

The White Falcon
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The innkeeper had long practice in sizing up guests quickly. You got an odd lot here, just outside the city gates – the ones who had missed the curfew, or preferred the cheaper prices. It had become almost a game to see if he could guess their crafts and stations before they so much as spoke. Now this group ... the twitchy, nervous-looking man who was handing the horses off to the stable boy could be anything, but he would be the servant, not the master. He had the look of a man who would carry out orders well – not through any competence or sense of duty, but because he hadn't the wit to look beyond the task.

The other man – he would be a professional soldier. There was no mistaking the swagger of a man who lived off plunder, tricked out in finery made for another, and who had gotten what he held by his own hand. And it wasn't too hard to guess where he had been fighting last, given the troubles in the land. The innkeeper took a mental inventory of the current guests. A soldier from the levies would cause few problems – only wanting to serve his time and go home – but this type looked for trouble. But perhaps his employer would keep a tight hand on him. That would be ... the lady?

Now here was a puzzle. The cloak that enveloped her was ragged beyond road-wear, and it was more than the journey that seemed to weigh on her. But her calm authority and quiet confidence belonged in the hall ... or at the head of an army. Here was a woman who could lead men to the ends of the earth, whether for her own sake or for whatever banner she took up. If these two were the best she could command these days, the innkeeper guessed that it had not always been so.

On impulse he bowed lower to her than was his usual custom. "How may I serve my lady?"

She nodded to acknowledge his greeting and a sad, wry half-smile touched her mouth. But she said no word as she turned to the swaggerer, and the innkeeper heard the chink of metal beneath her cloak as she moved.

The other pushed her roughly to one side and stood before the innkeeper, his hands on his hips and a scowl on his face. "We'll have a room for the night - a private one, that locks. And dinner for two - something cheap."

The innkeeper looked back and forth between the two in confusion, then shrugged and turned to lead them within. He gestured at the pegs by the fire where cloaks were hanging to dry. This time it was more affronted courtesy than simple impulse that led him to assist the woman with hers - as if she had indeed been a great lady - while the men tossed theirs at the pegs. The soldier scowled again and jerked her away by one arm, snarling, "Keep away from her!"

Again came the chink of metal and this time he could see the cause: the short chain fastening the cuffs on her wrists. Now the innkeeper could only stand and gape as the soldier shoved her onto a bench in the corner and unlocked one cuff to clamp it around an ornamental railing.

"Hey, you can't do that," he protested, recovering himself with difficulty.

The soldier shot him a warning glance, but the woman, misunderstanding him - perhaps deliberately - answered in a low, rich voice with just a hint of amusement, "Have no fear that I will damage your property. He only chains me to show that he can."

At her last words, the soldier gave her a sharp, backhanded blow across the face, saying, "You speak when I give you leave!"

In response, she only stared at him, the effect marred by the blood on her mouth, but he was the first to look away.

The blacksmith was a neighbor, and a regular evening customer at the inn. There had been a time when he had had a wife to cook for him, and family at his hearth in the evenings. But fever had taken the wife, and the wars had taken the family. He wasn't the sort to care for spending time alone with his memories, so he took his dinner at the inn most nights. When he first laid eyes on the woman he felt only a mild annoyance: she was sitting in his usual corner. But then he took in the colors and martial cut of her garments and his face darkened in something too tired for anger and too impersonal for hate. He spat on the floor in her direction and turned to call for his dinner.

"Marron! What's your wife got on the fire tonight?"

Faralha was a harper from Leuin – the west country – where all the troubles were. Two years past she had fled here to the city to escape the fighting and to try to find a living once more. The living was scanty, for though Leuinori folk in exile were still hungry for the songs of home, they had little money to spare for harpers. So she slept in a shed where some of her countrymen kept a stable, and mostly sang for the Doruni, the easterners, as she did in Marron's inn. But those were different songs than she used to sing. The land here did not listen, and her tunes were no more than the piping of the blackbird.

She slipped in through the kitchen, knowing Marron would allow her a bite on credit before she began, so she heard the kitchen folks whispering about the lady in chains before she went out to see for herself. And when she saw, she knew the colors of that tattered jack and the cut of those boots, and knew where this lady was from. And then she looked at her face, and though she had never seen her before, Faralha knew who the lady must be. They knew too – the soldiers who chained her like a circus bear – though the other folk at the inn had not guessed yet. All the hope and light drained out of her world and Faralha knew a curious, ringing lightness where her heart had been. It left her feeling freer than she had before in her life: what could anything she did matter now?

Faralha settled herself in her usual place near the fire. Not so near as to put the harp out of tune, but near enough to keep her fingers from stiffening. And first she played a soft air from her own country, one she often played to begin. She glanced up briefly at the lady and was rewarded with another of her faint smiles. Then she moved into a tune the people here knew as an old country dance, one with strange changes and an almost march-like beat. But in her land there were words to it and she sang them in the tongue in which they had first been sung to her. It was an old story, the one of the king – or sometimes the queen – who slept under the hill who would return when fate seemed darkest. *Still with us, still with us, she will return.* The refrain whispered in the corners of the inn. Then Faralha did what she had never before dared and turned the lyrics to the tongue of this land of exile.

*She will come riding all on a white stallion,
Still with us, still with us, she will return,
Then we will cast off the chains they lay on,
Still with us, still with us, she will return.*

The blacksmith looked up sharply from his dinner and frowned at her. Faralha threw her head back and closed her eyes as she began the new verse, the one that they had started singing only five years before.

*High in the heavens I see a white falcon,
Still with us, still with us, she will return,
Shining in sunlight and wearing a gold crown,
Still with us, still with us, she will return,
Harry the hounds over hillside and mountain,
Still with us, still with us, she will return,
This is our land and so it will remain,
Still with us, still with us, she has returned.*

Her fingers kept on singing though her voice could not, and her own tears blinded her to what her song had stirred up. For the lady wept too, though silently, as one might at remembering a departed loved one, and she fingered the remnants of silver stitching on her breast that had once been an embroidered falcon. The blacksmith was not the only one who stared at her in dawning understanding, and a few of those others made the sign against evil. But the swaggering soldier turned crimson with rage and crossed the room in three quick strides to box the harper's ears and send her sprawling across the hearth.

"Be silent with your traitor's songs or I'll silence you myself."

She scrambled out of his way, trying to protect her instrument. The lady had stood, straining against bonds less visible than her chains. But it was Marron, the innkeeper, who smoothed the tension, taking the soldier cajolingly by the sleeve and thrusting a pitcher of ale into his hand.

"Your dinner is ready as we speak, sir. See, my daughter is bringing it to your table. Let the girl be. She sings what she chooses and if you don't like it you can keep your coins in your pocket."

The man let himself be led back to the table and started in eagerly on the stew and bread. Marron coughed loudly to get his attention, and he looked up in annoyance.

"What about her?" the innkeeper asked, nodding at the lady.

"What about her?" the soldier echoed.

"About dinner ..." He faltered as the soldier laughed loudly.

"I'll be rid of her tomorrow. Why should I waste good money feeding her anymore? She won't starve to death in one night." At the look on Marron's face he sneered and looked

around to address all the patrons. "You've got it so soft here, you can afford to be self-righteous. If you spent a day - just one day - out there on the border that'd drive out any pity you're feeling. They're wolves in human flesh. And you let them come here and set up their dens at the very walls of the city and think they've changed into lap-dogs like that one." He pointed at Faralha. "You'll learn different some dark night when they turn on you like they did on the people of Alar-Nessa. Have you even heard of Alar-Nessa?"

"Aye!" growled the blacksmith.

"Then look to your own backs, and leave her to me."

After that, the blacksmith stared at the lady for a long time with a scowl twisting his face and his mind lost in thought until Marron came bringing his dinner.

When the harper's song ceased, the merchant slowly unclenched his fingers from around the shattered cup he had been holding and looked in distant surprise at the blood where it had cut his palm. How could the music still affect him so after all these years? He had left that behind - left it behind with the other things of his childhood. He looked around guiltily to see if anyone had noticed the strength of his reaction.

The songs rarely crept into his memory anymore. And when they did, he could think of it all as a child's dream ... that once he had sung to the land and it had sung back to him. That wasn't real - not real like six wagon-loads of goods headed for a buyer in the city. Not real like the children who waited for him within the city walls: well-fed, rosy-cheeked children who were dressed in unpatched clothing, a son who was nearly a man.

Songs were a fine dream, but they didn't bring buyers to the market. At least not any more. And when the year had been bad, they didn't pay the taxes on the goods you hadn't even sold. And when you rose up against the lords in their stone keeps - keeps built with the very money they had squeezed from you - songs were a poor substitute for arrows and good swords.

Who could blame him if he had headed east? Who could blame him if he wanted more for his children-to-be than the scraps he had grown up on? And here he was, with a prosperous business and a fine wife - a wife who had brought him respectability and a house in the better part of town, not in the ragged village outside the walls where later-come Leuinori scraped and starved, just as they had

at home. Who could blame him if he shed even his name, as he had his western clothes and speech?

He wiped his hand surreptitiously on a kerchief and dropped the shards of the cup under the table. Why couldn't they let it rest? Let it go? He had seen a dog by the roadside the other day, run down by a cart. It had dragged itself to the edge of the road and lay there whining softly in the hot sun. From time to time it would try to stand, but the hind legs lay useless and limp. And he had done the merciful thing and killed it before moving on. There was a time to call an end and give up the struggle.

He looked over in the corner where *she* was sitting. Their eyes met, and to the merchant her gaze spoke of recognition and accusation. She knew him for what he was. And she could reveal it here in front of everyone. She had but to stand and point and name his clan, and everything he had built, had worked for, would come tumbling down. The times were too tense. You could not live where he lived, deal what he dealt, go where he went, and be known as Leuinori. His wife would be mocked and his children spat upon. He looked away again and tried to calm his racing heart.

The old stonemason had helped Faralha up from the floor and clucked over the new scratch in her harp and slipped a bit of coin – though he had little to spare – into her hand. "I never knew that was one of the Old Songs," he said, settling her back in her place. "My grandmother used to sing something to that tune, but I never knew what it meant."

"Your grandmother was Leuinori?" the harper asked.

"Well, I don't know about that. She never said one way or the other that I recall. But she was always singing something and some of it was in some strange language or another. Do you know 'The Fairy Ring', then? Or 'Ardoal's Voyage'? I love songs about the old legends."

Faralha shook her head, trying not to show her disdain. "Those are Doruni songs. Some court poet wrote them in the old king's time."

"Is that so?" the old man wondered. "I would have thought them as old as the rocks."

One of his friends joined them then, laughing good-naturedly at the old man's astonishment. "Half the 'Leuinori' songs you hear on the streets these days were written by some rhymester at court. It's all the rage now. Last winter they had a masque with everyone dressed up like

someone out of the old stories. My niece works in the kitchens up there and snuck a peak at some of it."

The harper held her tongue only by virtue of long practice. They meant no harm, but neither did they care for her feelings in the matter. What was it to them if the singer of this year's fashion was feasted at court while those who sang the true songs starved?

"Sing one of yours, then," the stonemason asked her. "One of the Old Songs about magic."

Faralha shrugged and checked the tuning of the strings. She'd give them a Leuinan song, but it would be all the same to them which it was. She'd save the Old Songs for those who knew the difference.

The merchant found himself trembling like a leaf in the wind, and his eyes kept moving back to the lady's face whether he would or no. Then the harper started again: a quiet traveling song – one you sang to your horse on the road. And without realizing he did it, the merchant's mouth shaped the words – words he had known in his childhood as he had known his own name. The lady saw it and smiled, and that broke the spell. He stood so abruptly that his stool crashed to the floor. Fear chilled to hate in his heart and he hurled himself out of the common room and up the stairs to the sleeping chambers. But even the dark and silence would not banish the echo of that music.

Marron looked nervously over at the soldier as he emerged from the kitchen carrying a laden platter. Then, steeling himself, he walked to the lady's corner and set it before her. She looked up at him in surprise, an unspoken question on her lips. But before either of them said a word, her jailer was on his feet with a roar of outrage.

"I told you to keep away from her! And I said she was to have no food."

The innkeeper wiped his hands on his apron and moved back a step. "No, sir. You said that you would not pay for her food. Someone else has."

"Beef? You're feeding her beef and you fed us that stinking gruel?"

Marron backed up another step. "I fed you what you paid for, and I'm feeding her what was bought for her." He looked around as if for support. "Surely you can't complain about that."

The soldier, too, looked around, but his gaze was accusing. "Who did this?" Only silence answered him. "Who

spent good coin to feed this dog of a traitor?" he roared. Then his eyes fell on Faralha and he dragged her up by the neck of her gown. "You!"

She twisted in his grasp but could not break free. Finally she glared at him defiantly and said, "Would that I could! I would give all that I have, to my very life, for the *Lohanor*. But I cannot give what is not mine, and I haven't the coin to buy her even a crust of bread."

"I don't believe you," he said, slapping her casually with his free hand. He raised it back for a second blow and was surprised when his wrist was seized in a grip of iron. He let the harper fall from his grasp and turned to face the blacksmith.

"You're a bit too free with your fists for my taste," the big man said quietly.

"What business is it of yours?" Now *he* was the one who squirmed in a grip he could not break. "Are you some Leuin-lover?"

The blacksmith's eyes narrowed. "I lost a brother at Alar-Nessa, and a son at Qarnfeld. But that's nothing to do with this girl, and I won't have you beating her for something she never did."

"How do you know what she did or not?"

The blacksmith released his wrist and said flatly, "Because I paid for the woman's dinner." There was a stunned silence in the room. "And I'll pay for her bed, too. Marron, give her your best room and I'll pay the charge."

The soldier looked from one to the other with no understanding in his face. But there was no answer he could make, so he shrugged and went back to his own table.

The lady had watched it all with detached curiosity. Now she caught the blacksmith's eye and beckoned him near. He took no step closer, but neither did he turn away. With a flicker of eyes in her jailer's direction, she said softly, "Thank you for the dinner." His face was like stone, as if daring her to guess his reasons. "I'm sorry that you lost your son."

"You're sorry," he hissed back at her.

"I know how you feel," she continued, as if he hadn't spoken. "You see, I have lost five thousand sons and daughters to this war. And every one of them I loved as you loved your son." She looked as if she would have said more, but the soldier shot her a warning look and she fell

silent, returning him the wry, almost amused smile that seemed to drive him to fury.

"You won't think it's so funny tomorrow," he spat. "Let's see you laugh at the gallows."

She chuckled. "I've been laughing at the gallows for the last ten years."

From somewhere in the room there was a muffled laugh and the soldier looked around to spot the culprit. It had begun to dawn on him that he was playing the fool for these people. Every time she jerked *his* chain, she gathered more sympathy. And he was clever enough to see what was happening, but not enough to know what to do about it. He muttered an oath aimed at the others in general, then growled at his partner, "Keep an eye on her," and strode out into the yard.

Faralha had retrieved her harp and readjusted its tuning. "What would you hear, Lady?" she asked, settling herself again by the fire.

"Sing me 'The Dark Lass of Linnerth', and 'The Hazel Pool', and 'Nellan Argues with Her Cow'. Those were always my favorites as a girl."

Faralha gaped at her in surprise. "Lady, I haven't the heart for such merry tunes tonight."

"If not tonight, when will I hear them again? Child, there will be time enough for tears after I'm dead. Don't rush me to the grave."

The harper swallowed heavily and looked away. Then she set her fingers to the strings and began the tune for the tale of courting gone hilariously awry in the village of Linnerth. By the time she began the second verse, the song had worked its charm and the cloud had lifted from her heart. Even the other customers – though they could not follow the words – were absently tapping their toes and fingers and chattering of lighter matters. The quick dance meters of 'The Hazel Pool' even had Marron's daughter out jiggling with her pitcher as she passed around refilling cups. Faralha began the next strains, then paused.

"I need another voice – will you be Nellan or the cow?"

The lady laughed, but then a shadow passed over her face and she said, "You'll have to be both, I'm afraid. It was part of my bargain with them ... that I would not sing."

"Not ... not sing?"

"How did it happen," the blacksmith broke in abruptly, "that you came into the power of a man like *that*. I had heard better of you."

Faralha bristled on her lady's behalf, but the woman only sighed and the entire room hushed in expectancy of a tale.

"It was after the battle at Isterne, when we knew there would be no victory – nor even terms. We sang down the mist to cover our retreat and slipped into the hills – I'm sure you've heard that part of the tale by now. And there I released my captains from their oaths and sent my people home, to try to take up their lives again if they could.

"We had left our pursuers wandering blindly by the sea, but every army has its stragglers – in this case deliberate stragglers perhaps, who had had no taste for the battle we were fleeing. When we came to the pass at Anaq they blocked our way and would have held it against us.

"Oh, we could have fought our way through – there were no more than a dozen of them – but not before the fog lifted and the main army could chase us again. Some of us could have climbed the peaks and gone around, but not all, and not the wounded. And there was no going back.

"But I saw that these were men who fought for their own gain, and I pointed out that there was no profit to them in standing against us, except what they would have earned from the main battle itself. But if they would stand off and let the army pass through, I would trade myself for that passage. They took the bargain, but they had no mind to share me with the regular army. These two were set to bring me here – to the king himself – to claim their reward. That is the whole of the tale. And because it made no difference, I agreed to their terms: that I would allow myself to be bound, and swore not to attempt escape or harm against them, and they forbade me to sing, because they feared sorcery and would not take my word on that matter."

"How could you?" Faralha asked, through a voice halfway between sorrow and rage. "Every one of us would have willingly died for you. How could you throw that away?"

"What would their lives have bought me? Where could I go?"

Faralha said, in the tongue that only the two of them understood, "You could ride back to the Hill and wait for the next time."

She smiled her sad smile and shook her head, replying in the same tongue, "The next one will not be me. This

falcon has made her flight and hit short of the mark. There is no second cast."

The harper scrambled to her feet and shouted angrily, "They will parade you through the streets and hang your head on the city gate and boast that they have slain the *Lohanor*. And there will be no 'next time'!" Then she whirled and ran from the inn.

The lady looked around at the crowd, who stirred uneasily at being left out of the exchange. "It seems we will have no more music tonight. My apologies for that."

As the noise slowly returned to normal, the blacksmith came over to sit across from the lady. She waited for him to speak first, finishing her dinner hungrily, in the best thanks she knew how to give. But when she had finished and he still sat in silence, she asked, "Why?"

He would not answer her at first, though the struggle showed clearly on his face. Then he said, "My son was home on leave the month before he died."

She waited, sensing that the tale would come in its own time.

"Do you know what he said to me, the night before he marched away? The last thing he ever said to me?" He searched her face as if expecting an answer, but she only waited. "He said, 'They tell us we are fighting a great evil, but no one fights as these people do except from love and desperation.' And then he looked around, as if he thought someone might be listening, and he said, 'I have seen their *Lohanor*, and - God help me - if I were free, I would fight for her too.' And I hated you then. It was not enough that you had stolen his life, but you had stolen his heart as well."

"And now?"

He looked down at his hands. "And now ... I have seen what he saw." And then, abruptly, he pushed away from the table without meeting her eyes and left the inn without a word.

The soldier came back, in no better mood than before, and called for the innkeeper to show them their rooms as he unchained the lady from her bench. He made a great fuss of demanding that he be given the only keys to the rooms, and when they had been shown them, he dismissed Marron and glared at him until he went downstairs again. He looked around the well-appointed chamber that the blacksmith's money had bought, then pushed the lady down the hallway to

the smaller room and locked her to the bedframe before returning to share the better room with his comrade. Exhaustion sent the lady to sleep almost before she heard the key turn in the door.

The merchant rose at dawn, not so much eager to get his wagons through the city gates before the streets clogged, but eager simply to get away from the inn. However much he justified his own actions in his mind, his heart still whispered 'traitor'. No. Let all those useless hopes and dreams fade away until the songs were no more than pretty music and the *Lohanor* was a fairy tale for children. He had done what he had to do – there had never really been a choice. But the music still whispered in his ears and he could not explain away the tears that fought past his control.

The sun streaming through the window onto her face woke the lady at last. She opened her eyes to stare at the ceiling, noting incuriously that the angle meant it was nearly noon. Odd, that no one had come for her yet, but it hurt too much to wonder, to question ... to care. Her only thought was, *Please, let it be over soon.*

After what seemed a long time there was a tentative tap on the door, then a more authoritative knock.

"I cannot reach the door," she called out. "And if I could, I have no key."

There was silence at the door for a while, then the sound of heavy footsteps in the hall and a key in the lock. The innkeeper stared in surprise to see her there.

She schooled her face to its sad, wry grin. "My companions thought they would take advantage of the smith's generosity." She nodded toward the ring in his hand. "They had asked to have the only keys ..."

"And do you think I'd be such a fool not to have spares? But I haven't a spare for those," he said, pointing to the manacles that bound her to the bedstead, "so you'll have to wait until I roust your friends out."

He disappeared back down the hallway. She heard him pounding at another door in the distance, then the rattle of keys, followed by a confused din of shouting and coughing.

Some time passed before anyone came to enlighten her. It was the innkeeper's daughter, pale and shaking and carrying a small black key.

"Dead!" she exclaimed as she unlocked the chain from the bed. "They're dead, both of them! Someone dumped sleepwort down the chimney then stopped it up."

The lady rose and followed her down the hall. They had thrown the windows open and someone had gone up on the roof and unplugged the flue. A faint, sweet odor lingered in the room, but it hadn't been that that had killed them – the herb had only kept them from waking while the smoke did its work. The two men lay side by side on the bed as if asleep, except for the fine layer of soot that covered everything.

"She did it! She killed them!" someone shouted from the crowd that filled the room, pointing at the lady where she stood in the doorway.

"And how could I have done that," she asked, "with me chained to a post and the room locked as well? And what would it profit me to kill them?"

The accuser gaped at her a moment. "Why, to escape, of course!"

She laughed in outright astonishment. "And so I killed them, locked myself back in my room – somehow returning all the keys to their possession – and waited until now, rather than stealing a horse in the night and being halfway to the Fleth? Don't be a fool." It was the closest thing she had shown to anger in the time she had been there.

"Sorcery!" someone muttered.

"No one else would have reason to kill them," another said. "Send for the city guard."

"No!" she protested frantically, seeing where this would lead. She looked around to Marron and held out her hands. "I swore that I would surrender myself to the king of my own will. Let me do that – not be dragged before him by the guards as if I were a common criminal!" Marron hesitated and she continued, "I had no part in these deaths. I give you my word on that. Will you let me finish this journey in peace?"

He shifted his stance and sized up the mood of the crowd. "It isn't that I doubt you or anything," he said slowly, "and God knows, if you *had* done it, it isn't as if they could do anything worse to you. But if it wasn't you, you see, we need to know who it was. I don't like the thought of a murderer hanging about my place. Why would anyone else want to kill them?"

"Who knew they were in this room?" she countered. The room quieted as the meaning of her question sank in. "Did anyone know they had switched rooms with me? You didn't," she said, turning to Marron. "Did anyone?" When the silence

had begun to fray, she said, "Shouldn't the question be, why would anyone want to kill me?"

That question stumped them. Who would kill a dead woman? As they pondered the riddle, Marron herded them out of the chamber and down into the common room.

Somehow, no one found it strange when the lady took charge of matters and began questioning the guests. It was what Marron had noticed in her at the first: the natural habit of command lay so easily on her shoulders that it would be impossible to take offense. Afterward they talked openly of sorcery, for all she did was ask simple questions and watch your eyes as you answered. And with most, she nodded and dismissed them after that, but those who had tried to dissemble found themselves queried more sharply until she was satisfied.

But no answer emerged. No one had seen or heard anything, or turned up any reason why the deed might have been done. Marron had sent out messengers to call in the locals who had been there just for the evening. "Of course, there were three travelers who left early this morning," he added. "It could have been any of them. The two heading up north are long gone, but the fellow with the wagons lives right in town. He showed up after they closed the gates yesterday. I could have him fetched."

The lady brought him to mind – the one who had mouthed the words of the Leuinal song. Had he thought to kill her lest she betray him? But if it had been him, he had brought about his own betrayal by the deed. She shook her head. "Leave him be for now."

They brought the blacksmith in, grumbling at being taken from his forge. But though he still would not meet the lady's eyes, neither did he show any surprise that she still lived. And they brought the old stonemason in, who spat on the floor when he heard of the deaths and said he had no tears for the likes of them. And finally there was only Faralha left to come, who had to be searched out in the corner where she slept most of the day away.

They heard the harper's voice, tight with emotion, as she approached the door. "What happened? What do you want with me?" She stepped through the doorway and blinked a moment in the darkness of the common room, then Marron stepped from between her and the lady. Faralha's face went pasty white. She swayed and clutched a table edge to keep from falling. "No," she whispered, almost too softly to

hear. The lady stood and went to her, and Faralha sank to her knees before her, face buried in her hands and sobs shaking her thin shoulders.

"Why?" the lady asked, though she suspected the answer.

The harper looked up and struggled to find her voice. "To steal their victory. To leave us our dreams. To take you out of their hands before they could make a sordid circus of your death!" She clenched her hands into fists. "I will not ask your forgiveness for trying, only for failing."

The lady shook her head. "I will forgive you for trying, but I will not forgive you for killing two others in my place."

Faralha looked around wildly and realized the most notable absence in the crowd. "But then you are free!"

"No! It was never these chains that bound me, but my own word. No one can free me from that." She took Faralha by the arm and raised her up. "Today – as I swore in exchange for my people's lives – I will walk into the king's court and deliver myself into his hands. And you will be my herald, and sing the *Allohan* before me. That is your penance."

"Please, no ..."

The lady's voice lowered. "Must I go alone, then?" she asked. And for the first time, her mask of calm acceptance began to slip. "Be there with me, until the end. Sing to me."

The harper gulped and nodded.

The lady looked around the room. "If you are satisfied, we will leave you."

But when she would have gone to the door, Marron blocked her path. "There's no need for haste. It's nearly evening and the gates will be closing. Tomorrow will be soon enough. Rest another day. We can find you a bath and some fresh clothes – or would you go before the king in rags and filth?"

A ghost of the wry smile returned. "That is how most of my countrymen have entered this land."

And then the blacksmith faced her again and moved to unlock the heavy chains from her wrists. She moved to protest, but he said, "Tomorrow, if you insist, you can be chained again, but for one night you can do without."

She stared around at the small crowd that remained. In their faces she saw a familiar look. Somehow, in a single

day, she had moved from being their enemy to being the Queen Under the Hill. They loved her. If she lifted her hand, they would follow her. If she spoke the right words, and sang to their hearts, they would even die for her. The burden was far heavier than the one the smith had removed. Though she wished nothing more than to have the whole matter done with, she let herself be persuaded. And while water was being heated, and her clothes whisked away, and a dozen other preparations made, Faralha slipped off on errands of her own.

The morning was gray and misty with the sort of summer fog that would burn off soon with little warning. The lady had stayed wakeful until the early hours, but at last had slipped into a few hours of sleep. Now she woke, rising in her borrowed shift, to find a suit of clothes laid out at the foot of the bed. *Could such a thing be done in one night?* she wondered. *And how many needles did they find to work this?* She lifted the quilted coat, with the pattern taken from her old torn garment, down to the falcon badge stitched on the breast. And a clean shirt and hose, and her old boots cleaned and polished. A shiver went through her as she put the garments on.

And then she went down into the courtyard. The blacksmith came out toward her from a knot of waiting people. Almost shyly, he held out a pair of delicate silver bracelets, linked by a silver chain. She put them on, thinking that the stories would make much of that. Would they say no baser metal could have bound her? And then Faralha came from the stable, leading a white mare, who the day before had been pulling a vegetable cart. Now she had been brushed until her coat gleamed like moonlight.

The lady mounted, and Faralha led her through the city gates and along the streets toward the plaza before the palace, chanting the plaintive strains of the *Allohan*. Echoes came from every alleyway and shadow that they passed – Leuinori exiles forming that invisible layer on which every city stands. They took up the chant until the whole city seemed filled with the sound of the ancient tongue. And then they stood before the palace gates, with the eerie music swelling around them, and the harper proclaimed in a loud voice that the *Lohanor* had come to give herself into the king's hands. And as the fog parted a shaft of sunlight lit the rider on the white horse, and high overhead the lady heard the sound of a falcon screaming.

For the first time since the pass at Anaq, the journey seemed not an ending, but a beginning.