# The Road

The creak of the wain and rattle of fittings blended with the hiss of leaves and scattered birdsong. Asira looked ahead at the ribbon of packed dirt and imagined what might lay ahead. She had never been outside of the Westmarch. Indeed, she seldom wandered too far from the sight of Crogmoor Castle, that now lay in a ruin somewhere backward down the road. One hand maintained a hold on the side of the wain; the other went to her belly.

Life would be different now.

Lord Dirridain lay in the wain ahead of her, breathing and warm, but his eyes opened for only moments at a time, a couple of times a day at most. Many times, he didn’t open them at all, his deep and wounded sleep keeping him in its clutches for the whole of the day. Thus far, though he seemed to be hanging onto life, he did not speak. She needed him to speak.

Ahead of her, on the wagon with Lord Dirridain was the High Lady Kreegs, former mistress of Crogmoor, widow to the murdered lord, stepmother to the woman Asira had served over the past half dozen years. Kadrana Kreegs. The Young Lady Kreegs, had been her title. Now she was gone. Gone, and no one knew where. Not yet. That would change though, in time. Everything would change.

The little train of wains and outriders was heading eastward, through the ridge of hills that divided the Westmarch from Middlemarch and the South March beyond it. That was their destination: South March. Thorngraad. The seat of Petty-King Gunthrin.

She looked to the front of the train and saw him there, atop his tall white horse, crowned helmet on his head and full armour on, in case they met trouble along the road. He would fight alongside the lesser men, despite his rank and his age. All of the men would. Only a dozen of them were armoured though, the rest being servants and peasants, and included among them was Lord Dirridain himself. Gunthrin had insisted upon it.

‘There is no need to fight bandits,’ he had said, the night before they had left, ‘If you have a strong enough show of power in the first place. They won’t dare break the treeline if death awaits them.’

She prayed to Hennu he was right. She didn’t like the thought of rough men amid the trees, measuring them and contemplating murder and theft. She missed the castle. Harsh as her mistress had been, and hard as the life of a handmaid could be, it was safe from such dangers.

At least she had thought it was.

She felt a lurch in her belly and stifled a gasp. Alien, that lurch. Not her. Something within her. She still had not been able to bring herself to name what was happening; it was scary enough to know what it was.

She lifted her eyes and caught the gaze of High Lady Kreegs. The older woman’s stare was keen and curious. Did she know? How could she? And yet, there was something in her look, a mixture of concern and doubt, that gave Asira the sense of being stripped of her secrecy, of her layers of clothing, until she was laid bare before the woman. Maybe. Ah well, better High Lady Kreegs than Young Lady Kreegs. The character of the two couldn’t be any further apart. Perhaps it would be good to share her burden with the older lady. Perhaps in sharing it they might be able to come up with some kind of solution to the dilemma. What to do if Lord Dirridain never woke up… what to do if he did.

‘We halt over the next rise,’ called the king from the front of the line, ‘We rest there for the night.’

Their third night on the road. The better part of two weeks left to go, at the speed the wains travelled. Normally she would not have minded the time out of doors, sleeping with the great curtain of stars and grey-drifting clouds above her, but it was different now. Her mind had already begun to turn to other concerns, and the thought of bandits in the shadows did not help to ease her mind.

The camp was set up quickly and efficiently. She threw in to help, of course, in keeping with her station as a servant, but High Lady Kreegs called for her to help with making Lord Dirridain comfortable. It was lighter work, and took place in the first tent to be erected. She was thankful for it, but the request had only made her more certain that her secret was not as secret as she had thought.

‘He is doing better,’ the noblewoman said, as much to herself as to Asira it seemed, ‘Despite the travel.’

‘Do you think he will-‘ Asira’s words were cut short as the young lord opened his eyes and looked at her. Then to lady Kreegs, and then back. A touch of a smile at the edges of his mouth? Maybe?

Then they closed. The mouth relaxed. The breathing grew long and easy again.

‘That is the third time today,’ Lady Kreegs smiled as she spoke. ‘Yesterday it was twice, and did you notice? He looked at you and at me. Not just open eyes, but sight. Awareness! I am so pleased.’

Asira nodded. It was good news. Very good news. The wounds had closed, though the scars were red and bright, and the beat of his heart was steadier – not the thready, hesitant beat it had been in the first days after his charge upon Crogmoor and the sorcerer who had held the place against its rightful residents and rulers. She had thought him doomed, that day. The bolts punched through his skin and the blood, so much blood, soaked through his clothing and onto the ground around him. Perhaps he had been slain that day, and they were all just waiting for what must come – but perhaps not.

Perhaps there was hope in each new day, after all.

A watch had been set, of course, and there were enough of them that, once they were all lounging about in the flickering glow of the firelight, her fears of attack waned. She could sleep in relative peace, troubled only by her own worries about the months to come, not those of the hours immediately ahead of her. Her eyelids were heavy, her belly full of warm stew and weak beer, and sleep was coming. Perhaps here dreams would bring peace.

She awoke with a start.

Nothing too notable, save that she was not the only one awake around the little fire, and there were too many people missing. A dozen had been sitting around the fire when she had drifted off, now four remained, huddled around the low flames and glancing off into the darkness.

All was quiet, but not well. She could feel it.

She stirred and moved a little closer to the flames.

‘What is it?’ she asked, and the four sets of eyes around the fire turned to her.

‘I dunno, miss,’ she was answered by a grey-haired ostler, there with his young apprentice and two scullery maids, ‘Not yet an hour past, a man came in, looking white as a sheet in the darkness. Went right to the king. Pulled him from sleep he did! Then the king gives orders, and men takes watch. Double watch, maybe more. Somethin’ is afoot, though I don’t know it for bandits or bears, myself.’

‘Pray sweet Hennu it ain’t a hellcat,’ muttered one of the women, ‘Ain’t never seen one and don’t mean to. Not out here, in the dark, more than anywhere.’ She touched her forehead, invoking Hennu’s eye.

She was not waiting. She had not been through everything she had endured in the last months only to fall whimpering to bandits or a hellcat. Lady Kreegs had called her to help with Lord Dirridain earlier in the day, perhaps she could use that as an excuse to get within earshot of what was going on. She rose and walked off toward the nobles’ tents, leaving her blanket on the ground behind her. The ostler snatched it up and wrapped it around the other one he wore. None of the four followed her.

The flicker of a candle showed in a soft glow around the tent where Lord Dirridain slept. He would not need such a thing, so whoever was in there was awake. She approached the sentry with a stride as confident as she could make it, and he greeted her with a nod of recognition, but no challenge. She pulled the heavy canvass aside and stepped in. Lady Kreegs was there, her worry clear in the warm light of the candle.

‘Ah, Asira, good of you to come. I have been watching him, but my eyes are heavy. Did you sleep?’

‘Some, My Lady’ she nodded, ‘But the… I awoke when the watch was doubled.’

Lady Kreegs’ eyes widened. ‘What?’

‘I thought you would know. Those by the fire said that the watch had been increased. Few are now left by the fires.’

‘Why?’

‘I had hoped you would know.’

‘I will soon enough. You will stay with Lord Dirridain a moment? I will speak with the king, if he is awake.’

Asira nodded.

Pulling on a thick fur cloak, Lady Kreegs stepped out into the night, asking the guard to let no one in until she returned. Her footfalls faded into the night.

Asira’s eyes fell on Lord Dirridain. On Eric.

She stared a while, not knowing what to say, and then she made so bold as to place her hand upon him and feel the warmth of his skin. It was cool in the night, but there was no death there. She thought she could see, at last, a little of that improvement Lady Kreegs had insisted was there.

‘Eric,’ she whispered, not wanting even the guard to overhear her, ‘There is something you should know. I do not know if you will think this good news, or ill, but it is good news for me; I have decided it. I ask nothing more of you than a meagre living and whatever affection you may have in your heart for me. For me, and for…’ She hesitated, the import of saying it even to an unconscious Dirridain was more than she had in her at that moment. The hesitation was enough to eat away the little time she had to herself; before her words could be refashioned and given to the supine form Infront of her, the sounds of Lady Kreegs’ return whispered in through the night air.

The flap opened and she came in with a draught of cool night air.

‘Well, it is less than I thought it might be, though some are properly disturbed by it.’

‘By what?’

‘One of the sentries said he saw something. A man, he said, but a strange one. King Gunthrin feels it may have been a bandit scout. Well enough. They were unlikely to try us when the sentry was a normal one. All is at the alert now, so they won’t try anything. I’m sure of it. A sleepy day tomorrow, perhaps, but the night will be fine.’

Asira tried to feel relieved. She realised, as Lady Kreeg’s eyes fell to it, that her hand was clasped around Lord Dirridain’s fingers. She caught the faint smile at the corner of the older woman’s mouth and let her hand stay where it was. An unspoken moment.

Yes, Lady Kreegs knew.

‘Strange, you said?’

‘Pardon me?’

‘You said the sentry saw a strange man… a stranger, did you mean, or strange looking?’

‘Strange looking, I suppose. He thought he looked fey.’

Asira’s skin tingled and she felt the blood drain from her face. Lady Kreegs saw the change and grasped her other hand.

‘Dear, please, don’t go like that. Superstition. Tricks of the shadows.’

‘How can you say that, after… after what happened at the castle?’

‘What happened at Crogmoor was sorcery, to be sure, but it was still a man who did it. A villain, yes, but a man nonetheless. The Feyfolk are a legend told to children and simple folk to keep them from the woods! Nothing more. If they saw a man, a man it was. A man only. Do not fear, you have… you have enough to worry about, do you not?’

Asira’s pale face flooded with red then, and her eyes fell to the floor.

‘Do not worry, your secret is safe with me. It is… Eric’s?’

Asira nodded.

‘Forgive me but… you are certain?’

Another nod.

‘Very well then. Fear not. Men will be men, but I am a woman too and know what it is like where you are… at least in part. You will never starve, nor will the babe,’ her eyes glanced to Dirridain, still lost in sleep, ‘regardless of what he thinks or does when he awakes.’

‘Thank you,’ Asira’s hands went to Lady Kreegs’ and grasped them tightly, ‘Thank you so much.’

‘Think nothing of it. Eric is like a son to me, and this babe shall be like a grandchild. I am not powerful, but I am not poor. What I have will be to your benefit. Now, the night is old and worry is a heavy burden. Lie you here, by the side of the bier, and sleep. I will watch over you both and sleep in the wain tomorrow. You can ride with us, and watch over him while I rest.’

As she obeyed Lady Kreegs and lowered herself onto the thick rugs on the floor beside Dirridain’s bed, her eyes drew closed of their own accord and deeper darkness fell. Above her, the Lord of Crogmoor’s eyes fluttered open once and then closed again.

All was then quiet in the tent, and uneventful in the camp around it.