

'Damn right he was ashamed.' She had entrusted him with picking up the cripple in Sacton and bringing him to her. She hadn't told him why it was so important that he drop everything, but she hadn't needed to. He could see it in her eyes. And he could see it now. Or, rather, feel it. He dare not look at her.

But she knew. He knew that she did. He had never seen her like this before. When Ellaye reappeared from his rooms with a fresh change of clothes, Madam had just quieted and plopped herself down on the reinforced sofa sitting against the far wall. As his shirt was being buttoned he heard her sigh. Finally dressed, he found his courage.

"He's dead." he squeaked.

"I know." she replied.

"I'm sorry." he added. "What now?"

"I'm not sure." she answered, still far away. Rising, she crossed to him, and held out her elbow. "Come, we've a wedding to attend. It will go on whether we're there or not. Perhaps we'll think of something along the way."

Grabbing Madam's arm, Waldo took a step forward and things started to spin. He staggered and reached out for support with the other hand.

“Buck up, Waldo!” chirped Madam. “We’ve got to get our asses up that hill, and we’re gonna have to walk. No way a carriage will ever get through the crowds. Come on now!” Half pushing, half pulling, she propelled him towards the front parlor and the door.

As they entered the parlor, Waldo spied Macy as she was dragging herself up the far stairs. Madam called to her.

“Macy, dear! A little help here.” When she came to them, Madam instructed her to get under his other arm and help them get him at least as far as the horse trolley on Sacton Street. Macy protested only with her eyes and shoulders before acquiescing. When they reached Sacton Street to find the trolleys not running, Madam further cajoled her into the walk up the hill.

When they got there, all three of them were huffing and puffing just this side of a heart attack. The Cathedral bells were still pealing but the big double doors were closed, awaiting only the bride. They were too late. No way were they going to be able to fight their way through the throng filling every square inch of Noble Hill.

“Come on.” urged Macy. “They’ll have to clear a path from the Castle for Callie.” Corpulent charge in tow, breathing now back to normal, she headed for the front door of the Castle. Waldo did his best to keep up, Madam pushing from behind. They had not gone far when he heard a collective gasp from the crowd around him. Straining on tiptoes to see over and around the taller heads and headdresses in front of him, Waldo could just make out the object of their surprise: the Red Knight had just stepped forth from the Castle Frismont.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

He stood silently in the Frismont Castle courtyard and stared across the jousting pitch at the now closed Cathedral doors. He remained motionless, waiting as the dull roar of the crowd rippled to silence. This was it. It would be either him or Owen

Camberly. Enough was enough. At the end of the day, only one of them would be left standing.

He stared out through the eyes slits of his suffocating helm at the now silent crowd. Thank goodness he'd left most of the heavy plate armor at the bottom of the hill, donning only the red chain mail, helm, and a plain white belted surcoat. It was a warm day and he could feel every degree of it.

He hadn't been eating well lately and the climb uphill, through the underground passageway Madam had directed him to, had nearly done him in. Then he'd gotten caught up in the commotion engulfing the Castle. So here he stood unmoving, every eye upon him.

When he took his first step forward, the only sounds that he heard were the clinking of his chain mail and the rasping of his breath. The sea of expectant faces parted before him as he made his way out onto the pitch. Yesterday's triumph over Owen seemed somehow distant: Hollow.

He looked at the hope in the eyes of those he passed and prayed for the strength to do what must be done. 'Was this really happening? Could he really and truly be all that stood between these people's dreams and an Owen Camberly nightmare of a future?' He shuddered at the thought. ...at the implied responsibility. He might not have started this Red Knight thing. But he was going to end it. Here. Today.

Out of the corner of his eye he could see Madam and Cap'n Waldo bobbing and weaving their way towards him. He sure hoped she knew what she was doing. She was a tricky one all right. He hadn't known her all that long, but there was something about her that commanded authority. As for the Cap'n: Well...?

The only thing he knew for certain was that Owen Camberly had to be stopped. There had been enough killing. Well, maybe not quite enough. The good brother wasn't going to go down without a fight, nor go away quietly. He needed to die so that others may live.

He stopped at the base of the Cathedral stairs, took a deep breath, readjusted his burdens, and crossed himself with his mind.

He began his ascent, one step at a time. From inside he could hear the organist strike up 'Here comes the Bride'.

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Beck looked around frantically as the organist struck up the first chords of 'Here comes the Bride'. Closed off as they were here inside the Cathedral, it had been creepy the way the crowd outside had grown suddenly silent. Callie must be making her way across the compound.

It wasn't supposed to work like this. His mind wanted to scream. He wanted to jump up and call everything off. He needed to think. They needed to do something.

He looked out into the sea of faces. Eric was nowhere to be found. Madam wasn't there, either. 'Might that be a good sign?' He doubted it after Owen's recently whispered revelation. They were screwed. 'Did Callie know?'

Thank God she still had the will, even if it was a fake. Only they and Madam would know that. At least she could get out of marrying the bastard. But there was no way they could stop him from becoming Baron. Not now. Not after Beck gave up his claim. 'Damned if she did, damned if she didn't.'

Had Callie known all along? He had to wonder. Had she made a pact with the devil? Though he didn't want to admit it, deep down... Deep, deep down, he had to admit that it was at least possible. She would have sacrificed herself to save him. She had done it often enough in the past. 'Yeah, it was possible.' But not likely.

It didn't take into account Eric's Da. If he were truly one of the twins, then he could have the damn Barony. 'But would Callie feel the same way? He didn't want to admit it, even to himself, but he could see her wanting the power, wanting it bad enough that she'd share it with Owen Camberly. If that's what it took.

A thought crossed the outer fringes of his mind, and it chilled him. 'Did Callie plan to do away with her husband and rule

much as her mother had? Was Callie truly her mother's daughter? The Deacon seemed to think so. It made him sad.

As the organist pounded toward crescendo, every eye in the place turned towards the huge double doors in back. The crossbow-bearing honor guard, festooned in yellow rose embroidered surcoats, took their places lining the center aisle. Owen Camberly threw a smirk over his shoulder before taking his place up near the altar. Beck caught his mother casting a self-satisfied wink in her future son-in-law's direction. The Deacon was his usual stoic self. The congregation held its collective breath as two altar boys went to throw open the doors.

Beck stood as the cracks of sunlight streaming through the open doors grew wider. His heartbeat kept pace with the organist's poundings. Every eye converged on the opening doorway. Through it walked a fully helmed and armored Red Knight, Callie's lifeless body draped across his arms

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

Eric fought his way through the crowd, an elbow at a time. Up ahead, at the base of the Cathedral steps, he could just make out the tops of Madam's and Waldo's heads. 'Was Macy with them?' He could only hope so. He out-elbowed an old lady and drew that much closer.

At the top of the steps, he'd seen the Red Knight enter the Cathedral, clutching Callie to his chest. 'What was going on?' Everything was a mess. All their plans were coming apart. He had to get inside and let them know that his Da wasn't going to be riding to anyone's rescue.

'And what of Callie? What happened to her?' From where he fought his way through the crowd, he couldn't tell if she was alive or not. 'And what of the Red Knight?' His reappearance at the joust yesterday had caught everyone by surprise, no one more so than Brother Owen.

He chuckled, then oofed as his lack of concentration cost him an elbow to the midsection. He struggled forward, calling out

to Madam just as the silence of the crowd rippled to an end. She didn't seem to hear him. Sensing an opening, he crashed through it and found himself at the foot of the steps.

By now he could see Madam and Waldo almost at the top. His heart leapt at the sight of the Cap'n's other human crutch. 't was Macy!' He'd found her and vowed to himself to never again let her out of his sight. Her past mattered to him as little as his future did. With Hawkins dead, he wasn't going to be the heir to anything. He loved her and, at this very moment, that was all that mattered.

"Well, almost." he muttered guiltily. With another well-placed elbow to a throat, he found himself almost at the top of the steps. Though he'd been calling her name since first spying her, he didn't think Macy had heard him. She hadn't turned around, that's for sure.

As soon as the Red Knight and Callie disappeared through them, the doors started to swing shut, pushed by the Cathedral acolytes and assisted by members of the honor guard. Waldo, Madam, and Macy had managed to work their way into position to follow right behind.

By the time Eric had fought his way to the top of the steps, the crowd had been pushed back and the doors were a whisper away from kissing closed. Using an instep behind him as a starting block, Eric shot through the opening and rolled across the marble threshold, avoiding an oaken amputation by inches. Inside, he bounced once and came to his feet.

No sooner had he done so than a massive arm grabbed him across the shoulders and a distilled belch slapped him in the side of the head.

"Where's Macy?" he asked a wobbly, cross-eyed Cap'n Waldo from inches away. Struggling to focus, the Cap'n leaned in even closer and belched again. "You ain't her, is ya? Well, I'll be double Dutch damned! She was here jist a minit ago!"

‘That was close.’ With a glance back towards the doors, Macy ducked low and scurried into the flower-filled side aisle. With everyone standing to get a better look at what was going on at the entrance, she was sure that her route of retreat had gone unnoticed by Eric. She wasn’t strong enough to face him and still do what she must.

As she crept up the aisle towards the rectory and her exit, she kept pace with the red clad warrior and Callie. She could see Waldo, Madam, and Eric trailing them up the center aisle. The honor guard, which had used to their cross bows to form an archway when the back doors had opened, now seemed uncertain as to what to do next. Some kept their weapons aloft. Others head, lowered them. A few even pointed them at the knight and his bridal burden. Eerily, the organist continued to pound out the Wedding March, oblivious to the change in circumstances.

Up front, Beck had risen and was talking to Father Tom. The Baroness was babbling in Owen’s ear but he was ignoring her, staring slack-jawed at the procession making its way up the center aisle. At their side stood the Deacon, lost in concentration, silently stroking his chin.

Macy was in shock. Dressed as she was in servant costume and bedraggled from lack of sleep, no one was going to confuse her with the dashing Miss Blackwood, who had so recently been Callie’s new confidant. ‘Nope.’ She was just plain Macy again. Just another faceless servant. Just another wench.

The sight of Callie’s body had been too much. ...too much to process. Somewhere out on the periphery, somewhere out there that she didn’t want to acknowledge, she knew that her new friend’s death was all her fault.

At the time, it had seemed like the right thing to do. When she had snuck out of Madam’s in the middle of the night and made her way to Callie’s bedsides, it had seemed like a mission of mercy.... A last good act before returning to her former life. She had felt that Callie needed to know that Eric’s Da was dead so she could call off the marriage to Owen. She should have known.

‘Who was she kidding?’ Everything was now a mess and it was all her fault. Callie was dead because Macy’s news had left her no way out. Callie’s death was the only way to keep Owen Camberly from ruling the Barony. Macy wasn’t sure what the future held, but this seemed a whole lot like Owen Camberly’s last hurrah. He seemed to realize that, too.

“Murderer!” he screamed, regaining his voice. “Get him!” He shrieked at the still paralyzed honor guard as he hopped about at the head of the aisle.

“Mister Camberly!” Boomed out Beck from behind him. “You no longer hold any authority *whatsoever* in this Barony, so shut your mouth, and get out of the way!”

Beck descended the dais and pushed the still-frantic Owen off to the side.

“As Seneschal of the Flame, I am the acting authority here until the matter of succession is resolved. Lay her here.”

He cleared the way then, with dignity, helped lay his sister upon the altar, bare feet hanging over one end, red tresses cascading to the floor over the other. There would be time for tears later

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“...Lay her here.”

Beck cleared the way for the red clad warrior to lay his sister atop the altar. Along the way, the organist’s poundings echoed to silence, leaving the clink of chain mail as the only sound bouncing from the rafters. A punishing glance in Owen’s direction kept the good brother’s mouth closed. Out of the corner of his eye, Beck saw a small someone slipped through the rectory door, snicking the door shut behind her.

He beckoned the Deacon to the altar and noticed that the town doctor was fighting his way forward from the back of the crowd. Beck deftly maneuvered himself between Owen Camberly and the red clad mystery man. The shock having worn off, the

crowd was coming to life, whispering up a storm, with question marks for the lightning.

Spying one of Callie's ladies in waiting lingering back by the door, he motioned for the Captain of the Guard to bring her forward. Leaving the Deacon and the Doc to their ministrations, and the rest of them milling about, he took her off to one side.

"What happened?" he asked quietly.

"Sh-She was ready an hour ago, M'Lord, and asked us for some time alone so that she could pray. When we knocked to tell her it was time to come to the church, there was no answer.

"We were yelling her name and beating on the door when he..." She pointed at the knight. "...came striding down the hallway. With his help we beat the door down."

She paused and dared a glance into Beck's eyes. He smiled and motioned for her to continue.

"She was sprawled on the floor, M'Lord. There was an empty wine cup beside her, on the floor. Poison, M'Lord. One of the servants said the cup smelled of poison, the stuff they leave out around the Castle. ...for the rats.

"He..." she gestured again. "He then picked her up and brought her here."

"Thank you, uuh, Mary," he said, remembering her name. Then he turned and went back to the altar. He looked down. Her lips were blue. Her skin was so pale it almost wasn't there. The Doc was holding her wrist, looking up at Beck, and slowly shaking his head. Beck could see the Deacon headed for the rectory.

Even though the Red Knight still wore his helm, Beck could see that he and Owen were trying to kill each other with their stares. When his dry-eyed mother tried to open her mouth to share one of her usual pearls of wisdom, he just wasn't in the mood, and slapped a hand across her lips. Her eyes went wide. His narrowed.

Solemnly, he walked over and stood before the Red Knight. "Good sir. Half of those here went to saint you. The other half want to string you up. You got some explaining to do."

The warrior reached for his red helm, took it off, and shook out his blond locks. From behind, a gasp. "Oh, mein gott! It's Arthur Camberly!"

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

"Oh, mein gott! It's Arthur Camberly!"

Waldo, blinked to clear his bloodshot eyes, then cast a dirty look over his shoulder at the Gubnator.

"Dude's Looney Tunes!" he muttered to Madam.

Taking an arm from across Eric's shoulders, he wiped his eyes in a further effort to clear them. With a deep breath and an aromatic belch, he forced himself to stand on his own two feet.

"If'n dat's Arthur Camberly," he muttered, directed at no one. "how comes he gots me former mate Will Sutter's face?" He turned to Madam with an eyebrow raised.

"He's your mate...?" she questioned, remembering having seen him as she had sent him and Macy off to ValleyHo in a quest to find Edmund Camberly. "What goes around comes around!" she uttered with a chuckle. "Leave it to you Cap'n Waldo!"

He looked at her, not understanding, then turned back to the confrontation between Will and young Beck. The Seneschal had again positioned himself between Owen Camberly and the blonde warrior. With a last sad glance at Callie on the altar, Will Sutter bit his lower lip, looking for a place to begin. Beck remained quiet, waiting for him to do so.

"The Red Knight is dead." he started, then repeated it loud enough for all to hear. "He died the night of the big fire. Lady Sarah, too. Saw it with my own eyes. T'was Annie's brother. Learned that later. But you can check." He looked Beck in the eye. "It's true."

"Me?" He looked at Waldo. "The Cap'n's right. I was just his mate. Wrong place. Wrong time. Saw things I shouldn't-a-seen." He cleared his throat, raised his voice, and pointed a finger at Owen.

“He killed him. Burned him alive. Raped Annie’s sister. I was a witness.”

As Owen opened his mouth to protest, Beck whirled and hurled a ‘silence!’ at him with such force that it seemed to rattle the stained glass windows. Turning back to Will, in a gentler voice he bade him to continue. He did, gesturing towards Eric.

“It was his Da first asked me to pretend to be the Red Knight. ‘twas me at the ValleyHo memorial ceremony. ‘twas me yesterday on the jousting pitch.” He nodded towards Madam. “She asked me to continue pretending. Anything to keep Owen from hurting more people.”

He turned toward the Gubnator.

“I’m sorry, M’Lord, for pretending to be Arthur up in Sacton. Long story. But Arthur’s dead, too. I was there. He died during the battle. In ValleyHo. He killed him.” Again he gestured, this time towards Owen. “I saw him stab his brother in the back. I saw him murder his.....Ooof!”

There was a commotion as the fat sea captain blindsided him, knocking him to the floor. A crossbow bolt protruded from Waldo’s chest. Halfway up the aisle stood Owen Camberly, crossbow in hand.

“Liar!” He screamed, then turned and headed for the door.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

Like the rest of those in attendance, Eric stood immobilized as Owen Camberly retreated up the aisle and through the doors. In the blink of an eye, he was gone. By the time Beck recovered enough to issue an order for his arrest, it was already too late.

Turning back, Eric saw that Madam had cradled the fallen Waldo’s head in her lap. Having given up on Callie, the Doc had rushed over to see what he could do for the Cap’n. The rapidly spreading stain on his shirt-front told Eric it wasn’t going to be much.

Crossing himself, Eric backed away, making room for those who were pushing forward from behind. He ascended the dais

and scanned the crowd for signs of Macy. 'Couldn't she see that everything was different now?' The death of his Da had left him free to make his own decisions. He loved her and knew that she knew it.' So why wasn't she coming forward?'

Behind him, he heard the Deacon muttering to himself, now bent over Callie's prostrate form. Turning, he could see the old man rubbing some kind of salve on her lips, then trying to spoon some liquid between them.

It made him sad. Just another example of refusing to accept the reality of the situation. 'Was that what he was doing with Macy Bl....., Macy whatever her name was?' At this very moment, it sure as hell seemed like it.

Today was supposed to have been a day of celebration, yet here he stood, surrounded by the dead and dying. 'Had Owen Camberly won after all? 'He was gone, escaped. Yet, if no one in the Barony ever again laid eyes on him, he had left a legacy of pain, violence, and death that would last many lifetimes. 'Yeah. It sure seemed like he had won.'

Giving up on any hope of finding Macy, Eric descended the dais with a last glance back at the Deacon and Callie. Silently, he said his goodbyes. At the head of the aisle, Cap'n Waldo still lay in Madam's lap, working his way inexorably towards his last breath. Eric tried to squeeze by, drawn towards the doors and the open spaces and fresh air they represented.

A tap on his shoulder and Eric turned, surprised to be looking up at the hulking form of his father's man, Simon. Through a series of hand gestures and other nonverbal communication, he let Eric know that Richmond had been responsible for his Da's death. And that he had been responsible for Richmond's.

Eric forgave him with his eyes, then gestured towards the doors and bade the big man to follow. Halfway down the aisle he turned back, surprised to see the gentle giant on his knees, kissing Madam's hand. Tears in his eyes, he stood up and followed Eric out the door.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

Waldo's eyes went wide as that big, knuckle crunching monster knelt and took Madam's fleshy hand in his two big paws. Before Waldo could eke out a protest, the big man took her hand to his lips and kissed it. Then he stood up and disappeared in the direction of the door.

"S-s-sorry." Gurgled the Cap'n in the general direction of his weeping friend. He could feel the softness of her expansive, velvet covered lap as it cradled his head. And the gentle strokes of her hand as it brushed the perspiration from his brow. Looking up into her upside down face, he could see a tear as it formed in the corner of her eye, then watch it as it grew and leapt forth to splash loudly against his cheek.

"S-s-sorry." He gurgled again as his lungs slowly filled with blood. 'Funny. ' He'd been shot with an arrow. Then why did it feel like he was drowning? He wasn't long for this world and, strangely enough, he was okay with that.

No more worries. No more financial problems. No more hangovers. No more pain. 'What wasn't to like?' Looking up into Madam's tear stained face made him ashamed of himself.

He hadn't done much with the life the good Lord had entrusted him with, but he had managed to look out for her. He'd kept her safe. He'd kept her secrets. He'd done right by her.

It pained him to think that he had let her down when it most counted. He hadn't managed to get Hawkins back to Friston for her.

"S-s-sorry." He gurgled yet again as she repeatedly mumbled a mantra of 'ThassOK. ThassOK. ThassOK.' down at him. 'No. It wasn't okay.' Things were all fucked up because of his big mistake. He had but a few gurgled breaths in which to do what he could to make amends.

Her face was devolving into swirls of color and the sounds assaulting his ears no longer made sense. It wouldn't be long now. Fighting gravity, he reached for Madam's hand and held on

tight. Forcing himself to concentrate, he guided it towards his lap. She resisted. He increased the pressure.

"Peli..." He mumbled. "Peli..." Then he forced her hand towards the pouch he wore on his belt. When she tried to pull away he held on tighter and blinked his eyes into focus. The rattle in his chest was a constant now.

"Not... Not... Not..." he heaved. From someplace far away, he felt her try to remove her hand from his. He clutched tighter and forced it into the pouch. He heard the crinkle of paper and smiled. He tried to shake his head. She withdrew a sheaf of papers and he let go of her hand.

"N-not both. It's... Will... Will..." he struggled to say as the first streams of blood trickled from his lips. "Will... Will..." he repeated, his eyes darting rapidly about. Then they were still, staring silently at nothing. The Cap'n had left the building.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

Will, dressed as the Red Knight, felt conspicuous as he stood in the circle of gawkers, watching as the life drained out of Cap'n Waldo. His feelings toward the fat man were ambivalent to say the least. He'd spent many the hard day under his harsh tongue and lash. Yet, had he not saved him from the clutches of the Unwashed, he would probably be dead. As with most passings, the benefit of the doubt was the easy way out.

Just as he was trying to figure out how to make a graceful exit, the Baroness seemed to come to life. Screeching, she separated herself from the pack and stood towering over Madam and the now dead Waldo.

"Get out! Get out! Get out!" she wailed. "Get this riffraff out of this holy place where it doesn't belong. Guards! Guards! Where are the damn guards. Get this mess off the floor and throw it back down the hill where it belongs!" She was hopping about, her face redder than the hair piled atop her head.

With every one else seemingly frozen in shock at her sudden outburst, Will instinctively rushed forward in defense of

Madam and the Cap'n's memory. Madam appeared to be ignoring the tirade, studying the papers she had pulled from Waldo's pouch. Waldo was already somewhere far away, undoubtedly trying to lie his way past Saint Peter.

Just as Will got there, Madam jumped to her feet, surprisingly spry for a woman of her bulk. As the two women glared at each other eye-to-eye, the Deacon too joined their little circle. The tension hung in the air, a combustible mixture waiting to explode.

And explode it did: upside the Baroness' head in the flash of a ring encrusted fist. Down she went. Out cold. Madam wasn't one to be trifled with. When the Deacon bent down to inspect, he was surprised to see that a rose shaped bruise was already forming in the middle of the Baroness' heavily rouged cheek. He looked up at Madam. Back at the bruise. Up at Madam again. He jumped up.

As a light went on behind his eyes and his lips fluttered into action, she put one jewel-encrusted finger to his lips.

"Sssssh." she said. "That was a lifetime ago."

From somewhere behind him, Will heard a sputtering cough and an exclamation.

"Aw, Hell!" I can't do anything right!"

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

By the time Macy made her way out of the rectory's side door, the tears were streaming down her face. 'Not Callie too!' First: Will. Then: Annie. Now: Callie. It was all too much. When Eric had tumbled through the closing Cathedral doors, she had just run.

The resolve she had felt while still down at Madam's had melted away at the sight of him, especially amidst the finery and wealth of the Cathedral. 'Who was she kidding?' Who wouldn't want this life, given a choice? She couldn't stay in Friston. Noble Hill, and the Castle would loom over her every day, casting deep shadows across the sunshiny person she had always been. She

could no longer be herself here. If she stayed in Friston, desire would destroy her.

“The secret to life is how well you bullshit yourself.” she muttered, drying her tears on the rough material of her ragged sleeve. Having made her way across the compound, she stood at the top of Sacton Street and looked down. Her life, her new life, her new old life, began down there. Not up here.

She could see Madam’s street down by the docks and Cap’n Waldo’s ship still at berth. ‘Get on with it,’ she urged herself. With a last look back, she could have sworn she saw Eric at the top of the steps. ‘Eric who?’ She was already doing her best to forget him. The secret to life is how well you bullshit yourself after all.’

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

“Aw, Hell! I can’t do anything right!” Callie wiggled her toes and breathed deep of the incense-laden, floral-scented air. She snuck a peek at the expansive oak beamed ceiling. ‘Yep’, she was still ‘here’, not ‘there’.

It just wasn’t fair. She’d drifted along the tunnel. She’d seen the light. She’d felt eternity’s reassuring embrace. Now she was back ‘here’ again. ‘How could that be?’

She felt hands brushing the damp hair back from her forehead. She heard the town Doc muttering to himself.

“... a miracle!” he whispered reverently, over and over again.

In the background, she could hear other voices, a myriad of sound: young and old, male and female, deep and hi-pitched. Their comments seemed to be directed at her. And then she heard it.

‘No! It couldn’t be.’ But there it was again. She couldn’t be imagining it. Maybe she was in the hereafter after all. For out there somewhere, unmistakably, she heard the voice of her Guardian Angel.

Eyes flying open, she bolted upright, sitting on the edge of the altar, feet dangling over the front. The Cathedral grew quiet except for the near silent mumbling of prayers. It seemed to her that virtually everyone was crossing themselves and looking to the heavens. She managed a “Hi there” and a guilty little wave. They erupted in applause and crushed forward to welcome her back from the dead.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

Will heard a shriek as someone stepped on the still prone Baroness in the melee to move forward. He hung back, drinking in the beauty of the tousled Callie as she held court for her myriad of well-wishers. He couldn't help but smile to himself at the role he had played in making this scene possible. With attention averted away from him, he started backing towards the door and his return to obscurity. He was pleased with himself. He'd done good.

About halfway there, he heard his name being called. Well, not really his name. That's why it took a while to register.

“Hey you! Mister Red Knight!” she called, waving him forward. He pointed a finger at the middle of his chest and she shook her head emphatically.

“Yes, you. Come forward.” she ordered. With trepidation Will reversed direction and retraced his steps up the center aisle. The crowd parted to let him pass. Every eye in the hall was on him. His heart was in his throat. The closer he got, the more beautiful she became.

As he ascended the steps, it was as if the two of them were the only people in the room. Everything else was a blur. His heart was beating so loudly, he was afraid she could hear it.

At the top of the steps he knelt, took her hand, and kissed it. She thanked him for having defeated Owen at the joust and for having carried her across the compound from the Castle. When she asked him what he wanted in return, he mumbled a few platitudes about duty and honor.

Her eyes went wide and she leaned back, mouth gaping open.

“You’re... You’re... You’re...” She whispered. “You’re my Guardian Angel!”

All will could do was shake his head, his cheeks turning as red as his chain mail.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

Eric could have sworn she saw him. Just before she disappeared over the brow of Sacton Street, she had turned. She had looked his way but she had given no sign of recognition. He looked up at Simon, confusion in his eyes. The big man had put a hand in the middle of his back and nearly threw him down the stairs.

By the time he reached the bottom, he was running. He didn’t stop until he reached the flatlands at the base of Sacton Street. Just as he turned into Madam’s Street, he saw Macy’s slight figure slipped through the doorway, closing it behind her.

He stopped, hands on knees, and gulped in big lungs full of air. When he sat down on the curb, he told himself it was just to give him time to catch his breath. When doubt started to creep in, he told himself it was only natural. When he found himself still sitting there a half hour later, he was telling himself he never he really loved her in the first place.

‘A relationship can’t be built on lies. Blood and water don’t mix. Once a whore, always a whore.’ By the time he slipped back into the Cathedral, he had thoroughly convinced himself that he’d been a victim of her feminine wiles. Why, then, he wondered, did it hurt so damn much?

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

Callie leaned in closer, put her hands on his shoulders, and drew him into her cocooning embrace. Still on his knee, he leaned

in until their eyes were but inches apart. She silently mouthed a thank you.

"If you were my Guardian Angel, then you know, you were, uh, there...? ...there that night? ...the night, uh, Owen, uh,...?" She let the implied questions hang between them, lowering her eyes in shame. He answered her with an almost imperceptible nod.

"No one need know." he mumbled.

"Then you know I am... I'm..." her voice caught, eyes still downcast. He grabbed her chin and forced her to look at him.

"What I know is that you are the bravest... The most beautiful... The, uh, same Miss Callie I have loved... We all have loved... ... Since I was a little boy. Nothing has changed. Nothing!" It was his turn to avert his eyes.

"The word 'love' tumbles easily from your lips.....my champion." she admonished. "Or have you forgotten?"

He looked up at her quizzically, his face so flushed she swore she could see a reflection of red in the white of her wedding gown.

"Oh, that's right." she continued, obviously relishing his confusion. "You weren't there yet. You were still making your grand entrance. But mother remembers. So do most of those here in attendance.

"Right, mother?" she yelled over the top of his head. "You remember, don't you? Offering my hand in marriage to the winner of yesterday's tournament?"

"To the winner go the spoils and all that? Of course, at the time you thought Owen had won. You never did have much luck in choosing your men, did you?"

She chuckled and looked back down at a flabbergasted Will, face red and eyes wide. She leaned in close and lowered her voice again.

"Be careful what you ask for. You might just get it."

"Are you crazy?" he mouthed.

"No, I'm impetuous." she chortled. "Ask anyone. I woke up this morning to the prospect of being Owen Camberly's

broodmare. What could be worse than that? Someone's got to be Baron of this God forsaken place. Someone's got to keep me in line." She winked.

"Who better than my Guardian Angel? Want the job? You're already down on one knee. Why not just go ahead and propose?" Will's lips moved, but nothing came out.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

Like most everyone else in the Cathedral, Beck just stood there, unsure of what to make of his sister's miraculous recovery. Her huddle with the Red Knight, or rather the guy pretending to be the Red Knight, and the accusations she hurled at their mother had unsettled him. One minute she was dead. The next she was back in control. He couldn't help but smile. It was as if everyone in the Cathedral was but a dim reflection in the light she cast. He wasn't sure what she was up to, but he had a feeling it would rock their world. There were moments that separate everything into 'before' and 'after'. He felt in his bones that this was going to be one of those moments.

He glanced sideways at his still shaken mother, the bruise on her cheek already purpling up. The smug look on the Deacon's face was inscrutable, as usual. Madam had returned to the fallen Cap'n. The Gubnator wasn't his usual boisterous self, but rather was concentrating on Callie, as if trying to read her silently moving lips. There was a hush of expectation as they watched his sister, an energy awaiting release like a tea kettle about to explode.

When Callie climbed down from the altar and warmly embraced the red clad warrior, smiles broke out across the room. When he lifted her up and their lips met in a wet, slobbering kiss, eyes went wide. When she turned him around and announced that he had proposed, and that she had accepted, the ticking of the rectory clock could be heard. The silence was broken by the clearing of a throat and an ominous utterance:

"Uh, that might just be a problem."

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

“Uh, that might just be a problem.”

Will just stood there, arm around Callie, as every eye in the place sought out Madam. She was again kneeling next to the lifeless body of Cap’n Waldo, softly caressing his hairless brow.

“Deacon.” she called, without raising her voice or looking up. “Here.” she offered, holding up the papers Waldo had forced on her with his dying breaths.

“Pelican.” She added softly. “Those were his dying words. ‘Twasn’t Owen. It was him. Look.”

All eyes flowed to Waldo, then the Deacon, who accepted the papers and carefully opened them. Quizzical eyebrows rose here and there as they waited for the little old holy man to peruse the document.

“What’s the problem?” he asked, looking down. “What’s it say?” She replied: “It’s the will, right? ...the one stolen off your desk on Pelican Island? Only it wasn’t Owen who took it. It was Waldo.”

“Yeah, it’s the one I found at the Baron’s deathbed. ... irrelevant now. Since Hawkins is dead, what difference does it make?”

“What’s it say?” she repeated. “Tell us all.” She looked up at Will with a sad smile. He passed it along to Callie. She just shrugged her shoulders.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

Callie was as confused as everybody else. Only the big woman kneeling on the floor seemed to know what was going on. Obviously her father’s will had finally turned up. ‘Was Owen one of the twins? Was he going to end up Baron after all?’ The Deacon cleared his throat and moved the document back and forth to bring it into focus.

“Very well.” he began. “This appears to be the last will and testament that was presented to our Baron on his deathbed by Sir

Edmund, Arthur's father. It has the Baron's seal." He held it up for all to see.

"It acknowledges twins, twin boys born to the first Baroness." His eyes flickered to the kneeling woman. "It acknowledges that they didn't die at birth." There was a murmur from the crowd. "It states that, unbeknownst to the Baron he, Sir Edmund, had not disposed of them, but rather spirited them away to be raised in anonymity."

The murmur grew louder. The Deacon grew quiet, looked sadly towards Callie and Beck, then waited for it to subside. When it did, he continued.

"It states that he had given the babes to good, childless, common folk to raise. One was given an educated, intellectual upbringing. The other was raised to be a warrior. He had also saved a young servant boy whose throat had been slashed. Him he assigned to the scholarly twin. ...the eldest twin. ...the crippled one. That twin became his voice since the servant boy never again spoke. This servant became his strength. ...his legs."

The Baron's true heir was Richard Hawkins. This will..." He held it up and shook it. "This will passed on the Baron's title to his eldest son. ...to Richard Hawkins."

He paused, the pain on his face obvious. The ticking of the rectory clock seemed ominously loud.

"Richard Hawkins body was fished out of the bay this morning, the obvious victim of a stabbing. A preliminary investigation seems to point to someone who was working for Owen Camberly."

The murmuring grew louder again, meaner this time, working its way toward sounding a whole lot like a lynch mob. The Deacon motioned them for quiet.

"Uh, by the way, Sir Edmund also acknowledged that, after securing the twins surrogate parents, he bought a baby from an unwed servant girl on his estate. After paying her grandly and sending her far away, he raised that baby has his own. He raised it alongside his own newborn son and called them twins. He did

this to attract attention, should anyone in future go looking for 'twins'. That bastard became the bastard we all know as Owen. Arthur was Sir Edmund's true son."

"Well!" shot out Beck. "Don't keep us on tenterhooks. Who was the second twin?"

"We don't know." answered the Deacon. "He was lost."

"Oh, but we do." murmured Madam. "He has been found. That is the problem."

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

All eyes were once again on Madam.

"Go on." urged Beck. "Tell us what you know."

She looked up at the Deacon.

"What does the will say? What does it say about the deformity?"

The Deacon gave her an exasperated look, and continued. Beck drew back from the look in his eyes. It was as if she were trying to paint him into a corner he didn't want painted into.

"It said Hawkins was deformed and that was perceived as a bad sign from God." he shot back, deftly avoiding, Beck noticed, any mention of his own role in the situation. Her eyes continued to bore into him.

"What does it say about the second twin?" she asked quietly.

"It said that he'd been raised to the sword, trained in the martial arts, but was killed in a raid by the Unwashed."

"No." she said, shaking her head. "What does it say about the deformity?"

With a scowl, the Deacon pressed on.

"It said the two boys had been born joined at the foot. The deformity which crippled the elder had occurred during the surgery to separate them."

"And what of the younger one?"

“It said he’d been left with a scar in the shape of an ankh on his left calf and was missing the first digit on the small toe of that foot. So what?”

He looked down at her, but she was looking toward the altar where Will stood open-mouthed, visibly trembling.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

Will just stood there, everything spinning. He felt like he was going to be sick. He could sense Callie at his side, fighting to keep him from falling over. His mind was racing so fast that no words formed, only images. Somehow it all made sense. But then again, it didn’t.

Twice here in the past few minutes, he’d gone from being an apprentice, a commoner, to being offered the Barony. Each offering had it’s hidden prices and rewards. Doubt had assaulted him from all sides lately. Then there was Callie’s miraculous resurrection. ...the battles of steel and wits with Owen. It was all too much.

When he looked down at Callie, she smiled up at him, but it didn’t conceal her pain. ...her loss. However far-fetched it was, she had come to view him as her guardian, her protector. Somehow he doubted that being her half-brother was compensation enough to avoid the lonely future he saw in her eyes.

And what of himself? Baron? Baaah! What did he know about being a Baron? When she had asked him to propose it seemed doable, but only because she was going to be at his side. Face it. She’s the true Baron material in the Friston family... And now...? Will was brought out of his reverie by her tugging on his sleeve.

“You kiss pretty dang good for a brother.” she said with a sad smile. Will wanted to run away.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

Callie didn't know whether to laugh or cry. It was all too much. Just a few short hours ago she had said her goodbyes to this world. Snatched back from the abyss, for a moment there it seemed like she was being smiled down upon. Now this. If there was a God, she had no doubt that He was indeed a cruel one.

She knew she had only a moment or two to come to peace with this. If the handsome young warrior standing at her side was her brother and the Baron to be, he was going to need help. Lots of help.

In that silent moment with herself, she vowed to be there for him as he had been there for her. ...to give to him unconditionally. ...to love him. She couldn't be his wife, but that didn't mean she couldn't be his partner. It would be a life of sacrifice, but she vowed to do it joyously. In that moment she knew she'd be okay with it. She wouldn't become the bitter old harridan that her mother had. After all, she had already died once today. From here on out, she was playing with house money. She squeezed his arm and leaned in closer.

"You can do it," she whispered. "I'll be there for you. I'll help. Just be you. That'll be good enough." He looked into her eyes and she could see the terror in them dissipate.

"I'll still always love you," he whispered behind a hand. Then he stepped forward and motioned the crowd to quiet. As soon as they did, the Gubnator stepped forward.

"Vait!" he boomed. "Ziss iss not right. Ve still have a problem!"

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

Like everyone else, Beck stayed silent and waited for the Gubnator to continue. He watched as the big man's eyes darted back and forth between the Deacon and his mother. Both seem to be doing their utmost to avoid that gaze.

"Vell? I guess it vill be up to me, Ja?"

"No. No." offered the Deacon, shaking his head. "I will explain. It was my doing. I offer apologies in advance to those who may have been hurt."

The old man climbed halfway up to the dais upon which Callie and Will still stood. Turning, he raised his hand then, upon bringing it down, crossed himself.

"Lord forgive me." he mumbled, before clearing his throat and looking up at the assembly.

"Those were difficult times." he began in his best resonant preacher's voice. "Gubness. Beck. Callie. Others too many to mention. We have already heard the bad decisions made the night the first Baroness gave birth to co-joined twins. An examination of this young man behind me will reveal the scars that he has carried from birth. ...the scars that now make him heir to the Barony of Friston. I guess we owe Sir Edmund a debt of gratitude for bringing this injustice to light."

He paused to stare down at the Baroness who was carving out chunks of both his and the Gubnator's flesh with her piercing green devil eyes.

Since this is a day for bringing injustices to light, I guess our dear friend, the Gubnator, could no longer bear the secrets he has carried these past many years. Do not blame him. It was all my doing."

Beck looked up at his sister. She shook her shoulders, as obviously in the dark as he was. He looked across at his mother. She obviously wasn't. He looked toward the Gubnator and it all fell into place. He should have seen it coming. It hit him like a thunderbolt between the eyes.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

Callie never saw it coming. The shocked look on Beck's face didn't give it away. The sad little smile the Deacon threw over his shoulder at her didn't give it away. The vile looks being volleyed back and forth between the Gubnator and her mother

didn't do it either. Call her naïve, but at the moment she was clueless.

When the Deacon trotted out that the Baron had never consummated his marriage to her mother, she still couldn't put two and two together. Only when the little old man admitted to arranging a tryst back then to produce an heir did it hit her. The Gubnator was her father! She swooned, saved from falling down the stairs only by Will's strong arms and quick reflexes.

'Her whole life had been a lie!' The fire in her belly boiled over and cast itself in her mother's direction. As she stomped down the stairs, she could actually see fear in her mother's eyes.

As the Baroness scrambled backward, Callie pressed forward. When the crowd parted, the Baroness began to run. Callie lifted her skirts and gave pursuit. By now a piteous mewling could be heard from the mother. Later, there were those who would swear that the daughter was growling as she raced up the aisle.

As they neared the back doors a shout of "Guards!" boomed off the rafters, commanding enough to halt the both of them in their tracks. Callie turned back to see Will, in all his armored glory, standing in front of the altar, hands akimbo, staring down at them.

"I don't recall giving either of you permission to leave!" he barked.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

To get a better view, Eric crossed himself for any unintended sacrilege, and jumped up on the pew. To his right, Callie and her mother cowered in the doorway. Up at the altar Eric was surprised to see that it was Arthur Camberly wearing the red armor. Macy had told him that he had died. The acoustics of the Cathedral must be exceptional since Eric could hear even when he spoke at conversation level.

"Baroness Friston." he heard from the altar. "You may leave us. Go pack your things. You will be leaving us when the Gubnator sets sail for home. Perhaps some quality time in a

convent will enable you to be forgiven your transgressions. You have many years left you. You may be able to wheedle and snivel your way past the pearly gates yet. You may go.”

When she hesitated, the red clad warrior took a couple steps down and boomed “You have been dismissed!” The door opened, closed, and she was gone. He then turned his attentions on Callie.

“As for you...” he began, motioning her forward. At the same time, he beckoned the Gubnator to him. As Callie saucily sashayed her way back up the aisle, Eric watched the other two huddle at the altar, casting the occasional glance or chuckle in her direction.

Carefully skirting the fallen Cap’n’s bulk, she made her way to the foot of the dais. Claspings her hands in front of her like the angel she was not, she smiled up at the two men and waited. It was so quiet in the Cathedral that Eric could hear the beating of his own heart.

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

Will stared down at her, his heart going, pitty-pat. Gazing back at him in angelic repose, she was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen. ‘It was good to be the Baron.’

He felt a nudge from the Gubnator, accompanied by a knowing look and a face-filling grin. Then the big man descended the steps, and took his daughter in his arms for the first time.

“I haff waited haff a lifetime to do dat.” he murmured, tears in his eyes. “From afar, you haff made me wery, wery proud. Make no mistake. You are your father’s daughter. Ve are getting a late start, but you vill always be daddy’s little girl.”

Now they were both in tears. When he brushed past her to rejoin his people, she turned to go with him. Realizing her faux pas, she quickly turned and curtsied to Will.

“Forgive me, uh, uh, M’Lord.” Her cheeks flushed. “I’m not used to... I’m not used... Uh... Uh... I’m used to, uh, being the Baron’s kid.” she whispered, eyes averted.

Will just stood there, arms folded across his chest, drinking in her softness and the vulnerability it engendered. He had never been so happy. 'Be careful what you ask for. You might just get it.' He wanted to stay here forever.

"M'Lord?" she queried, looking up. "May I be excused so that I may get my things in order before sailing to Sacton with my father?"

Will's brow darkened, and he could see her flinch and avert her eyes. Slowly, one step at a time, he descended until he stood before her kneeling form. He took her hand.

"I have been assured by your father, among others, that you are a woman of your word."

She dared a look up at him. He pulled her up even as he dropped to a knee before her.

"I can't do this alone." he said, taking both of her hands in both of his. "I've already asked you to be my bride once today. My every prayer is that, as I kneel here before you to ask a second time, I will receive the same reply. Callie, dear heart, will you be my wife, my partner, my love?"

Unable to speak, she just shook her head and let lose with big ol' crocodile tears. Pulling him to his feet, she held onto him like she would never let him go. And she never did. .

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-----Epilogue-----
-----VISITATIONS-----

The little old man radiated contentment as he basked in the warm sunshine, gazing out across the choppy bay to the hustle and bustle of Friston beyond. He knew that he wasn't long for this world. His work here was done. The irony of his final days being spent on a barren rock, a prison island, wasn't lost on him. "...a life sentence," he chuckled to himself.

The natural sound of cawing gulls as they swooped down to turn sea life into seafood soothed him. He looked to his left. The hammering and sawing that had been raising a ruckus all morning from down at the dock had mercifully stopped. As he watched, the workmen were piling back aboard the big schooner still tied up out at it's end. Their work here was done too, it seems.

He scratched himself and reached for a tall glass of his favorite beverage: lemon-lime Kool Aid. There was a whole cell full of the stuff back inside. 'Yep'. He was gonna miss Kool Aid when he was no longer of this world. He wasn't gonna miss much though. All things considered, it was a pretty nasty little place, ...a selfish place. After all his hard work, his selfless sacrifice, he had no doubt he was headed for a better place. He sighed.

"About time you showed up," he called out over his shoulder. "Pull up a rock and help yourself to something cold to drink." Receiving no reply, he looked back at the tall young warrior glowering at him from the doorway to the former prison. "OK," he continued, "Now you know all my secrets. So what you gonna do? Kill me? Why bother? I'm already a dead man. Everything I have is yours. This is your world now. Do with it what you will. As a matter of fact, that was the plan all along.

"Come now. Sit down. I'm getting a crick in my neck." The old man made a second glass appear from somewhere beside him and filled it with the sugary, electric-green elixir and some ice.

"See. I told you I was expecting you. Come sit with me. We don't have much time."

Owen left the doorway and arranged himself on the crumbling masonry of the little porch's top step. Haughty as ever, he looked up into the little holy man's twinkling gray eyes.

"You talk a good game for an old man.", he challenged at his menacing best.

"If you only knew!" the Deacon replied with a chuckle. Sweeping a hand behind him, he let his eyes grow cold and his voice grow colder.

"Do you have any idea what you have here? I have met some fools in my time but you... you... Well, we won't go there now.

"What you have behind you is the accumulated knowledge and wealth of all of humanity. Do you have any idea of what you could accomplish with such a treasure trove? The world out there...", he swept an arm towards Friston. "...is yours for the taking. Yours. Yours alone. This island gives you the power to forge mankind's future. ...to learn from past mistakes. ...to build a better world.

"Behind you are seven millennia worth of imagination, wisdom, and invention. Behind you is the power to give people control of their world, tame nature, and make every individual's life better, ...easier, ...more productive.

"There are vaccines and medicines that will save lives and double the life expectancy of everyone on Earth.

"There are seeds for unimagined foodstuffs and even magic elixirs..." he held up his glass. "...that will eradicate famine.

"Behind you is a world of possibilities. Behind you is a future of plenty, an opportunity to learn from the past and undo the tragedy that has been humanity's lot since the beginning of time. And it's all yours."

Owen looked at him, eyes hooded with suspicion. The Deacon could almost hear the gears grinding in the young man's head. He could almost smell the sulphur of an unsuccessfully struck match as it tried to flicker to enlightenment behind the young man's eyes.

‘Would it succeed? No.’ The Deacon had too much experience and knew people too well to have any illusions about Owen Camberly. He had been chosen well. Owen’s lips fluttered to life.

“It gives one the power of God.” he whispered.

“Yes it does.” whispered the Deacon back as he gathered up his old bones and stood.

“Nature calls.” he said to an Owen still lost in thought, eyes still far away. As he headed for the door, Owen called out to him.

“Deacon?”

“Yes, my son?”

“Are there also weapons inside? Modern weapons? Powerful weapons?”

“Oh yes. Yes, indeed. Terrible weapons.” chuckled the Deacon without looking back. ‘Yep. His work here was done.’

“I’ll be back.” he threw over his shoulder, disappearing into the dark interior. ‘Yep. I’ll be back.’

-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-

“Yep. I’ll be back.” chuckled the Deacon as he waited on the elevator. “But not in your lifetime!” He chuckled again. ‘Yep. He had chosen well. Owen Camberly had been the perfect choice. ...the perfect combination of, well, everything.’

About now the young man ought to be noticing that the Pelican Island dock was being towed back to Friston by the schooner. He wondered how long it would take him to realize that he was marooned here, walled in by great white sharks and racing riptides.

‘It would probably be a while.’ He hadn’t chosen Owen Camberly for what was probably the most important role in human history because he was the brightest crayon in the box.

‘Oh, no.’ It would probably take him months, if not years, of going through the contents of the cells to figure out a way past the sharks and the tides. That was part of the plan, too. By the time he left this island formerly known as Alcatraz, he would be a

weapon of truly mythical proportion. Each day here his rage and his knowledge would grow exponentially. In a way it made the Deacon sad. He feared that he had overstayed his welcome in this violent, beautiful world. He was ready to move on.

When the elevator doors snicked open, he stepped aboard, turned around, and hit the 'down' button. As the rusty old conveyance creaked its way downward, he fumbled in his pockets, eventually producing an old skeleton key covered in verdigris. It looked like any one of a number of keys he carried, but that illusion was shattered as soon as he held it near the elevator's control panel.

There it began quietly beeping, and pulsing red lights raced back and forth along its length. He inserted it into an unobtrusive keyhole in the elevator panel and a small door opened above it, sliding silently back into a hidden recess.

He placed his palm onto a hand-sized keypad and waited. Moments later a disembodied female voice filled the chamber:

"Access...Granted."

He removed his hand and threw the first of an array of toggle switches downward. The elevator stopped its creaking and accelerated downward rapidly, taking most of the Deacon with it as his stomach fought to keep pace.

He threw the second toggle and the female voice once again filled the space:

"Atmospheric adjustment will commence in ten seconds, nine seconds, eight..."

The Deacon held his breath and stuck a bony finger up each nostril, deftly removing the oxygen scrubbers embedded there.

"...three seconds, two seconds, one second. Atmospheric adjustment complete."

The voice echoed away as he breathed deep of the radiation-rich air.

"Aaaah," he sighed, his first breath of fresh air in weeks. As the elevator began its deceleration, his stomach lurched in the other direction. He placed the oxygen scrubbers in a small glass

vial and placed them inside the panel for re-insertion next trip topside.

When the car stopped, for a fraction of a second each of his feet felt as heavy as an anvil. By the time the door silently whooshed open, his equilibrium had been restored. Stepping forth, he glanced quickly around at the place he had called home for the past ten thousand years. 'Sol-3 years, that is.'

It was crystalline in structure and bathed in an ambient radiation that came across slightly green-tinged to eyes that had been surgically adjusted to Earth's light. It was a huge room, three walls of which were covered in monitor screens, labeled from Aberdeen, Addis Ababa, and Alberta on the left to Zagreb, Zaire, and Zimbabwe on the right.

Most of the screens showed desolate wastelands devoid of either plant or animal life. Each of these had a small green light below it. The San Francisco screen had a red light below it, activity on it. Two or three other screens had red lights, one less than his last visit down here, the Deacon noted. 'Yep. He wasn't long for this world. His work here was done. Almost.'

Glancing toward the fourth wall, he noticed that the communications console was flashing. 'Already! My how time flies when you're having fun.' he thought.

He looked toward the digital countdown clock. 'Yep.' The fleet was due in less than six hundred Sol years. That message would be from the Starfleet commander. It would have been his first call after waking from stasis.

It had been almost a thousand Sol years since his last update to the approaching Starfleet. On his planet that was the blink of an eye, but here on Sol-3 it seemed like forever ago. At the time he'd been sweeping across the Asian steppes with one of his best protégés, a barbaric warlord by the name of Temujin. History would remember him as Genghis Khan.

"History? What history?" chuckled the Deacon. He had done his job well, but he had been here too long. There is no history. History ends here. Starfleet command ought to be

ecstatic with his progress since the last report. As he approached the console to return his superior's call, he chuckled to himself.

'Better take this pestilential, vermin-infested skin bag off. Don't want to scare him half to death.'

With that, he reached up to the back of his neck, searched around in the folds of skin, grabbed a pull-tab, and pulled the skin bag up over his head. After sliding his arms out of it, he let it drop to the floor, then stepped out of it. He looked up and preened for the crystalline mirror hanging on the wall opposite.

"Not bad for a sixteen-thousand year old," he mumbled, smiling at his reflection. The crystalline figure smiling back from the mirror showed him to be fit of figure, in the prime of life, a sponge for the ambient light around him.

Still feeling unclean, he walked over to a closet-sized radiation chamber and closed himself inside. Five minutes of heat and radiation and he finally felt cleansed of the disgusting after-effects of the skin bag.

He stepped out of the radiation shower, went to the galley, fixed himself another glass of the electric-green Kool Aid, then settled in front of the communications console. He picked up the microphone.

"Starfleet Command", he began. "This is Imperial Exterminator D-Con reporting from Sol-3. Starfleet Command. Come in."

"Imperial Exterminator D-Con, please hold." came the reply. "Starfleet Command will be with you momentarily."

He leaned back, took a swig of his Kool Aid, and waited. He didn't have to wait long.

"D-Con. D-Con. Come in, you old skin bag." boomed the Starfleet Commanders bass voice across the light years that separated them. "So how goes the extermination business?"

"I'll be happy when it's over. It seems like I've been on this oxygen-infested stinkhole of a planet forever. I'm ready to go home."

"So, did the human being seeds perform as promised? What you gonna report back to the Emperor?"

“Wellll... The terraforming conglomerate that produces them isn’t going to be too happy with me, I fear. If you have any of their stock, I’d suggest you call your broker.”

The commander chuckled.

“I don’t do stock markets. I’m not a gambling man, especially when only the insiders can win. Might as well just sign my paychecks over to the man.” Then he got serious.

“What’s the problem? I thought they were doing the job. Last update you said they were doing even better than expected.”

“Yep. They are. That’s the problem. These Oxy-Gone™ Human Being seeds are the most caustic, rapacious bio-engineered organism I’ve ever encountered. Think about it. It has taken them less than seven thousand years, Sol-3 years!, to turn this oxygen-based life factory of a planet into an irradiated wasteland.”

“What’s the problem? It sounds like a godsend for crystalline life.”

“It’s the scale and timeframe that’s terrifying. Think about it. What if they figure it out and, instead of destroying the very world that gives them life, they turn that destructive energy outward. ... against us? ...against all other civilized life in the Universe?”

“Ummmm. I see what you mean: Oxygen-breathing vermin from one end of the Universe to the other. If they ever learn to quit breeding themselves into extinction, we’ll be up to our crystal asses in the damn things.”

“You don’t know the worst of it. They actually managed to break containment and get off planet.”

“WHAT!”

“Yep. They developed rocketry and nuclear science, then managed to send a manned mission to our orbiting platform.”

“NO! Which platform are you operating there?”

“The Mobile Orbiting Observation Nodule, moon for short. It was only a short-lived program, spurred on by the competition between two factions, disbanded when one of the factions imploded upon itself. But they got there less than ten years after

making the commitment to do so, less than seventy after first discovering flight. Scary.”

“Terrifying.” was the hushed reply.

“It was about fifty years after that when they started making serious noises about a mission to Sol-2.” He heard an audible gasp on the other end of the line. “That’s when I decided to pull the plug, accelerate things, and institute the Armageddon insurance option.”

“Which was...”

“Get this. It was a beautiful bit of programming. When they were originally bio-engineered, they were pre-disposed to believe that, as a species, they would attain their maximum potential only after they destroyed themselves and their world. Ingenious! They were engineered to selfishly destroy all oxygen-based life, then turn on each other and destroy themselves.”

“Ridiculous.” chuckled the commander.

“Ridiculous.” Agreed D-Con. “If you can believe it, they’ve convinced themselves that they were created in God’s image.”

“A god?”

“No, *the* God!” At this, they both dissolved into fits of uncontrollable laughter.

“How uppity!” choked out the commander. “Their lifespan is what? Seventy, eighty sol years? I’ve have underwear older than that. THE God? It’d take them their whole lifetime just to dial His area code, much less His phone number.”

He made his voice hi-pitched and mocking:

“Humanity on line two for God. Please hold!” He broke up into a paroxysm of laughter. “He’ll get back to you in a million years or so.”

“So...” intoned D-Con, having quit finding anything amusing about human beings a long time ago. “...you see what I mean. As a lifeform, I think human being seeds will be a one and done Sol-3 experiment. I’m going to highly recommend to the Emperor that we destroy every last vestige of this experiment, down to the last test tube. The Universe cannot afford to keep even frozen

embryos at the Galactic Center for Disease Control. Civilization cannot risk it.”

“Yeah. I guess I have to agree with you. Is Sol-3 going to be safe for our colony ships when we get there?”

“Yep. No problem. They have one last hurrah but it should be over within the current human lifespan. What little life that still exists on the planet has devolved itself back to the microbial level.

“And I have entrusted a truly rapacious example of the lifeform with everything necessary to destroy what little life is left here, probably before you’re done with breakfast. Don’t worry.”

“I won’t then. You’re the best Imperial Exterminator this side of Tau Ceti. I’ll send your regards along to the Emperor. Take care of yourself. Take some time for yourself. We’ll be there before you know it.”

“Thank you, Sir.”

Hang in there. Signing off. Bye-bye now.”

With that he was gone and all was quiet again. D-Con sat at the console, feeling good about himself, then decided to follow the commander’s suggestion. A little bit of R & R would do him good. He finished his Kool Aid and reached for the microphone.

“D-Con to m.o.o.n. base. Come in. D-Con to m.o.o.n. base.”

“M.o.o.n. base here.” came the reply.

“Beam me up, Skaa-D.” he sighed.

“Aye-aye sir.” came the reply.

Then, in a twinkling of glittering crystal, he was gone.

“No doubt the Universe is unfolding as it should.”

The End