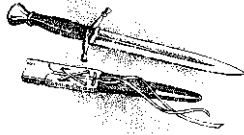


The Crowded Shadows



Wynter sank closer to Ozkar's neck and slowly dipped her head so that the dark brim of her hat hid her eyes. The horse side-stepped nervously under her and tried to back out of their hiding place. He could sense her fear and it was making him anxious. Wynter murmured to him and stroked his shoulder, but he shook his head, snorted and loudly stamped his foot.

The men moving in the trees ahead of her were getting close. Wynter tracked their progress by the noise of their horses, and she shrank further back into cover as the sounds grew louder. She could not believe how easily these men had escaped her attention. The trees here were so thick and dark that Wynter might never have noticed them, only that they had been foolish enough to light a pipe, and its rich tobacco scent had alerted her to their presence. It filled her with fear to realise that they may have been travelling parallel to each other for days and not known it, the sounds of the men's horses cancelling out the noises made by Ozkar and vice versa.

Wynter was just raising her head to peer through the trees, hoping for a glimpse of them, when a low whistling signal from the road sent her ducking again, her heart racing. There was a moment of silence from the men, then they whistled a melodic reply, and to Wynter's horror, began pushing their horses through the brush towards her.

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They came frighteningly close and she was filled with an almost irresistible desire to lift her head and look. But it would take just one careless movement and they would spot her, so she kept her eyes shut and her head down and the men passed slowly by.

They urged their horses down a steeply sloping bank and out of sight. Wynter side-stepped Ozkar so that she could observe their descent to the road.

She found herself looking down on the tops of their heads as they passed from the shade into brutal sunshine, and they came to a halt in the road, looking expectantly into the trees on the opposite side. Wynter followed their gaze, and ducked lower at the sight of four horsemen descending the far slope. As these newcomers reached the road, the original two men shook back their dark hats and uncovered their faces. They were Combermen, their rosined hair and beards glistening in the sun. They squinted warily at the newcomers and one of them called out, in stilted Southlandast, the language of Jonathon's Kingdom, 'So far?'

The newcomers called back, 'And not yet there?'

There was a general easing of tension in the men, and Wynter committed these passwords, and the whistles that had preceded them, to memory.

As the newcomers pulled to a halt, the shorter Comberman asked, 'I take it we face the same direction?'

'Anything is possible,' said one of the newcomers noncommittally. They threw back their headgear, and Wynter felt a thrill of fear. They were Haunardii Warriors, if their abundance of gleaming weaponry was anything to go by. She leant forward in her saddle, trying to get a better view. She had never personally met any Haunardii but they were notoriously savage and wily. Their narrow, slanting eyes were black as night and they regarded the Combermen

scornfully, their flat, honey-coloured faces filled with laughing contempt.

‘These men humbly suggest that you are not too sharp at keeping yourself hid,’ sneered the youngest. ‘What sort of fool needs a pipe of weed *that* much?’

The Combermen glanced at each other. The taller one bit his pipe firmly between his teeth and began to drift back to the trees. ‘Stick to thy side of the road and my smoke won’t bother thee,’ he said with finality.

The Haunardii looked amused. They smirked at each other and began backing their horses away. It was obvious to Wynter that – like herself – all these men were travelling in secret, eschewing the relative ease of the road for the cover of the thick forest, and it appeared that the Haun’s sole purpose in calling the others had been to mock them for their carelessness. As they retreated, the youngest laughingly said, ‘We pray that it is not your stealth you are offering at the table of the Rebel Prince!’

The Rebel Prince? thought Wynter. *Alberon!* She stared down at the men below. *So you are gathering allies to your table. But, Good Christ, Alberon! First Combermen, and now Haunardii? Have you lost your mind?*

Down on the road, the young Haunardii was still needling the Combermen, his mocking voice drifting up through the heat. ‘We humbly suggest you may as well dance down the centre of the road yodelling, for all the sly you have exhibited up in the trees.’

‘Yes, well,’ growled the shorter Comberman, ‘thy skills in diplomacy will be a great asset to the future king, I dare say. Sleep well these next twelve nights, Haun, and have no doubt, we’ll see *thee* in camp.’

The Combermen were ascending the slope even as they spoke

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and Wynter eased Ozkar back into the deeper shadows, listening as they snarled their goodbyes. The Combermen angled off through the trees, trailing pipe smoke and muttering as they went. The Haunardii must have climbed the opposite slope and melted into the forest there.

Wynter stayed where she was, deep in thought, and Ozkar returned to snoozing beneath her.

Was it possible, she wondered, that the King had been right? Did Alberon actually intend to overthrow the crown? The thought of Alberon in alliance with either the Haunardii or the Combermen made Wynter's blood run cold. Did he really stand against his father now, with greedy expansionists on one hand and bigoted zealots on the other? What would become of the Kingdom if this were the case, and what kind of reception could Wynter expect from her old friend if he had truly set his face against the King?

She looked out into the forest and thought about the Haun and the Combermen, and all they symbolised. If it came down to it, and she had to weigh them on one hand, and King Jonathon on the other – Alberon or no Alberon – Wynter had no doubt who she would choose. She shook her head and looked around her helplessly. She did not want to think about the kind of choices she may now have to make. Despair threatened suddenly, out of nowhere, and Wynter sat up straight, forcing it down.

That is enough, she told herself firmly. *There is no point fretting until I have found Alberon and discovered the truth. Then we shall see, all this will be easily resolved.* Grimly, she set her jaw. She had sacrificed her father for this quest, she was risking her own life for it, and she was not about to fail.

The forest was now tranquil and seemingly empty of human traffic, so Wynter gave up her cautious vigil and slid from Ozkar's back.

Wearily, she leant against his neck for a moment and let her head settle. They'd been travelling since just before dawn, and it was time for them both to rest. It would be safest to rest further up the hill, but first Wynter had to replenish her water supply. She decided to risk using the stream by the road to fill the waterskins. God only knew when she'd get another chance to restock.

As she undid the ties, Ozkar snuffled at her and lipped her tunic, looking for food. Wynter pushed his head away in exhausted irritation. He was rationed to one loaf of horse-bread morning and night, and it was more than enough for him, even at this hard pace. Mind you, as far as Wynter was concerned, he could *have* it, all of it. After five days' travel she was heartily sick of horse-bread, cheese and dried sausage. Even when soaked, the coarse bean bread was a trial to the teeth, and a torment to the bowels.

What I would not pay for a plate of liver and onions, she thought as she slung the waterskins over both arms and dropped to her hands and knees. *Or, oh God bless us, a strawberry cordial ... or apple pie and clotted cream*. She began to slither cautiously down the hill on her belly. Her ears and eyes focused on her surroundings, her heart and stomach dreaming of food.

She reached the edge of the undergrowth and peered down at the shallow little stream bubbling its way along the bottom of the ditch. Wynter knew that with her face covered she was just another dark patch in the shifting shadows. Still, she kept her body carefully motionless as she stretched her arm down to the stream and submerged the first waterskin. It began to fill slowly and Wynter laid her cheek on the bank and scanned the road while she waited.

The first waterskin full, she was just about to submerge the second one when the sound of hooves came pounding up through the turf. She jerked back her hand and pressed into the shadows as a

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horse galloped past.

It was a merchantman, of middling income by the looks of him, leading a fully laden pack-mule. He was travelling much too fast for the animal's bulky load and he kept glancing behind him in a panic. Wynter regarded him with a heavy heart and wondered what the hell he had expected, travelling alone on this road. He had not even had the sense to disguise his expensive tack or the fine quality of his clothes.

There were two pursuers, galloping fast and riding low to their saddles. They quickly caught up with their quarry, flanking the pack-mule like wolves and closing in on the merchant. As he galloped past, the bandit on his left hauled back with a staff and unhorsed the merchant with a wide swing to his head.

The merchant's bright hat sailed through the air and rolled into the ditch across from Wynter. The man himself fell between the horses and was left behind in the dust as the bandits shot forward to corral his goods.

Wynter couldn't take her eyes from the merchant as he lay on his back in the road. He was utterly dazed, his face covered in dust, a thin stream of blood pooling beneath his head. She heard the bandits capture and turn his horses, and she knew for certain what this poor man's fate would be. She dipped her chin and clenched her hands as the bandits trotted into view.

One of them, the fellow with the staff, dropped lightly from the saddle and jogged to where the merchant lay. As the bandit approached him, Wynter saw the merchant raise a gloved hand to the sky, his eyes questing. He seemed to have no grasp of his situation. The bandit raised his staff high and Wynter squeezed her eyes shut as he brought it down onto the merchant's face.

There were not many blows after that and Wynter lay very still

and quiet, her face hidden in her hands, while the bandits stripped the body. They chatted amiably as they went about their business, obviously well used to each other and comfortably at ease with their work. There was much talk of the inn, and of Jenny, and of which of them she liked more. There was speculation as to how much they'd get for this haul. They came to the conclusion that they should get quite a bit. Perhaps so much that Jenny might even like them both at once, if they played their cards right. There was a lot of good-natured chuckling, and Wynter pressed her fingers hard into her temples and bit her lips.

Finally, their voices moved back in the direction of the horses and Wynter risked turning her head and looking at the merchant.

The bandits had carried him to the side of the road and laid him neatly at the base of a tree, as though politely disinclined to block traffic. He was curled on his side with his back to her, and once she'd looked at him, Wynter found it impossible to look away. This was somebody's father maybe, somebody's son. Until a few moments ago, he had been alive and breathing, full of thoughts and plans. And now he was nothing but meat, cast aside and abandoned, carrion for the badgers and the foxes, with his family never to know what became of him.

That could be me, thought Wynter, snuffed out and gone in the blink of an eye.

Suddenly the bandit with the staff came back into view. He walked to the side of the road, knelt and leant into the ditch across from Wynter, stretching to reach something far in the brambles. He sat back, grinning, and displayed the merchant's hat for his companion to see.

Wynter should have dipped her head, but she was filled with such hatred for him at that moment that she just watched as the bandit

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knelt there and whacked the hat off his knee to dislodge the dust.

He was about to get to his feet when he lifted his eyes and spotted her in the shelter of the brambles. Wynter saw him blink under the shade of his hat, saw him frown and her heart froze as he rose slowly to his feet, squinting into the shadows where she lay, his face uncertain.

‘What is it?’ asked his companion, who was already mounted and ready to go.

The man didn’t answer. Instead, he crossed the road and hunkered down in front of Wynter’s hiding place, gazing across the dancing brightness of the water and staring straight into her eyes.

Everything Wynter had ever been taught, everything she knew she should do in such a situation, fell out of her head. To her absolute horror and dismay, she just lay there, frozen and helpless, as the man took his time looking her up and down.

His eyes travelled the length of her and she saw him register her curves and hollows, her distinctively womanish shape. When his eyes came back up to meet hers, they were calculating and hot. He bared his teeth, and Wynter felt a shrivelling, horrible fear in her belly at the hunger in his grin.

‘Oy! Tosh!’ called his companion. ‘What is it?’ He had pulled his horse around and Wynter could hear him starting to drift towards them.

The bandit stood and waved him back. ‘Nothin’,’ he said, strolling casually back to the horses. ‘Nothin’ but a badger hole! I thought ’twas a person lying there! Sun must a got into my head!’

A wave of nauseating relief washed over her, and Wynter clamped her hand over her mouth, certain that she was going to vomit. As the bandit remounted his horse she heard him say, ‘Lookit, Peter. Once we settle a price with Silent Murk, you go on ahead and take Jenny to

yourself tonight. I got some business of my own to tend to.'

'Business?' cried his friend in disbelief. 'Instead of Jenny ...? What kind of business?'

'Ach, naught interestin'. Just fancy a bit of huntin' is all.'

'Huntin'?' echoed the other man, clearly baffled. 'Instead of Jenny? Tosh, I ain't complainin', God knows! But are you mad?'

The bandit chuckled. They began to trot away, but before they got out of earshot, Wynter heard his good-natured reply.

'I ain't mad,' he said amiably. 'I just find myself with a sudden craving for fresh meat. That's all.' And he laughed again, a warm laugh that made Wynter tremble and her throat close over with fear.