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# The Gold Falcon

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## Published by Voyager

Extract

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Neb strode across the kitchen and stood next to the window, no more than a hole cut in the wall, open to the smell of mud and cows. Still, he found the air cleaner than that inside. Smoke rose from damp wood at the hearth in the middle of the floor and swirled through the half-round of a room before it oozed out of the chinks and cracks in the walls. Aunt Mauva knelt at the hearth and slapped flat rounds of dough onto the griddle stone. The oatcakes puffed and steamed. Neb heard his stomach rumble, and Clae, his young brother, took a step towards their aunt-by-marriage.

'Wait your turn!' she snapped. Her blue eyes narrowed in her bony face, and strands of dirty red hair stuck to her cheeks with sweat. 'Your uncle and me eats first.'

'Give that batch to the lads.' Uncle Brwn was sitting at the plank table, a tankard of ale in his hand. 'They've been pulling stones out of the west field all day, and that watery porridge you dished out this morning was scant.'

'Scant? Scant, was it?' Mauva turned and rose in one smooth motion. 'You've got your bloody gall! Dumping more mouths to feed into my lap –'

Brwn slammed the tankard down and lurched to his feet. 'You miserly barren slut! You should thank the gods for sending you my nephews.'

Mauva squealed and charged, waving her fists in the air. Uncle Brwn grabbed her by the wrists and held on until she stopped squirming. He pushed her back, then set his thick and calloused hands on his hips, but before he could speak, she shoved her face up under his, and they were off again, screaming at each other, sometimes with curses, more often with meaningless grunts and squeals. Neb knelt down by

the hearth, found a thin splint of wood, and flipped the oatcakes over before they burned.

'Get somewhat to carry these,' he hissed at Clae.

Clae glanced around the kitchen. On the sideboard stood an old flat basket; he grabbed it and held it up. Neb nodded, and Clae brought the basket over. Neb flipped the cooked cakes into the basket – three apiece. Little enough, but they would have to do. His screeching kin might quiet down before he could cook another batch. He stood up, grabbed the basket from Clae, and slipped out the back door. Clae followed, and together they slogged across the muddy farmyard and dodged around the dungheap. Skinny chickens came clucking, heads high and hopeful.

'Forgive me,' Neb said. 'There's barely enough for us.'

A packed earth wall surrounded house, barn, and farmyard. They hurried through the gate and trotted around the outside of the wall, where an apple tree stood to offer them some shade. They sat down, grabbed the still-warm cakes, and gobbled them before Mauva could come and take them back. Above them little apples bobbed among the leaves, still too green, no matter how hungry they were. Clae swallowed the last bit of cake and wiped his mouth on his sleeve.

'Neb?' he said. 'I wish Mam hadn't died.'

'So do I, but wishing won't bring her back.'

'I know. Why does Uncle Brwn put up with Mauva?'

'Because she lets him drink all the ale he wants. Are you still hungry?'

'I am.' Clae sounded on the edge of tears.

'Down by the river we can find berries.'

'If she finds us gone she'll make Uncle beat us.'

'I'll think of some way to get out of it. If we get back late enough, they'll both be drunk.'

Brwn's farm, the last steading on the Great West Road, lay a mile beyond the last village. No one saw the boys as they hurried across the west field and jumped over the half-finished stone wall into the wild meadow. It was a lovely warm after-

noon, and the slanted light lay as thick as honey on the green rolling pasture land. Tinged with yellow clay, the river Melyn churned and bubbled over boulders. All along its grassy banks stood mounds of redberry canes, heavy with fruit, sweet from a long hot day. The boys gorged themselves, drank river water, and stuffed in a few more handfuls of berries. Clae would have eaten still more, but Neb stopped him.

'You don't want the runs, do you?'

'I don't, truly, but oh, it's so good not be hungry.'

They sat down in the warm grass and watched the river gleam like gold in the afternoon light, gliding along south to join the great rivers of the kingdom of Deverry – or so they'd always been told. They'd spent their entire lives here in Arcodd province. Off to their east stretched half-settled farmland; to the west and north, wild country. Far away south from their rough frontier lay the rich fields of the centre of the kingdom and the fabled city of Dun Deverry, where the high king lived in a reputedly splendid palace.

When Neb turned to the north, he could see, about half a mile away, the smooth rise of pale tan cliff that separated this valley from the high plateau beyond. The river tumbled down in a spray of white laced with rainbows. Above, the primeval forest, all tangled pines and scruffy underbrush, stood poised at the cliff edge like a green flood, ready to pour over the valley.

'Neb?' Clae said. 'Can we go look at the waterfall? Can we go up to the top?'

'I don't think so. We don't want to be caught up there in the dark.'

'I guess not. Well, maybe Aunt Mauva will be drunk soon.'

Materializing as silently and suddenly as always, the Wildfolk appeared. Knee-high grey gnomes, all warts and spindly limbs, clustered around the two boys. In the air blue sprites flew back and forth, wringing their tiny hands, opening tiny mouths to reveal their needle-sharp fangs. At the river's edge undines rose up, as sleek as otters but with silver fur.

The gnomes grabbed the sleeves of Neb's torn shirt and pulled on them while the sprites darted back and forth. They would start north towards the waterfall, then swoop back to buzz around the lads like flies. A big yellow gnome, Neb's favourite, grabbed his hand and tugged.

Clae saw none of this, because he was pawing through the grass. Finally he picked out a bit of stick and began chewing on it.

'Get that out of your mouth,' Neb said. 'And come on, we're going to have a look at the waterfall after all.'

Clae grinned and tossed the stick into the river. An undine caught it, bowed, and disappeared into foam.

In a crowd of Wildfolk the two boys headed upstream, following a grassy path beside the noisy river. Now and then Clae seemed to feel the presence of the gnomes. When one of them brushed against him, he would look down, then shrug as if dismissing the sensation. For as long as he could remember Neb had seen the Wildfolk, but no one else in his family had the gift of the Sight. He'd learned early to keep his gifts to himself. Any mention of Wildfolk had exasperated his literal-minded mother and made the other children in town mock and tease him.

The two boys followed the river to the white water churning around fallen boulders. They panted up the steep path that zigzagged along the cliff face, then turned to look back. Under a black plume the distant village was burning. Neb stared, unable to comprehend, unable to scream, merely stared as the bright flower of flame poured black smoke into the sky. Little people, the size of red ants from their vantage point, scurried around and waved their arms. Larger ants chased them and waved things that winked metallic in the sun. A cluster of horses, the size of flies, stood on the far side of the village bridge. The farm – it too burned, a blossom of deadly gold among the green meadows. Two horses and riders circled the earthen wall.

'Raiders!' Clae's voice was a breathy sob. 'Oh Neb! Horsekin!'

Overhead a raven shrieked, as if answering him. The two riders suddenly turned their horses away from the farmstead. They broke into a gallop and headed upstream for the waterfall.

'Into the forest!' Neb said. 'We've got to hide!'

They raced across the grassy cliff top, plunged into the forest, and ran panting and crashing through the underbrush among the pines and brambles. Twigs and thorns caught and tore his shirt and brigga, but Neb drove his brother before him like a frightened sheep until at last they could run no more. They burrowed into a thick patch of shrubs and clung together. If the slavers caught them, they would geld Clae like a steer. *And they'd kill me*, Neb thought. *I'm old enough to cause trouble.*

Neb could see nothing in the tangled mass of forest. He could hear only the waterfall, plunging down over rock. Had they run far enough? Voices – Neb thought he heard voices, deep ones, muttering in what sounded like anger, then a crash and a jingle, very faint, as if someone had dropped something metallic on to a rock. He heard a shout that turned to a scream. Clae stiffened and opened his mouth. Neb clapped a hand over it before he could speak.

Whether voices or not, the sounds died away, leaving only the chatter of the waterfall to disturb the silence. Slowly the normal noises of a forest picked up, the distant rustles of small animals, the chirping of birds. The yellow gnome appeared to perch in a nearby bush and grin. It patted its stomach as if pleased with itself, then disappeared. Slowly, too, the grey twilight deepened into a velvety night. They were safe for now, but on the morrow in the sunlight the Horsekin might return to search the woods. Neb realized that he and Clae had best be gone as soon as it was light enough to see.

Eventually Clae squirmed into his brother's lap like a child half his size and fell asleep. Neb drowsed, but every snap of a twig, cry of an owl, or rustle of wind woke him in star-

tled terror. When at last the grey dawn came, he felt as stiff and cold as an old man. Clae woke in tears, crying out at his memories.

'Hush, hush,' Neb said, but he felt like weeping himself. 'Now we have to think. We don't have a cursed bite to eat, and we'd best find something.'

'We can't go down to the river. If the Horsekin are still there, they'll smell us out.'

'They'll what?'

'Smell us out. They can do that.'

'How do you know?'

Clae started to answer, then looked away, visibly puzzled. 'Someone must have told me,' he said at last.

'Well, we've heard plenty of tales about the Horsekin, sure enough. Speaking of noses, wipe yours on your sleeve, will you?'

Clae obliged. 'I never thought I'd miss Uncle Brwn,' he said, then began to weep in a silent trickle of tears. *Our uncle's dead,* Neb thought. *The last person who would take us in, even if he was a sot.*

'We're going to walk east,' Neb said. 'We'll follow the rising sun so we won't get lost. On the other side of the forest, we'll find a village. It's a long way, so you'll have to be brave.'

'But Neb?' Clae said. 'What will we eat?'

'Oh, berries and birds' eggs and herbs.' Neb made his voice as strong and cheery as he could. 'There's always lots to eat in summer.'

He was, of course, being ridiculously optimistic. The birds' eggs had long since hatched; few berry bushes grew in forest shade. At every step the forest itself blocked their way with ferns and shrubs, tangled between the trees. They had to push their way through, creeping uphill and hurrying down as they searched for the few herbs that would feed, not poison them. Water at least they had; they came across a good many rivulets trickling down to join the Melyn. By sundown, Clae could not make himself stop weeping. They

made a nest among low-growing shrubs, where Neb rocked him to sleep like a baby.

As he watched the shadows darken around them, Neb realized that they were going to die. He had no idea of how far the forest stretched. Were they going straight east? Trying to follow the sun among trees might have them wandering around in circles. *You can't give up,* he told himself. He'd promised his dying mother that he'd keep Clae safe. The one concern he could allow himself now was keeping them both alive. He fell asleep to dream of sitting at his mother's table and watching her pile bread and beef onto the trencher he shared with Clae.

In the morning, Neb woke with a start. A gaggle of gnomes stood around them as if they were standing guard, while sprites floated overhead. The yellow gnome materialized and stood pointing to its stomach.

'Do you know where there's food?' Neb whispered.

The gnome nodded and pointed off into the forest.

'Can you show me where it is?'

Again the gnome nodded. When Neb shook him, Clae woke with a howl and a scatter of tears. He slid off Neb's lap and screwed his fists into his eyes.

'Time to get on the road,' Neb said with as much cheer as he could muster. 'I've got the feeling we're going to be lucky today.'

'My feet hurt. I can't walk any more.' Clae lowered his hands. 'I'll just die here.'

'You won't do any such thing. Here, stick out your legs. One at a time! I'll wrap the swaddling for you.'

With the rags bound tight against his feet, Clae managed to keep walking. As they beat their way through fern and thistle, the Wildfolk led the boys straight into the forest, dodging around the black-barked pines and trampling through green ferns. Neb was beginning to wonder if the gnomes knew where they were going when he realized that up ahead the light was growing brighter. The trees grew farther apart,

and the underbrush thinned. A few more yards, and they stepped out into a clearing, where a mass of redberry canes grew in a mound. Clae rushed forward and was already stuffing his mouth when Neb caught up with him. Neb mumbled a prayer of thanks to the gods, then began plucking every berry he could reach.

Red juice like gore stained their hands and faces by the time they forced themselves to stop. Neb was considering finding a stream to wash in when the yellow gnome appeared again. It grabbed his shirt with one little hand and with the other pointed to the far side of the clearing. When Neb took a few steps that way, he realized that he could hear running water.

'There's a stream or suchlike over yonder,' Neb said to Clae. 'We'll go that way.'

The gnome smiled and nodded its head. Other Wildfolk appeared and surrounded them as they crossed the clearing. They worked their way through forest cover for about a hundred yards before they found the stream, and, just beyond that, a marvel: a dirt road, curving through the trees. When Neb sighted along it, it seemed to run roughly east.

'I never knew this road was here,' Clae said.

'No more did I,' Neb said.

'I wonder where it goes to? There's naught out to the west of here.'

'Doesn't matter. We can walk faster now, and a road means people must have made it.'

'But what about the raiders?' Clae looked nervously around him. 'They'll follow the road and get us.'

'They won't,' Neb said firmly. 'They've got those huge horses, so they can't ride through the wild woods. They'll never get as far as this road.'

Neb insisted they wash their hands before they scooped up drinking water in them. When they finished, he pulled up a handful of grass, soaked it, and cleaned the snot and berry juice off Clae's face.

All that day they tried to ignore their hunger and make speed, but now and again the road dipped into shallow ravines or swung wide around a mound or spur of naked rock – no easy travelling. As far as Neb could tell, however, it continued to run east towards safety. Around noon, the forest thinned out along a stream, where they found a few more berries and a patch of wood sorrel they could graze like deer. Then it was back on the road to stumble along, exhausted. Neb began to lose hope, but the sprites fluttered ahead of them, and the yellow gnome kept beckoning them onward.

Towards sunset, Neb saw thin tendrils of pale blue smoke drifting far ahead. He froze and grabbed Clae's arm.

'Back into the trees,' he whispered.

Clae took a deep breath and fought back tears. 'Do we have to go back to the forest? I'm all scratched up from the thistles and suchlike.'

The yellow gnome hopped up and down, shaking its head.

'We can't stay on the road,' Neb said.

'Oh, please?'

The gnome nodded a violent yes.

'Very well.' Neb gave in to both of them. 'We'll stick to the road for a bit.'

'My thanks,' Clae said. 'I'm so tired.'

The gnome smiled, then turned and danced along the road, leading the way. In about a quarter of a mile, off to the left of the road, the forest gave way to another clearing. In the tall grass two horses grazed at tether, a slender grey like a lady's palfrey and a stocky dun packhorse. Beyond them the plume of smoke rose up. Neb hesitated, trying to decide whether to run or go forward. The wind shifted, bringing with it the smell of soda bread, baking on a griddle. Clae whimpered.

'All right, we'll go on,' Neb said. 'But carefully now. If I tell you to run, you head for the forest.'

A few yards more brought them close enough to hear a man singing, a pleasant tenor voice that picked up snatches of songs, then idly dropped them again.

'No Horsekin would sing like that,' Neb said.

The yellow gnome grinned and nodded his agreement.

Another turn of the road brought them to a camp and its owner. He was hunkering down beside the fire and baking bread on an iron griddle. On the tall side, but slender as a lad, he had hair so pale that it looked like moonlight and a face so handsome that it was almost girlish. He wore a shirt that once had been splendid, but now the bands of red and purple embroidery were worn and threadbare, and the yellow stain of old linen spread across the shoulders and back. His trousers, blue brigga cut from once-fine wool, were faded, stained, and patched here and there – a rough-looking fellow, but the gnomes rushed into his camp without a trace of fear. He stood up and looked around, saw Neb and Clae, and mugged amazement.

'What's all this?' he said. 'Come over here, you two! You look half-starved and scared to death. What's happened?'

'Raiders,' Neb stammered. 'Horsekin burned my uncle's farm and the village. Me and my brother got away.'

'By the gods! You're safe now – I swear it. You've got naught to fear from me.'

The yellow gnome grinned, leapt into the air, and vanished. As the two boys walked over, the stranger knelt again at the fire, where an iron griddle balanced on rocks. Clae sat down nearby with a grunt of exhaustion, his eyes fixed on the soda bread, but Neb stood for a moment, looking around him. Scattered by the fire were saddlebags and pack panniers stuffed with gear and provisions.

'I'm Neb and this is Clae,' Neb said. 'Who are you? What are you doing here?'

'Well, you may call me Salamander,' the stranger said. 'My real name is so long that no one can ever say it properly. As to what I'm doing, I'm having dinner. Come join me.'

Shamelessly Neb and Clae wolfed down chunks of warm bread. Salamander rummaged through saddlebags of fine pale leather, found some cheese wrapped in clean cloth, and cut them slices with a dagger. While they ate the cheese,

he bustled around, getting out a small sack of flour, a silver spoon, a little wooden box of the precious soda and a water-skin. He knelt down to mix up another batch of bread, kneading it in an iron pot, then slapped it into a thin cake right on the griddle with his oddly long and slender fingers.

'Now, you two had best settle your stomachs before you eat anything more,' he said. 'You'll only get sick if you eat too much after starving.'

'True spoken,' Neb said. 'Oh ye gods, my thanks. May the gods give you every happiness in life for this.'

'Nicely spoken, lad.' Salamander looked up, glancing his way.

His eyes were grey, a common colour in this part of the country, and a perfectly ordinary shape, but all at once Neb couldn't look away from them. *I know him*, he thought. *I've met him – I couldn't have met him.* Salamander tilted his head to one side and returned the stare, then sat back on his heels, his smile gone. Neb could have sworn that Salamander recognized him as well. The silence held until Salamander looked away.

'Tell me about the raid,' he said abruptly. 'Where are you from?'

'The last farm on the Great West Road,' Neb said, 'but we've not lived there long. When our mam died, we had to go live with our uncle. Before that we lived in Trev Hael. My da was a scribe, but he died, too. Before Mam, I mean.'

'Last year, was it? I heard that there was some sort of powerful illness in your town. An inflammation of the bowels, is what I heard, with fever.'

'It was, and a terrible bad fever, too. I had a touch of it, but Da died of it, and our little sister did, too. Mam wore herself out, I think, nursing them, and then this spring, when it was so damp and chill –' Neb felt tears welling in his voice.

'You don't need to say more,' Salamander said. 'That's a sad thing all round. How old are you, lad? Do you know?'

'I do. Da always kept count. I'm sixteen, and my brother is eight.'

'Sixteen, is it? Huh.' Salamander seemed to be counting something out in his mind. 'I'm surprised your father didn't marry you off years ago.'

'It wasn't for want of trying. He and the town matchmaker just never seemed to find the right lass.'

'Ah, I see.' Salamander pointed and smiled. 'Look, your brother's asleep.'

Clae had curled up right on the ground, and indeed he was asleep, open-mouthed and limp.

'Just as well,' Neb said. 'He'll not have to listen to the tale this way.'

Neb told the story of their last day on the farm and their escape as clearly as he could. When he rambled to a stop, Salamander said nothing for a long moment. He looked sad, and so deeply weary that Neb wondered how he could ever have thought him young.

'What made you go look at the waterfall?' Salamander asked.

'Oh, just a whim.'

The yellow gnome materialized, gave Neb a sour look, then climbed into his lap like a cat. Salamander pointed to the gnome with his cooking spoon.

'It's more likely he warned you,' Salamander said. 'He led you here, after all.'

Neb found he couldn't speak. Someone else with the Sight! He'd always hoped for such. The irony of the bitter circumstances in which he'd had his hope fulfilled struck him hard.

'Did anyone see you up on the cliff?' Salamander went on.

'I think so. Two Horsekin rode our way, but they were too far away for me to see if they were pointing at us or such-like. We ran into the forest and hid.' Neb paused, remembering. 'I thought I heard voices, but the waterfall was so loud, it was hard to tell. There was a scream, too. It almost sounded like someone fell off the cliff.'

The yellow gnome began to clap its hands and dance in a little circle.

'Here!' Salamander said to it. 'You and your lads didn't push that Horsekin down the cliff, did you?'

The gnome stopped dancing, grinned, and nodded. Salamander, however, looked grim.

'Is he dead?' Salamander said.

The gnome nodded yes, then disappeared.

'Ye gods!' Neb could hear how feeble his own voice sounded. 'I always thought of them like little pet birds or puppies. Sweet little creatures, that is.'

'Never ever make that mistake again! They're not called the *Wild*folk for naught.'

'I won't, I can promise you that!' Neb paused, struck by his sudden thought. 'They saved our lives. If that Horsekin had got up to the top of the cliff . . .' His voice deserted him.

'He would have found you, truly. They have noses as keen as dogs'.'

'Well, that's one up for Clae, then. He told me that. But sir, the Wildfolk – what are they?'

'Sir, am I?' Salamander grinned at him. 'No need for courtesies, lad. You have the same odd gift that I do, after all. As to what they are, do you know what an elemental spirit is?'

'I don't. I mean, everyone knows what spirits are, but I've not heard the word elemental before.'

'Well, it's a long thing to explain, but –' Salamander stopped abruptly.

With a whimper Clae woke and sat up, stretching his arms over his head. Conversation about the Wildfolk would have to wait. Salamander flipped the griddle cake over with the handle of the spoon before he spoke again.

'May the Horsekins' hairy balls freeze off when they sink to the lowest hell,' Salamander said. 'But I don't want to wait that long for justice. Allow me to offer you lads my protection, such as it is. I'll escort you east, where we shall find both safety and revenge.'

'My thanks! I'm truly grateful.'

Salamander smiled, and at that moment he looked young again, barely a twenty's worth of years.

'But sir?' Clae said with a yawn. 'Who are you? What are you really?'

'Really?' Salamander raised one pale eyebrow. 'Well, lad, when it comes to me, there's no such thing as really, because I'm a mountebank, a travelling minstrel, a storyteller, who deals in nothing but lies, jests, and the most blatant illusions. I am, in short, a gerthddyn, who wanders around parting honest folk from their coin in return for a few brief hours in the land of never-was, never-will-be. I can also juggle, make scarves appear out of thin air, and once, in my greatest moment, I plucked a sparrow out of the hat of a fat merchant.'

Clae giggled and sat up a bit straighter.

'Later,' Salamander went on, 'after I've eaten, I shall tell you a story that will drive all thoughts of those cursed raiders out of your head, so that you may go to sleep when your most esteemed brother tells you to. I'm very good at driving away evil thoughts.'

'My thanks,' Neb said. 'Truly, I don't know how I'll ever repay you for all of this.'

'No payment needed.' Salamander made a little bob of a bow. 'Why should I ask for payment, when I never do an honest day's work?'

Just as twilight was darkening into night, Salamander built up the fire and settled in to tell the promised story, which fascinated Neb as much as it did young Clae. Salamander swept them away to a far-off land where great sorcerers fought with greedy dragons over treasure, then told them of a prince who was questing for a gem that had magic, or dweomer, as Salamander called it. He played all the parts, his voice lilting for the beautiful princess, snarling for the evil sorcerer, rumbling for the mighty king. Every now and then, he sang a song as part of the tale, his beautiful voice harmonizing with the wind in the trees. By the time the stone was found, and the prince and princess safely married, Clae was smiling.

'Oh, I want there to be real dweomer gems,' Clae said. 'And real dweomermasters, too.'

'Do you now?' Salamander gave him a grin. 'Well, you never know, lad. You think about it when you're falling asleep.'

Neb found a soft spot in the grass for his brother's bed. He wrapped Clae up in one of the gerthddyn's blankets and stayed with him until he was safely asleep, then rejoined Salamander at the fire.

'A thousand thanks for amusing my brother,' Neb said. 'I'd gladly shower you with gold if I had any.'

'I only wish it were so easy to soothe your heart,' Salamander said.

'Well, good sir, that will take some doing, truly. First we lost our hearth kin, and now our uncle. It was all so horrible at first, it had me thinking we'd escaped the raiders only to live like beggars in the streets.'

'Now here, the folk in this part of the world aren't so hard-hearted that they'll let you starve. One way or another, we'll find some provision for you and the lad.'

'If I can get back to Trev Hael, I can make my own provision. After all, I can read and write. If naught else I can become a town letter-writer and earn our keep that way.'

'Well, there you go! It's a valuable skill to have.' Salamander hesitated on the edge of a smile. 'Provided that's the craft you want to follow.'

'Well, I don't know aught else but writing and suchlike. I'm not strong enough to join a warband, and I wouldn't want to weave or suchlike, so I don't know what other craft there'd be for me.'

'You don't, eh? Well, scribing is an honourable sort of work, and there's not many who can do it out here in Arcodd.'

Neb considered Salamander for a moment. In the dancing firelight it was hard to be sure, but he could have sworn that the gerthddyn was struggling to keep from laughing.

'Or what about herbcraft?' Salamander went on. 'Have you ever thought of trying your hand at that?'

'I did, truly. Fancy you thinking of that! When my da was still alive, I used to help the herbwoman in Trev Hael. I wrote out labels for her and suchlike, and she taught me a fair bit about the four humours and illnesses and the like. Oh, and about the four elements. Is that what you meant by elemental spirits?'

'It is. The different sorts of Wildfolk correspond to different elements. Hmm, the herbwoman must have been surprised at how fast you learned the lore.'

'She was. She told me once that it was like I was remembering it, not learning. How did you –'

'Just a guess. You're obviously a bright lad.'

Salamander was hiding something – Neb was sure of it – but probing for it might insult their benefactor. 'Govylla, her name was,' Neb went on. 'She lived through the plague. Huh – I wonder if she'd take us in, Clae and me, as prentices? Well, if I can get back there. Some priests of Bel were travelling out here, you see, and so they took us to our uncle.'

'And some might well be travelling back one fine day. But for now, we need to get the news of raiders to the right ears. I happen to have the very ears in mind. I've been travelling along from the east, you see, and the last place I plied my humble trade was the dun of a certain tieryn, Cadryc, noble scion of the ancient and conjoined Red Wolf clan, who's been grafted upon the root of a new demesne out here. When I left, everyone begged me to come back again soon, so we shall see if they were sincere or merely courteous. I have a great desire to inform the honourable tieryn about these raiders. Oh, that I do, a very great desire indeed.'

As he stared into the fire, Salamander let his smile fade, his eyes darkening, his slender mouth as harsh as a warrior's. In that moment Neb saw a different man, cold, ruthless and frightening. With a laugh the gerthddyn shrugged the mood away and began singing about lasses and spring flowers.

* * *

Down the hill behind Tieryn Cadryc's recently built dun lay a long meadow, where the tieryn's warband of thirty men were amusing themselves with mock combats in the last glow of a warm afternoon. Two men at a time would pick out wooden swords and wicker shields, then face off in the much-trampled grass. The rest of the troop sat in untidy lines off to either side and yelled comments and insults as the combat progressed. Gerran, the captain of the Red Wolf warband, sat off to one side with Lord Mirryn, Tieryn Cadryc's son. Brown-haired and blue-eyed, with a liberal dusting of freckles across his broad cheekbones, Mirryn was lounging full-length, propped up on one elbow, and chewing on a long grass stem like a farmer.

'One of these days our miserly gwerbret's bound to set up a proper tourney,' Mirryn said. 'Although everyone knows you'd win it, so I doubt me if I can get anyone to wager against you.'

'Oh here,' Gerran said. 'It's not that much of a sure thing.'

'Of course it is.' Mirryn grinned at him. 'False humility doesn't become you.'

Gerran allowed himself a brief smile. Out in the meadow a new fight was starting. The rest of the warband called out jests and jeers, teasing Daumyr for his bad luck in drawing his sparring partner. Daumyr, the tallest man in the troop at well over six feet, stood grinning while he swung his wooden sword in lazy circles to limber up his arm. His opponent, Warryc, was skinny and short – but fast.

'Ye gods, Daumyr's got a long reach!' Mirryn said. 'It's truly amazing, the way Warryc beats him every time. Huh – there must be a way we can use this at the next tourney.'

'Use it for what?' Gerran said.

'Acquiring some hard coin, that's what, by setting up a wager, getting some poor dolt to bet high on Daumyr.'

'The very soul of honour, that's you.'

Gerran was about to say more when he heard hoofbeats and shouting. A young page on a bay pony came galloping across the meadow.

'My lord Mirryn! Captain Gerran!' the page called out. 'The tieryn wants you straightaway. There's been a raid on the Great West Road.'

Mirryn led the warband back at the run. Up at the top of a hill, new walls of pale stone, built at the high king's expense, circled the fort to protect the tall stone broch tower and its outbuildings. The men dashed through the great iron-bound gates, stopped in the ward to catch their collective breath, then hurried into the great hall. Sunlight fell in dusty shafts from narrow windows, cut directly into stone, and striped the huge round room with shadows. Gerran paused, letting his eyes adjust, then picked his way through the clutter of tables and benches, dogs and servants. The warband followed him, but Mirryn hurried on ahead to his father's side. When he saw Gerran lingering behind, Mirryn waved him up with an impatient arm.

By the hearth of honour, Cadryc was pacing back and forth, a tall man, tending towards stout, with a thin band of grey hair clinging to the back of his head and a pair of ratty grey moustaches. Perched on the end of a table was the gerthddyn, Salamander. Mirryn and Gerran exchanged a look of faint disgust at the sight of him, a babbling fool in their shared opinion, with his tricks and tales. When Gerran started to kneel before the tieryn, Cadryc impatiently waved him to his feet.

'Raiders,' Cadryc said. 'Didn't the page tell you? We're riding tomorrow at dawn, so get the men ready.'

'Well and good, your grace,' Gerran said. 'How far are they?'

'Who knows, by now?' Cadryc shook his head in frustrated rage. 'Let's hope they're still looting the village.'

'Bastards,' Mirryn said. 'I hope to all the gods they are. We'll make them pay high for this.'

'You're staying here, lad,' Cadryc said. 'I'm not risking myself and my heir both.'

Mirryn flushed red, took a step forward, then shoved his hands into his brigga pockets.

'For all we know, the raiders have set up some sort of ruse

or trap,' Cadryc went on. 'I'll be leaving you ten men to command on fortguard. Your foster-brother here can handle the rest well enough.'

'Far be it from me to argue with you,' Mirryn said. 'Your grace.'

'Just that – don't argue,' Cadryc snapped. 'And don't sulk, either.'

Mirryn spun on his heel and stalked off, heading back outside. Cadryc muttered a few insults under his breath. Gerran decided a distraction was in order and turned to the gerthddyn.

'Little did I dream our paths would cross so soon.' Salamander gave him a fatuous smile. 'An honour to see you, captain.'

'Spare me the horseshit,' Gerran said. 'Did you see this raid or only find a burned village or suchlike?'

'Ah, what a soul of courtesy you are.' Salamander rolled his eyes heavenward. 'Actually, I found refugees, who escaped by blind luck.'

When Salamander pointed, Gerran noticed for the first time a tattered dirty lad and an equally ragged little boy, kneeling by the corner of the massive stone hearth. Dirt clotted in hair that was most likely mousy brown, and they shared a certain look about their deep-set blue eyes that marked them for close kin. Skinny as a stick, the older lad was, with fine, small hands, but the younger, though half-starved from the look of him, had broad hands and shoulders that promised strong bones and height one day.

'They lost everything in the raid,' Salamander said. 'Kin, house, the lot.' He pointed. 'Their names are Neb and Clae.'

'We'll give them a place here.' Tieryn Cadryc beckoned to a page. 'Go find my wife and ask her to join us.'

When the page trotted off, Neb, the older lad, watched him go with dead eyes.

'How many of them were there?' Gerran asked him. 'The raiders, I mean.'

'I don't know, sir,' Neb said. 'We were a good distance away, up by the waterfall, so we could see down into the valley. We saw the village burning, and our farm, and then a lot of people just running around.'

'Cursed lucky thing you were gone.'

The lad nodded, staring at him, too tired to speak, most likely.

'The raiding party won't be travelling fast, not with prisoners to drag along,' Cadryc broke in. 'I've sent a message to Lord Pedrys, telling him to meet us on the road with every man he can muster. I'd summon the other vassals as well, but they live too cursed far east, and we've got to make speed.'

'Your grace?' Gerran said. 'Wasn't there a lord near this village?'

'There was. What I want to know is this: is there still?'

Neb watched the captain and the tieryn walk away, talking of their plans, both of them tall men, but red-haired Gerran was as lean as the balding tieryn was stout. Neither would be a good man to cross, Neb decided, nor Lord Mirryn, either. Salamander left his perch on the table and joined the two boys.

'Well, there,' the gerthddyn said. 'Your uncle will be avenged, and perhaps they'll even manage to rescue your aunt.'

'If they do,' Clae said, 'we won't have to go back to her, will we?'

'You won't. Judging from what you told me on our journey here she doesn't seem to be a paragon of the female virtues, unlike the tieryn's good wife.' Salamander glanced over his shoulder. 'Who, I might add, is arriving at this very moment.'

Salamander stepped aside and bowed just as the lady hurried up, a stout little woman, her dark hair streaked with grey. She wore a pair of dresses of fine-woven blue linen, caught in at the waist by a plaid kirtle in yellow, white and

green. Two pages trailed after her, a skinny pale boy with a head of golden curls and a brown-haired lad a few years older.

'My lady, this is Neb and Clae,' Salamander said. 'Lads, this is the honourable Lady Galla, wife to Tieryn Cadryc.'

Since he was already kneeling, Neb ducked his head in respect and elbowed Clae to make him do the same.

'You may rise, lads,' she said. 'I've heard your terrible story from young Coryn, here.' She gestured at the older, brown-haired page. 'Now don't you worry, we'll find a place for you in the dun. The cook and the grooms can always use an extra pair of hands.'

'My thanks, my lady,' Neb said. 'We'll be glad to work for our keep, but we might not be staying –'

'My lady?' Salamander broke in. 'Luck has brought you someone more valuable than a mere kitchen lad. Our Neb can read and write.'

'Luck indeed!' Lady Galla smiled brilliantly. 'My husband's had need of a scribe for ever so long, him and half the noble-born in Arcodd, of course, but what scribe would be wanting to travel all the way out here, anyway, if he could find a better place down in Deverry? Well and good, young Neb, we'll see how well you form your letters, but first you need to eat from the look of you, and a bath wouldn't hurt either.'

'Thank you, my lady.' Clae looked up with wide eyes. 'We've been so hungry for so long.'

'Food first, then. Coryn, take them to the cook house and tell Cook I said to feed them well. Then do what you can about getting them clean. Clothes – well, I'll see what I can find.'

The food turned out to be generous scraps of roast pork, bread with butter, and some dried apples to chew on for a sweet. The cook let them sit in the straw by the door while she went back to work at her high table, cracking dried oats with a stone roller in a big stone quern. Coryn helped himself to a handful of apples and sat down with them. He seemed

a pleasant sort, chatting to the brothers as they wolfed down the meal.

'I do like our lady,' Coryn said. 'She's ever so kind and cheerful. And our lord's noble and honourable, too. But watch your step around Gerran. He's a touchy sort of man, the Falcon, and he'll slap you daft if you cross him.'

'The Falcon?' Neb said with his mouth full. 'What –'

'Oh, everyone calls him that. He's got a falcon device stamped on his gear and suchlike.'

'Is it his clan mark?'

'It's not, because he's not noble-born.' Coryn frowned in thought. 'I don't know why he carries it, and he probably shouldn't, 'cause he's a commoner.'

The cook turned their way and shoved her sweaty dark hair back from her face with a crooked little finger. 'The mark's just a fancy of Gerran's,' she said. 'After all, he was an orphan, and it's a comfort, like, to pretend he's got a family.'

'Still,' Coryn said, 'it's giving himself airs.'

'Oh, get along with you!' The cook rolled her eyes. 'It comes to him natural, like. He was raised in the dun like Lord Mirryn's brother, wasn't he now?'

'Why?' Clae said with his mouth half-full.

The cook glared narrow-eyed.

'Say please,' Neb muttered.

'Please, good dame,' Clae said. 'Why?'

'That's better.' The cook smiled at him. 'When Gerran was but a little lad, his father was killed in battle saving the tieryn's life, and the shock drove his poor mother mad. She drowned herself not long after. So our Cadryc took the lad and raised him with his own son, because he's as generous as a lord should be and as honourable, too.'

'That's truly splendid of him,' Neb said. 'But I can see why Gerran's a bit touchy.' He wiped his greasy mouth on his sleeve. 'I'll do my best to stay out of his way.'

'Now you've got dirt smeared in the grease.' Coryn grinned at him. 'We'd better get you that bath.'

Rather than haul water inside to heat at the hearth, they filled one of the horse troughs and let it warm in the hot sun while Coryn pointed out the various buildings in the fort. Eventually Neb and Clae stripped off their clothes and climbed into the water. Neb knelt on the bottom and kept ducking his head under while he tried to comb the worst of the dirt and leaves out of his hair. They were still splashing around when Salamander came strolling out of the broch with clothing draped over his arm.

'Well, you look a fair sight more courtly,' the gerthddyn said, grinning. 'Lady Galla's servant lass has turned up these.' He held up a pair of plain linen shirts, both worn but not too badly stained, and two pairs of faded grey brigga. 'She says you're to give her the old ones to boil for rags.'

'My thanks,' Neb said. 'Our lady's being as generous as the noble-born should be, but truly, I'd rather go back to Trev Hael.'

'Ah, but here is where your wyrd led you. Who can argue with their wyrd?'

'But –'

'Or truly, wyrd led you to me, and I led you here, but it's all the same thing.' Salamander gave him a sunny smile. 'Please, lad, stay here for a while, no more than a year and a day, say. And then if you want to move on, move on.'

'Well and good, then. You saved our lives, and I'll always be grateful for that.'

'No need for eternal gratitude. Just stay here for a little while. You'll know when it's time to leave.'

'Will I?' Neb hesitated, wondering if his benefactor were a bit daft. 'You know, I just thought of somewhat. The lady wants to see my writing, but I've got no ink and no pens, either. I saw some geese over by the stables, but the quills will take a while to cure.'

'So they will, but I've got some reed pens and a bit of ink cake, too.'

'Splendid! You can write, too?'

'Oh, a bit, but don't tell anyone. I don't fancy having some lord demand I stay and serve him as a scribe. Me for the open road.'

'I've been meaning to ask you a question, truly. Why have you come all the way to Arcodd? There's not a lot of folk out here and most of them are too poor to pay you to tell them tales.'

'Sharp lad, aren't you?' Salamander grinned at him. 'Well, in truth, I'm looking for my brother, who seems to have got himself lost.'

'Lost?'

'Just that. He was a silver dagger, you see.'

'A what?' Clae broke in. 'What's that?'

'A mercenary soldier of a sort,' Salamander said. 'They ride the countryside, looking for a lord who needs extra fighting men badly enough to pay them by the battle.'

Clae wrinkled his nose in disgust, but Neb leaned forward and grabbed his arm before he could say something rude. 'Your hair's still filthy,' Neb snapped. 'Wash it out.' He turned to Salamander. 'I'll pray your brother still rides on the earth and not in the Otherlands.'

'My thanks, but I truly do believe he's still alive. I had a report of him, you see, that he'd been seen up this way.'

Neb found himself wondering if Salamander were lying. The gerthddyn was studying the distant view with a little too much attention and a fixed smile. He refused to challenge the man who'd saved his life. Besides, having a silver dagger for a brother was such a shameful thing that he couldn't begrudge Salamander his embarrassment.

'I'll just be getting out,' Neb said. 'Come on, Clae. We'll have to help the stableman empty this trough. Horses can't drink dirty water.'

Neb hoisted himself over the edge and dropped to the ground. He shook himself to get the worst of the water off, then, still damp, put on the clothes Salamander handed him. The baggy wool brigga fitted well enough, but when he pulled

the shirt over his head, it billowed around him. The long sleeves draped over his hands. He began rolling them up.

'We can find you a bit of rope or suchlike for a belt,' Salamander said. 'And eventually, a better shirt.'

Later that afternoon, with pen and ink in hand, Neb went into the great hall and found Lady Galla waiting, sitting alone at the table of honour. She'd gathered a heap of parchment scraps, splitting into translucent layers from hard use. A good many messages had been written upon them, then scraped off to allow for new ones.

'Will these do?' Galla was peering at them. 'I looked all over, because I did remember that I had the accounts from our old demesne in a sack or suchlike, but I couldn't find it. These turned up lining a wooden chest.'

'I'm sure they'll do, my lady.' Neb searched through them and found at last a scrap with a reasonably smooth surface. 'Now, what would you like me to write?'

'Oh, some simple thing. Our names, say.'

Neb picked the script his father had always used for important documents, called Half-inch Royal because the scribes of the high king's court had invented it. Although she couldn't read in any true sense of the word, Galla did know her letters, and she could spell out her name and Tieryn Cadryc's when he wrote them.

'Quite lovely,' she announced. 'Very well, young Neb. As provision for you and your brother, you shall have a chamber of your own, meals in the great hall, and a set of new clothing each year. Will that be adequate?'

Neb had to steel himself to bargain with the noble-born, but he reminded himself that without tools, he couldn't practise his craft. 'I'll need coin as well, for the preparing of the inks and suchlike. I could just mix up soot and oak gall, but an important lord like your husband should have better. A silver penny a year should be enough. I hope I can find proper ink cakes and a mixing stone out here.'

'The coin we have, thanks to the high king's bounty.' Galla

thought for a moment. 'Now, I think you might find what you need in Cengarn. His grace my husband has been talking about riding to the gwerbret there, and so if he does, you can go with him.'

'Splendid, my lady, and my thanks. But then there's the matter of what I'm going to write upon. Fine parchments cost ever so much if you buy them, and I don't know how to make my own. Even if I did, could you spare the hides? You can only get two good sheets from a calf skin, and then scraps like these.'

'Oh.' Galla paused, chewing on her lower lip. 'Well, I'd not thought of that, but if you can find parchment for sale, I'm sure we can squeeze out the coin to buy some, at least for legal judgments and the like.'

'We can use wax-covered tablets for ordinary messages, if you have candle wax to spare. I can write with a stylus as well as a pen.'

'Now that I can give you, and a good knife, too, for cutting your pens.' Much relieved, Galla smiled at him. 'I've got a very important letter to write, you see. My brother has a daughter by his first wife, who died years and years ago. So he remarried, and now he and his second wife have sons and daughters of their own. The wife – well. Let's just say that she's never cared for her stepdaughter. There's only so much coin at my brother's disposal, and she wants to spend it on her own lasses. The wife wants to, I mean, not little Branna. That's my brother's daughter, you see, Lady Branna, my niece. So I'm offering to take the lass in, and if we can't find her a husband, then she can live here as my serving woman.' Lady Galla paused for a small frown. 'She's rather an odd lass, you see, so suitors might be a bit hard to find. But she does splendid needlework, so I'll be glad to have her. It's truly a marvel, the way she can take a bit of charcoal and sketch out patterns. You'd swear she was seeing them on the cloth and just following along the lines, they're so smooth and even. And – oh here, listen to me! A lad like

you won't be caring about needlework. You run along now and make those tablets. I'll have Coryn bring you wax and knives and suchlike.'

'Very well, my lady, and my thanks. I'll go hunt up some wood.'

Neb took Clae with him when he went out to the ward, which, with the dun so newly built, lacked much of the clutter and confusion of most strongholds. Behind the main broch tower stood the round, thatched kitchen hut, the well and some storage sheds. Across an open space stood the smithy, some pigsties and chicken coops, and beyond them the dungheap. A third of the high outer wall supported the stables, built right into the stones, with the ground level for horses and an upper barracks for the warband and the servants.

'Neb?' Clae said. 'We've found a good place, haven't we?'

'We have.' Neb looked at him and found him smiling. 'I think we'll do well here.'

'Good. I want to train for a rider.'

'You what?'

'I want to learn swordcraft and join the tieryn's warband.'

Neb stopped walking and put his hands on his hips. Clae looked up defiantly.

'Whatever for?' Neb said at last.

'Because.'

'Because what?'

'You know.' Clae shrugged and began scuffing at one of the cobbles with his bare toes. 'Because they killed everyone.'

'Ah. Because the raiders destroyed our village?'

Clae nodded, staring at the ground. *Ye gods!* Neb thought. *What would Mam say to this?*

'Well, I can understand that,' Neb said. 'I'll think about it.'

'I'm going to do it.'

'Listen, I'm the head of our clan now, and you won't do one wretched thing unless I say you may.'