

MINDA falters

by

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Sequel to Minda inherits

Draft for comments

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In this draft edition there are temporary section headings that **[Look like this]**. These are convenience labels in case I want to shuffle the order. In selecting the order I have tried to hide critical events from characters who wouldn't have heard about them yet and with any luck the reader will be in the dark as well.

Bessemer	Large wood beam across the top of a fireplace.
Billet	Sausage-shaped piece of metal or wood
Brake	Rough woodland with ground cover for animals
Butler	Head cellarman in a large house.
Butts	Archery targets
Demesne	Lands, territory. eg Lands owned by a manor.
Forestall	Buying goods before they get to open market
Jewel	Precious ornaments. Gold and silver as well as stones.
Lay Brother	Member of religious institution who primarily works to support the full-time brothers and doesn't hold a religious office.
Magnate	Very wealthy and powerful person
Manor	Smallest area of civil administration.
Mark	Unit of financial accounting.
Quench	Harden steel by rapid cooling
Quintain	Swinging target used for jousting practice.
Quiver	Backpack / pocket for arrows.
Reeve	Local civic official in charge of law and order. (See note below.)
Reward	Second highest table at a meal
Scullion	Menial kitchen servant
Settle	High-backed bench seat
Sheriff	District civic official in charge of law and order. (See note below.)
Team	Horses working together to pull heavier loads.
Temper	Precise and gentle heating of steel to toughen it

1 shilling = 12 pennies (pence)

1 penny = 2 halfpennies = 4 farthings

Titles of officials. Historically a *sheriff* was what we would nowadays call 'chief constable'. His job was to prevent disorder and hold suspects until they could be tried or deal himself with minor offences. Sometimes *reeve* is used interchangeably with *sheriff* but for the purpose of this book I have used *reeve* to indicate a sort of 'local police sergeant'. I have also invented a 'Tax *Collector*' who deals with property and fixed wealth and a 'Tax *Officer*' who deals with movable goods. This is similar to the old British split between 'Inland Revenue' and 'Customs and Excise'. Office-holders usually expected payments for favours and were unlikely to obstruct the most powerful people.

Historical accuracy. Extremes of wealth, influence of the church, fragile law and order, corruption, difficulty of travel, economic turmoil, recognition of status, and dirt are all characteristics of the mediaeval period. The reality of every-day living and society in those times is so very different from what we are used to today that a reader would be continually distracted from the story. To take one example: In this book inns are civilised places with public and private parlours and one bed per person. Wrong on all counts! How people lived then (covering a wide area of Europe and a number of centuries) is a large and fascinating subject. Often details such as clothing vary over time and distance. Skip down to the library to discover lots of factual information to stoke the fires of imagination and warm the chilling ignorance of how our forebears lived. In the meantime please forgive the inventions, simplifications and omissions and enjoy the tale.

What are those slashes? They are called a 'Truport'. Occasionally you will see one character's words finish with a / and the next start with a /. This indicates the second interrupts the first. For example:

"...I really think you ought/"

"/Shut up! I don't care what you think..."

Sometimes people interrupt themselves.

"...then we should/ /Oh no! Here comes John..."

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1 The story so far

The first book *Minda grows up* tells how our heroine was rejected by her father the Duke of Avel because she was crippled and ugly. She grows up strong and is trained to be a leader against outlaws. She does come across smugglers and shows her cleverness and determination. She is darling of the blacksmiths as she helps their relationships. At the end of the book Minda is eighteen and has just arranged the murder of her brother so she may inherit the dukedom.

The second book *Minda inherits* describes her struggle against murderous opposition to gain the dukedom and its wealth. She puts new life and into a decaying town and castle that have been neglected. Her arch-rival the Abbot is defeated and the townspeople are charmed and respect her. Once her base, the town of Bartonbry, is secure she can race to the King to give and get his support before. Without any friends at court she 'ambushes the king with charm' and hammer's home her strength and favoured status. At the end of this book she is given twenty fifteen year old sons of nobles (including three boys and two shady orphans from the streets) for a sort of 'boot camp'.

Minda is fearless, strong, practical and very good at inspiring loyalty. She has made many friends and enemies and turned enemies into loyal servants by strength of her personality and guile. Her time at the Tax Office allowed her to meet members of the King's secret intelligence service who are keen to have a powerful and loyal force in the kingdom who is not compromised by dubious allegiances at court. Her must-have-man is the son of a blacksmith but she can't marry anyone or else she would lose control of the dukedom.

Catch-up with places and people

Minda was raised in the village of **Selenden**, moved to village of **Trowstead** for two years and moved to the town of **Lostnock** in the autumn. Lostnock is a vibrant trading town, one of the busiest in the kingdom, but historically the Duke's home town of **Bartonbry** is the centre of regional government. This was decaying but Minda is rejuvenating it. Her castle and the Abbey dominate the town. It takes a day to ride from Lostnock to Bartonbry. The capital, Melbun, is at least three days over small mountains from Bartonbry. The King is easily infected by youthful enthusiasm but is otherwise a ditherer and not too well served or supported by the powerful people at court.

Minda has two completely loyal and familiar household servants: Personal bodyguard and servant **Flor** who she trained with for two years at Trowstead is now just twenty-two. He is her only true household servant. **Lucky** is a mercenary recruit who is older than Flor and a bit of a loner. **Doreen** took over the role of castle steward and Minda's chief of staff when her husband was found to be treacherous. (Her husband **Derek Driver** has been given the job of overseeing building works.) Minda sometime calls her 'mum'. **Paul** was the Abbot's secretary who was originally sent to poison her but became her secretary by being won round by Minda's (not entirely detached) flirting and guile. He is also her clerk of secret communications with the King's intelligencers. **Tomlyn** we would call the business manager who is extremely efficient at documenting all Minda's properties and other businesses. When she first arrived he absconded with gold and jewels but Minda cleverly got a full confession and promise of good behaviour and now he is a trusted part of the castle's organisation. **Agnes** her maid is a smith's daughter Minda rescued from Anorexia. **Perce** is the head horseman who knows a thing or two about cures for humans as well as horses. Ten year old **Little Arthur** was a kitchen boy until Minda used him as a messenger and mascot. His irrepressible energy and cheek make everyone smile. Practically an orphan, fearless and good with back-chat, it is easy to see why Minda has adopted him into her 'family'.

Brock is the honest and helpful sheriff of Bartonbry. He is determined to keep the peace and not let Minda or her staff take the law into their own hands. He and Minda get on well together, each complimenting the

other's role. **Mr. Bob** was her boss at the Lostnock Tax Office who guided her while she was struggling to get her inheritance. Her main contact in the King's secret service, **Silks** or **Ripetto** who used to appear as a travelling chapman (seller of ribbons and trinkets etc to ladies), is out of action so a travelling conjurer and entertainer, **Allesandro**, who like Silks originally came from Italy, has been substituted. The head of the King's secret service is **Xavier**.

Delphia and **Raysell** were her pseudo-sisters at Trowstead. Now the eldest Raysell is married to a trainee lawyer in Melbun and Delphia, Minda's age, is engaged to the eldest son of a smith's family, the **Watts**, in Lostnock who are rapidly rising to become industrialists using Delphia's education to help them manage their business. Minda desperately loves **Tom Watts** one of the sons. **Henry**, their 'brother' is brilliant at figures and diagrams and maps. He also trained with Minda and Flor under **Brand** at Trowstead in hedgerow-fighting and is a dead shot archer. He was the first choice for 'leader of self-defence forces' until Minda showed her superlative skills – which was just as well because Henry hadn't really got the heart or leadership skills.

At Melbun at Christmas she was given two tasks by the king. Firstly to take twenty annoying fifteen year old boys and train them in 'good behaviour' which wasn't particularly specified for a period that wasn't specified. As well as fifteen sons of noblemen she a nobleman's daughter, two run-away girls from second rank citizens and two orphan petty criminal boys. These five, the **Black Team**, have been put together and have already shown they are resourceful, clever, tough and courageous. Her second task was to create a force of about a hundred and fifty soldiers for the King's use in rooting-out established corruption and crookery. Details are vague. Minda is really providing the accommodation while an experienced general, **Lord Scamson** provided by the King, does the military training.

2 Breakdown

Minda had never been moody before. Now her whole life was a broken basket, full of talon-edged holes, unable to keep its shape, every load working it apart a little more. A pauper's forlorn hope not a duchesses' cradle for new hopes. She had woven her servants to the best of her ability but each was a small part and had to be joined to the others. If only she could weld them like iron into a single piece that rang when struck. What had gone wrong? She didn't know, it was like trying to catch butterflies.

Her accounts, and more importantly her finances, were getting sorted out by Francis Tomlyn and the two clerks. She'd worked hard on them in the last month and they were becoming a trusted and happy team. She knew clerks didn't like responsibility so it was up to her to train them. She gave them little tasks, explained what she wanted, then gave them praise and happy treats when they found they could-if-they-tried. She whistled for her private clerk Paul. "Get the painter to put a nice sign on the door to the Business Office saying 'Exchequer'. You'll have to spell it right for him. Ask Derek Driver to screw it on one night as a surprise for them."

"Please Minda Allesandro has just arrived as you requested and a messenger from Melbun has arrived with him. He has a handful of official letters and dozens for the cadets. Also three personal servants have been sent for the cadets."

"Thank you Paul. Can you spare a minute?"

"Yes Minda."

"Paul – You still call me Minda but everyone has gone back to calling me 'miss'. Why?"

"Because you insisted. I follow your commands not fashion Minda."

"That's very sweet of you. I meant why have the others changed?"

"Um. You are more direct now. More like a master than a maid. I would call you miss."

"Do you remember those days between Mid-winter and Christmas Paul?"

"Yes of course. You trapped me with your charm just like the Abbot said all women did! It was lovely miss. Ice inside me melted and for that I will ever be grateful."

"You should know I worked hard at that. I do love you Paul but I'm not a lovable person myself. I thank you for your loyalty through all our troubles."

"What troubles Minda?"

"My troubles."

"Please Minda may I say something?"

"Yes please Paul. I wish somebody would."

"Lucky and I – begging your forgiveness – have spoken about a thing Lucky called the 'scum on the surface of your well'. I'm sorry Minda. When he said it I could see what he meant. We pray together when we can."

"I don't pray to God Paul. You don't pray to me or the King. He will either look after us or leave us at the mercy of evil whatever he wants. On this earth I will be doing the King's work for him and giving him a few hints how he could do better. And I will do it direct not through a courtiers. If God himself asked me for a dozen angels to do good work then I would set about it. You know for yourself what the Church is good at..."

"I have my doubts Minda. Where was God when the Abbot tried to poison Little Arthur? – His own son."

"Or tried to poison me?"

"You have your own guardian Minda. When you are dead your legend will live brightly everywhere they work iron."

"But I'll be dead."

"We all will be one day."

"I tell you what Paul. Shall the two of us have a meal together to deal with the smouldering feud between the Abbey and the Dukedom that hasn't been put out yet? You tell them I want to damp down the embers of past fires – we have to work together – they know I'm not evil by now. Oh and get two really good bottles of wine off them and they can have their poisoned one back. Make that three!"

"Yes mis//Minda."

"See! It's getting to you as well. Hmm – Please tell Allesandro he will be most welcome even in his road-clothes."

That had been a moment of interest. Paul was nice, she could rest in his arms watching the fire – the sort of man you'd want as an older brother but not as sparkly as Tom Watts. She must have a daughter-to-mother talk with Doreen about Tom.

With her characteristic reaction Minda had turned the castle from the cowering hole of inhospitability she found at mid-winter to an efficient machine for dealing with every sort of visitor from King to beggar. Even when their own returned tired, say from team exercises someone was automatically detailed to ease their exhaustion. Minda said that any enemy appearing at the gatehouse would be confused and any enemy who had taken the trouble to find out about the castle would have understood that a castle that looks after its visitors would be really really good at looking after its own. Derek Driver, ex-steward now clerk-of-works, husband of the current steward, had so many men and so much timber being needed for barracks and stables contracted and delivering that the gatehouse made the obvious place to check and direct people quickly. Allesandro arrived at Minda's parlour after a servant had helped him wash and quickly dress in his show clothes. Five seconds after he entered cakes and sweet wine were brought.

"Your servant Your Grace."

"I've just been telling my staff they're to call me Minda. Sorry. I'm confused. Welcome to Bartonbry Allesandro."

"Would you be called Minda then Your Grace?"

"Go on. Nobody else does!"

"You English ladies are so elusive! So my friend Ripetto says."

"How is he?"

"The doctors say he won't use his legs again. He sent a message for you."

"Did you give it to Paul?"

"No your//Minda. He said I had to give it to you myself. He said I was to put my arm around your waist, look away, get a soft kiss then give you the most passionate kiss ever."

"Poor man. I suppose you'd better give me his message."

"Did he really give you that message Allesandro?"

"Yes. He said you'd ask."

"Then I know it came from him. And I know if he trusted you then I can trust you."

"But please miss, and // Minda! How can you trust me when you can't trust him."

"I didn't stab him. I sometimes wish I had done because he was cruel to two women and deserved to be hurt in return. But the past is where the dead men live."

"He asked to be forgiven."

"I won't forgive him. It's for his wife and Rose. Do you know his wife Allesandro?"

"Johanna."

"Do you?"

"Yes."

"Did he tell you she couldn't bear him leaving on his missions and he couldn't bear to be held back. Physically she would hold him and he would reject her."

"No."

"When he went away she was blind and friendless again. No wonder she clung to him." There was silence. "I can't get married but what about you Allesandro?"

"I tried as a youth and had to escape my country as a result. Then I left it alone for fun on the road. Then I wished I had a wife. Then I found one but – hmn – she had a different way of adding-up than me. I tried, God if he is listening knows I tried, I tried to show her the balance of income and expense how to build friendship to earn a free night under another's roof but her soul had been eaten by magic."

"Your magic. You're very clever so I'm told. Little Arthur's memory of you is just a confused blur."

"Little Arthur Gridds? The one that dressed as the Abbot and was given a jewelled dagger by the King at Melbun?"

"Yes. You took a penny off him at the Mid-winter fair for a display of magic."

"That knife must be worth a thousand pounds or more. He's worrying about a penny!"

"That knife is useless in a fight. The King really gave it to me and I don't know what to do with it. The sooner I can give it back in exchange for a jest or two at his table the better I will be pleased."

"Why did he give it to you Minda?"

"Allesandro. I have heard of you at Bartonbry at Midwinter and Ripetto has hinted good things about you but we have been sharing a little sweet wine and already you are a councillor!"

"It is you who are searching for council Minda." Allesandro tried to look like the uncle he never was. "You called me. My best friends say you are worth every support. How may I support you? I have no more to say."

She whistled for Paul... "Note for Silks – Allesandro has arrived. His gift is more welcome than he knows. My love to him and Johanna and Rose and he is to convey my love to them himself. I am safe and well and Allesandro will be fishing with me for a month or two. – Sorry Allesandro. This is Paul who is Xavier's agent and my private secretary. If you have a private name to use in that letter the choice is up to you."

"How did you know?" asked Paul.

"It was so obvious I asked Xavier to his face when I was at Melbun and he admitted it. That was lucky for you really. If it is any consolation Lucky knows too. If you have been confessing secrets to him then remember he is only looking after me. You could be a really bad person, you know, one day a poisoner next a really efficient collector of names at the Melbun cadet trials. I have agreed with X that your reports will continue and I will make sure they are accurate and complete. That will be all."

Allesandro asked "Minda. Ripetto has told me about how Paul attempted to poison you. Why do you trust him."

"A person can only be in one place at a time. Either they are with me or against me. Paul decided to change sides. I'm sure you have been told to look after me even though it was me that commanded you to come. Ripetto was right to warn you about me but you have nothing to fear if you're not afraid of anything."

"Um. That sounds like a promise of violence and storms."

"What are you afraid of Allesandro?"

"Nothing."

"I'm afraid of owls."

"Owls?"

"An I get very cross when people repeat what I say."

"Get cross then Your Grace. Owls?"

"Point taken. We have more important things to talk about. I sent for you because I was bored and had a thought you might brighten up

Bartonbry. Between then and now I remembered your connection with Ripetto and possibly Italian banking families. You have already lifted my spirits with a fresh breeze of trust and understanding."

"Ripetto told me that I must demand to be paid in true money but I should expect a bonus worth twice that."

"I will pay you ten pounds tomorrow. When you want more come and ask."

Allesandro had never made a bargain that ate its own tail like this before. "Now I know what Ripetto meant when he said you walked in loyalty like others walk in the rain. That's a very good bargain."

"When we find a worthwhile bonus you can have it. Is that fair?"

"Very fair. What do you want me to do?"

"First you must see Doreen. She is the steward and chief-of-staff. I employ her and she employs everyone else. She runs the whole castle. She'll see you're properly looked after but will use your balls for bullseyes if you pester the women – I'm afraid that was a sad time before I arrived. Second – No!" She gave Arthur's whistle...

...A servant appeared. She said "Please miss Arthur has been taken by the Black Team."

"Thank you Agnes. Agnes this is Allesandro an old friend of mine. I trust him but you shouldn't." She winked and smiled. "Allesandro this is my maid Agnes. She's only been with me a few weeks. – Send him to me when he returns please."

"Yes miss."

When she'd left Minda admitted "She's not the right person to be a maid but I said I'd take her from the home that was crushing her. She's harmless but can't hit the nail on the head. – Like me I suppose."

"From what I've heard you are hitting a lot of nails on their heads Minda."

"It might seem like that to you but everything is wherrity. The quartermaster of Scamson's soldiers was corrupt and while he never needed to eat again the soldiers went hungry until I could do something. The price of lead has doubled and suddenly builders are demanding concessions and perks – Just because I have to build stables and barracks quickly they think they have me over a barrel. There's going to be some very sorry builders soon as soon as I bring in men from Lostnock. And I'll make sure the Lostnock builders show me where the Bartonbry ones have cheated me."

"Your Grace. I must be formal for a moment. Ripetto sent me to see X before coming here. I am one of us. But Ripetto said you never had a

father and that's what you might need if Mr. Bob was back at Lostnock. I have no living children and I wouldn't tell you as a father what to do but I am now fifty years old and have seen the world and I will do my best to be the understanding father you never had if you want old arms to catch your moods."

Minda saw the brute black of the intelligencers manipulating her and the stronger white of their care for a sword that they hoped would defend them. "I am my own mistress Allesandro but I work with others. I should have said you'd be paid nothing and watched! – No! Don't worry Allesandro. It is nice to have friends watching over you. When I know you better we must share our worries."

"You still haven't said what you really wanted me for Minda."

"As I said I called for you on a girl's whim. I'm pleased at the outcome. I miss Silks and Mr. Bob – You will have to do in their stead. I thought perhaps you might show the Black Team some skills."

"What is the Black Team?"

"Ripetto asked me to take his son away from the feckless youth of Melbun and train him a bit like I had been. I said he needed some friends with him. The next day the King announced that I will be taking fifteen year-old boys and that the leading families should put theirs forward. I added I would take girls and one of my servants decided to add a couple of half-criminal orphan boys from the quays. I now have twenty in the castle in four teams of five. The Black Team is Jane Weston – the Duke of Weston's daughter, John and James Taylor orphans and quay labourers, Maggie Ulex daughter of a spicer and Rachel Whin daughter of an armourer. The last two ran away to be with me. We held a trial at Melbun to cut out the runts and the Black Team were brilliant. The other teams were all boys from leading families."

"Ripetto told me about the school for teenagers to learn respect but not the detail. Have you thought that every leading family is watching you and talking about you every day?"

"Yes. And what have I achieved?"

"I don't know. What?"

"I have the Black Team that are – I admit it – my favourites who keep climbing higher hills so they can enjoy rolling down them together. I love them all! Then the others. Boys are so boring. They get given tasks and muddle through but won't stop and think first, they won't trust each other and they can't enjoy learning. I'm sure some are beginning to see

that really practising sword fighting is better than playing and posing but they don't have the fun of life. I thought of spreading the girls between them but that wouldn't last. My criminals and runaways have a magic of their own they made in an hour."

"Like you charmed me within seconds of my arrival. I thought I was the one with the magic! I must meet this Black Team."

"I was hoping you could show them the arts of deception."

"Why? What good would it be to them?"

"The boys were petty thieves. The girls appear completely honest. I would like the girls to be confident of picking pockets and the boys to appear above suspicion. These are X's apprentices. But mind! – They don't know it."

"Um. I can't teach them pocket-picking but I may be able to show them many frauds and how to conceal and confound suspicion. From what you say they may have the right minds."

"How so? The right minds?"

"Practice, attention, practice, attention, practice and attention. If the boys in the Black Team will take their lead from the girls then you will have a weapon. How would you use it though?"

"I thought they might steal things."

"What things?"

"Papers."

"Substitute. Er – Sorry to be blunt. You would take one away and put a similar one in its place. For example your will to say everything should be left to the Abbey. This isn't street crime but team-work over weeks."

"Good. That's what I want to hear."

"But do you know what you're trying to do in the first place?"

"No. I just want them ready for whatever may come. All I can do is train them and they will have to use their sense and my training as best they can."

"So you'll be sending children to war?"

"Not yet I hope. Give me two years. With uncles like you they can live lives that don't burn them up but when we need flames to fight flames we have them ready."

"You really are deep Minda."

"No. It only came clear talking to you Allesandro... ..Will you have a room in the castle? It's up to you. Ask Doreen – She deals with everything."

"What about Arthur?"

"Say hello. Teach him a trick to show the Black Team. I let them borrow him – It gives them a focus of responsibility. Even if he is not good at it he will encourage them to try themselves. They will find out from him how it is done anyway but it's a really good way to get them interested in tricks so they can come to you for more."

"You take my breath away with your guile Minda."

"Are we done for now Allesandro?"

"No! I have another message."

"Who from?"

"Guess."

"Oh I hate it when people say 'guess'."

"The King himself. I was shown into a room and the King questions me and I told him how we both knew Little Arthur. His face lit up. He held my arm close and said he understood I was being sent to keep a fatherly eye on you – I'm only reporting what was said! He said you were precious to him as a daughter and as the whip to a horse. I asked him to explain because it made no sense to me. He said the horse may be willing but sometimes it needs a reminder for its duty. He says 'Your are his daughter. He doesn't know how much love he has but you can have all you want. He doesn't know how much strength he has but if he needs some can he borrow it from you?' Minda went into what Delphia called a 'thought egg'. Allesandro understood concentration, kept silent and observed closely. When she 'returned' he smiled and stayed silent.

"So! I'm to be the next king. That's what he thinks! Just because I'm innocent of the corruption of the court he thinks of me as his successor! What an idiot! Let him sweep the shit away himself not leave it to a woman to do the dirty work! Men! Simple and stupid!"

In the castle Minda only had Doreen or the Black Team to talk to as sensible women and the Black Team were half boys and half girls. Agnes had the mind of a weathervane. Brand was a good teacher of what he knew but not a confidant. Flor was finding how to make things happen, but even though they'd spent many nights wrapped in the same blanket under a hedge he was incapable of strategic or sensitive

thought. Lucky was her hovering angel, he could find a way to blunt a sharp edge but not to guide her. She was so lucky with what she had but she needed something more.

It took her a while of solitary concentration to admit she didn't know what she was doing or why. Everyone else seemed to know but not her. 'Making a generation of administrators', 'Sweeping away outlaws', 'holding my son hostage when he could be... ', 'A mere child teaching mine! What does she know? The King is bewitched' NO! This is what other people wished! These were side branches! She must be the main trunk. How did the main trunk know it was the main trunk? She remembered mistress Marline saying she was a bud waiting to flower. Now she was the bud at the top of the main trunk! But she was more worm-eaten than ever! Ever-crippled and wind between the ears. Nothing joined properly.

Doreen found Minda crying. Minda couldn't explain why she was crying. "Hold my hand daughter." was the best Doreen could improvise. A hug would have been too demanding for the fragile teenager.

The setting sun coloured the sky and the veined river pink as a regiment of silhouetted geese honked their way to roost in the meadows. Shadows full of velvet colours crept out of the banks onto the fields. Thin layers of mist sketched their beds for the night across the valley. Three of the Black Team were whispering and waiting for the others who were fumbling a hundred paces away in a nervous experiment for two.

The other three teams were busy at their desks in the schoolroom writing home. Minda had insisted that this should be before supper. Poor writers would get all the help they needed if they asked but there was no supper for a team until there was a clear letter from everyone in the team. (The boys in the Black Team were exempted on the grounds they were orphans and had nobody to write to. The fact they had never had an hour's writing lesson in their lives was also a factor. Minda compensated by saying to them all that one day they would have to write to the King himself to make up for it. They made an effort and were helped by the girls but learning to write takes time.)

Sam Scamson's recruits were restless. They'd assumed that the royal messenger would be carrying their pay. They had picked-up enough from the residents of Bartonbry to guess the Duchess would sort things out but there seemed to be a wall of not wanting to know from the castle. At least now they were getting their meals but that was about all. They drew lots to see who should put their grievance to Lord Scamson or 'dough-head' as he was more generally known. His response was understanding but worthless.

Old soldier Brand consulted with Flor and Lucky. "Dough-head must go. Minda will do that if we ask but then what? What are these soldiers for? Who are they going to fight? What equipment and training do they need? Until we have a plan we can't do anything."

Flor said. "I only know about making a dozen staff run to make things happen – And I only learned that at Melbun and I'm still learning. Thank goodness I have Doreen behind me."

"I'm really impressed with you Flor." said Brand. "Until you had to look after Minda you were a wet leaf on a tree now you are a big bough – trunk even! Mr. Trentchard was right to let you grow in your own time. If you were a girl you'd get a kiss but we'll have to settle for a hug... ...Keep going Flor."

Brand continued "Poor Lucky. You always get the jobs that nobody else wants. Do you know Lucky I think that's because – like Minda – you are good at dirty jobs. Somebody has to do them and you manage to shine through the deepest shit. You find the good, like taking those lads to the test at Melbun. Think about it. The Black Team would be two lords, a lady and two lesser girls where the possibilities for mis-command would have destroyed them. Come on – I've been learning from Minda too! – You have to be hugged..."

"Why isn't Minda with us?" asked Lucky "She is our commander."

Brand replied "We're the ones that will have to make sure things happen. If she goes away like she has to then who will be in charge? Dough-head was supposed to be. If we have a plan we can ask her what she thinks. If we've had a look at the land first we may spot traps that she is too occupied to notice."

"I have an idea" said Flor. Can we not use these men for what we want to do instead of fighting shadows. You taught us never to fight shadows Brand."

Lucky said "We could give each team a dozen men to teach leadership the real way."

"That's risky Lucky – But a good suggestion. Yes I can sort of see it now. It would be horrible confusion – How would they sort themselves out?"

Flor said "I don't like a hundred men with weapons wandering around with no purpose. People will get hurt."

Brand said "Neither does Brock. Should the three of us ask the Sheriff? You know him well boys."

Lucky said "He hates people carrying weapons. Yes! Let's share our troubles with Brock. He's been staunch with us."

"Alright" said Brand "We're all so busy! Can we go now?"

"Ten minutes?" Asked Flor.

"Please." Asked Lucky.

"Fifteen at the gate. Remember we are leaders so no rushing around flustered."

Time at the abbey was measured by the hourly bells from the clock. Even though the nights were quickly staying light later the routine there was driven by man's time not God's. The Black Team had discovered some of the feud between Minda and the Abbey from Little Arthur then pestered to find out more. Tonight they were going to be 'nice' in the exciting way Minda had shown them. They had debated the time to strike and decided that early-dark would find the brothers seated at a desk or table and make it easier to steal anything or escape if they needed to. Brother Caxton was clearly their target – He was the one that saved Arthur and had a bit of backbone. Father Harris was evil. Brother Roger was practical. That was all they knew. Their mission was to say thank you to Brother Caxton for balking at poisoning Arthur. They knew very well that this would mean embarrassment to the Brothers but they had picked up the baton of taunting with friendship from Minda. James had no trouble finding out from Lucky how to climb in over the wall. In twos they had visited the abbey and 'got lost'. Little Arthur had been carefully coached in how to find out where Brother Caxton lived from Paul. Now they were ready.

Just after the curfew bell they called at the Abbey gate. The gatekeeper recognised them of course. Everyone in Bartonbry knew about the Black Team and Little Arthur. 'No it was too late to see Brother Caxton. Sorry Boys and girls. Please come back tomorrow.' They had only called at the

gates they knew would be closed because 'that's what Minda would have done.' After some artistic pleading they departed into the darkness...

...To assemble in fighting formation at the second easiest over-the-wall escape route for young monks. This was a little worrying for first-over, Maggie, who had to drop into blackness but found it was about three inches! She took guard position ahead while the others followed. Suddenly two brothers appeared from the black. "Stop!" she said softly trying to make her voice sound seductively feminine (she learned quickly) but loudly enough for one to drop his lantern. "Twit! Pick it up. Now we haven't seen you and you haven't seen us is that clear?"

"Yes miss."

"When you're older you can order your girls to come to you. Now which way to Father Harris?"

The Black Team marched into the refectory. They had listened to Minda's words on 'what is the worst that can happen' and calculated that 'not a lot' was the answer if they came to thank Brother Caxton. Minda would have done it so why shouldn't they? Jane was their only noble so her superior tone should be used to break the silence that spread through hall as they entered. Fifty shocked faces looked at them.

Jane spoke clearly. "We have come to thank Brother Caxton for saving Arthur." The Black Team were learning silence as a weapon. After an exquisite pause with her hand casually resting on Arthur's head she continued. "That's all really. Please carry on." The team bowed in his direction, turned and left as swiftly as they came.

"Front gate!" Maggie whispered and they walked with an open lantern straight to the gate and spoke again to the gate-keeper most politely to ask to be let out. The boys occupied him while he dithered and the girls drew the bolts of the side door. They all walked out after thanking the keeper.

Brock was delighted. The King's messenger had brought a request that he should attend the court at Melbun to be invested as Count of Barton in recognition of his steady service to the King and the people of Bartonbry.

"Eve? How would you like to be a Countess?"

Without looking up from her sewing she began an automatic answer but then realised this was unusual. His smiling face descending on hers

signalled something important to him. What had he said? His kiss, grip and murmuring were irresistible. Countess? Count! Brock a Count! Joy! She dropped her sewing and stroked his head. Sometimes love overflows its banks, floods the meadows of happiness and sweet contentment and drives passion's mill.

Brock was always happy to see Brand, Flor and Lucky and this evening even more. The way they discussed matters with him as a colleague in a team that thought before acting was comforting and pleasing. Although Minda was never part of their informal conferences her leadership was always in the air.

"Is it urgent boys? Have you heard my news?"

Brand answered. "We need your advice. No. What news?"

"The King is going to make me a Count!"

Lucky was first to react. "About time too!" He bowed. Brand and Flor were a bit behind. They bowed as they couldn't think of anything better to say. "Sir, what the people of Bartonbry decide today the people of Melbun will follow next week."

"I'm going to be the Count of Barton."

Flor's training led him to ask. "Is this a secret sir?"

"No boys! I'm just trying to get used to the idea myself first."

"And your wife. She'll need a new gown." said Brock.

"She's as happy as I am. She's happier even – because ladies who looked down their noses at a mere Baronet's wife will now have some of their own medicine."

"What about you Brock?" asked Lucky. "The same applies to you doesn't it?"

"I suppose so but my job gives me power enough. Um – I shall have to think of those who may be friendly because I could be knowing about them. Hmm Krantick, he's overly polite perhaps. I do my job not ask for friendship."

"We want your advice Brock. No pay has arrived for the King's troops and Scamson doesn't seem to care. We all know he must go."

Brock said "Why do we all know that?"

"His job was to do the organising and training for Minda but he couldn't organise a fart in a privy. Minda can sack him and pay the troops but then what? If the troops don't get paid there will be trouble."

"Do these troops have leaders I can speak to?"

"They chose them as required by taking lots." said Lucky.

"So that's spokesmen not leaders. Can we assume Minda will send Scamson away if we ask her?"

Brand said "If we're all of one mind and have something better."

Brock said "Nobody knows what these men are for. Does Scamson? Does the Duchess?"

Lucky said "There's another problem. Half the recruits are not suitable. Scamson took anybody to make up his numbers."

Brock said. "I have to celebrate with my family now. The pay seems to be the thing we have to deal with immediately. I should ask the Minda to find a way of paying them – at least something on account – tomorrow. Let me know so I can strengthen the watch to deal with the drunkards."

"We will do that then and let you know what happens. Congratulations again sheriff."

When the Black Team returned to the castle Little Arthur was carried on John's shoulders while the others linked arms and marched in step behind. Jane commanded them to HALT! at the gatehouse. The panel in the slide door opened and a familiar voice called out.

"No room at the inn tonight!"

"Let us in Richard Fawkes or we'll sing a song." Said Maggie.

"Oh! Like that is it!" The gateman's face vanished for a few seconds. "Go on then. Sing your song. We are wise to that now. Look we have wool buds for our ears." He showed a handful of white balls. The Black Team might be clever but so far they weren't clever enough to have a second string for their bow. "Her Grace says if you came back after dark I was to give you a lantern and you would run round the outside of the castle walls. Here it is. She also said if I suspected cheating you were to do it twice. Off you go. I will tell her you are safe."

Brand, Flor and Lucky had arrived at the end of this but kept out of sight. They had a quick conference. "Shall I chase them said Lucky?"

"Yes do you want the lantern?"

"No." and he vanished.

Brand went to the gate and knocked his code and the door opened. "We heard the bit about the wool balls Dick. I will try and suggest something

else to them and tell you the defence – That mob need a dose of cold reality. Flor and I will wait for them round the corner now. It won't hurt for them to know we might be watching them anywhere."

While they were waiting for the Black Team to jog their circuit Brand said to Flor. "Every day you learn more reading and writing and drift away from the days of your training. I'm pleased you still remember it and I think you still love this game in the night but I can't read or write and I worry you may be carried away by the spirit of the Black Team."

"It's luck Brand. I don't really know what I'm doing ordering servants around but I do know if they are uncertain or false. And we were all like the Black Team last year. You lead us like that Jane does them."

"But Minda loves them for it. They are children, we are now adults. She has to move on and stay grown-up. Romance is quicksand."

The Black Team's lantern came round the last tower. Brand and Lucky lounged against the wall. Brand remembered Minda's words on the track when they caught the smugglers. He waited until the jogging lantern was 15 paces away then casually said "Good evening." The Lamp crashed to the ground and went out.

Out of the confusion came Lucky's high-low-high 'to me' whistle with his signature whistle. "Jane are you commander tonight?"

"Yes sir – Oh Lucky."

"Please command your men."

"Roll call!" She called.

"Arthur."

"James."

"Jane."

"John."

"Maggie."

"Rachel."

"Anyone not able to continue?... ..Forget the lantern. Walk to the gatehouse!"

Brand and Flor walked in front. Nothing needed saying.

Once inside the castle Brand addressed the Black Team. "You know why you are let on a long leash. You have learned more in three months than

most ever will but even so you are still on the first step of a long ladder. I will try to push you off each higher step – gently mind you – like tonight. Her grace thinks you are immortal but I have seen too many fly-covered bodies. I taught her grace survival and I will make sure you have the same closeness with death so that you can see it before it sees you. Here is an order. Tomorrow I want you to watch but keep clear. Do you all understand?" They all answered "Yes". "And well done Jane. You collected your men very well after the confusion. All I said was 'good evening'."

"Thank you Brand."

"But your bodies would be tumbled on the grass with throats slit if I'd been an outlaw. I'm too busy tonight to hear what you've been doing but I look forward to reading about it. Dismissed." Jane gave them a sign and they left.

"Brand I thought you said you couldn't read."

"I did. I can't. But they don't know that."

Doreen sat with Minda motionless in her arms. She wondered how it was that Minda had collapsed now? Was there some problem she didn't know about that was hanging over Minda's head? Was she ill? Paul pushed the door open a fraction, smiled with blank hope at Doreen and handed her a scrap of paper. 'Brock to be made a count'. His questioning look was returned by Doreen's 'coping' smile. There followed a tortuous silent charade where the answer was 'Purce'. Eventually Paul got the message and in ten minutes Purce had appeared at the door. He viewed the situation before taking charge.

"Youm got a sick-un Dureen."

"Yes Purce. All her spirit vanished."

"Oh. I'm not likin' the sound of it. Is she broke?"

"Empty not broke."

"Good but her won't be fixt 'till she 'ave a rest day. Is there nightmares or lightmares?"

"I don't think so Purce."

"So it just be the late dawn creep to meet the early sunset. Let's 'ope so."

"Have you a draught Perce?"

He winked. "I'll 'ave you one if you pop the gal in a warm bed." Outside he said to Paul. "Who does Rose's job now?"

"Agnes – Here she is. Learning the job. Is that right Agnes?"

"Yes Brother Paul."

"Come to me gal. Smell my chest." He clasped her tight. "You feel I am alive girl? You feel my strength? Do you want your heart to beat with mine?... ..You must do the same for your mistress. She be weak so you must be strong. Lend her your strength. Whip her fading hopes into mills of happiness. See me twice a day to report."

"Yes sir." Said an awed Agnes.

"Good girl – I knows you can do it."

"Thank you Perce. I will try."

After Doreen had put Minda to bed she collected her chiefs and explained the situation. Brand added the issue of the soldier's pay. Doreen dealt with that instantly. "Pay them half on account from Minda. Get the Hector the paymaster to work through the night with Tomlyn if necessary. We don't want trouble tomorrow."

Derek held his wife's hand. "Will she get better?"

Doreen was grateful for his gesture. Minda was her fifth child. Her other four had died within a week of each other ten years ago. "Yes husband. It's not creeping death but it may be weeks before she is fit again."

Flor said "I am your servant Doreen."

"Bless you Flor. You have worked so hard. I am really proud of you son. I have no special job but stand by me and we will see what happens."

Lucky said "The rumours will start tomorrow. Have we got a story?"

Brand said "Good point. Um – How about 'hurt her back riding'?"

"That'll do." said Doreen. "Brand will you deal with the soldiers and pay. I'll leave the cadets to you Lucky. Keep them out of the way.

Conference tomorrow at noon. You don't need me to tell you who to help you. That damned Black Team is getting on my nerves. I know – Leave them to me. Flor it is time you and me dealt with Scamson. – Let's do it now. Brand will you fetch him for us. Oh and Arthur is all mine for the next few days is that clear."

While Doreen and Flor were waiting for Scamson Arthur appeared very quietly. Obviously somebody had tipped him off to be on best behaviour.

"Come in Arthur." Said Doreen. "What have you been up to today?"

"We went to the abbey to thank Brother Caxton for saving my life."

"That was a nice thing to do. Whose idea was that?"

"I don't know mistress."

"What did he say."

"Nothing. Nobody said anything. They just stopped talking and looked at us then we escaped."

"Oh. Oh I see – I think. There's more to this. I have some things to say to you young man – Are you listening."

"Yes mistress."

"Firstly the Duchess has had a bad fall from her horse and hurt her back. You will be needed by my side for the next few days and are not to go anywhere without my permission. She looked after you now you must help look after her."

"Yes mistress."

"Secondly you are not talk with the Black Team without my permission. They have other things to do."

"Yes mistress."

"Now will you fetch James from the Black Team as quick as you like." Arthur scuttled off. Within ten seconds James Taylor was at the door.

"You called for me mistress?"

"Yes James. Please be seated. I have heard lots of good things about you. You know I keep a list of your crimes as well don't you?" she lied.

"Yes mistress." he guessed.

"Don't worry James you're not here tonight because of wrong-doing, but as of tonight the Black Team is going to stop playing games and grow up. You have shown you can work hard but now you have to train for games of life and death. Each one of you will be tested alone and together. You will have a new teacher tomorrow. For the first week I need your team to be absolutely obedient to him. I don't mean do enough to please him but do twice as much as he asks twice as well as he asks."

"Yes mistress."

"He has been brought specially to teach you crime. Yes. Why do you think the Duchess wanted runaway girls and pick-pocket boys? Now tell me James is it a good idea to let anybody else at all, servants, Arthur, parents, other teams know you're being trained as criminals?"

"No mistress."

"Why?"

"Er – They would suspect us."

"And?"

"Set the sheriff on us?"

"Yes. And ask questions like why would an honest Duchess teach children crime."

"Yes mistress. They would."

"I won't answer that now, but to say the Black Team is the best so that's why we've chosen you. It is really important." Scamson appeared at the door. "Come in Sam."

Flor added. "It is more important than important that nobody except you and your teacher know what's going on. I have seen a man killed because of just one wrong word. Just one. Tell your team that."

"Why are you telling me mistress? Jane is our leader."

"Because girls watch fights but boys get killed. Tell Jane she has done a wonderful job and if she doesn't believe you she can ask me to my face, but for the next week I want to see how you, my chief of crime, can lead. Remember it is more important than important and you will have an interesting time with your new teacher. Now tell me what happened at the Abbey."

Flor was impressed by the detailed planning and rapid withdrawal after the ambush. Doreen was horrified and thrilled by their cheek. She checked the line between embarrassment and insult wasn't crossed and tried to keep a straight face. "One of you – just one of you mind – not Arthur – should go to Brother Caxton tomorrow and say sorry for disturbing him but you were sincere and would he dine with me."

Scamson heard the story but to him it was Minda's fault for letting children roam and pester grown-ups with silly ideas. Doreen had picked-up Minda's hammer-of-pomposity. "What do you think Sam?"

"I don't know what to say. Breaking into private property is bad enough. Disturbing monks at their prayers deserves a whipping."

"So did they do anything right?" asked Flor. He knew vultures worked together and Doreen wouldn't have asked him to help her without a reason.

"Um. Calling at the gate first was a mistake."

"Why sir?" asked James a moment ahead of Doreen and Flor.

"You gave the game away."

"No we didn't. We made a fool of the gatekeeping. What's the point of keeping a shut gate if we can go round the corner and climb straight in?"

"You haven't been a soldier as long as I have young man. Then you'll know I speak sense."

"What else did they do wrong?" asked Flor.

"Er – um – They should have secured their means of escape first. As it was they had to hope they could find an unguarded exit. They could have been trapped."

Doreen and Flor looked at James. "Then what would have happened sir?"

"Er – um – You would have been caught."

"So how bad is that? And it didn't happen."

"Right. Thank you James. You have shown us all you carefully planned and carefully executed your harmless raid on the abbey. Well done. Now what have I asked you to do?"

"Er – Obey the new teacher to the last detail and – not tell anyone – and lead the team for the next week and tell Jane to ask you if she's not convinced she hasn't done anything bad."

"Good. Well done James. Remember secrecy is more important than important. Arthur will tell you about the Duchess and good night and God bless you all."

"Thank you mistress." A rather shocked James left to explain to the rest of the team.

"Sam. You're having problems with your force. What are they?"

"Everything is under control. There may be some teething troubles but I can manage. If I need advice or help I will consult with the duchess herself not the steward."

"No you won't Sam. She is injured and in bed for the next few days."

"May I remind you I am Lord Scamson not 'Sam'."

"Sam, may I remind you that you are in Bartonbry. Bartonbry castle. You will tell me what your problems are or leave at first light tomorrow. Which?"

"You can't threaten me. I demand to see Minda."

Flor's immediate reaction was to argue but his time watching Minda twist people had been well spent. "He 'demands' Doreen. What shall we do?"

Doreen recognised Minda's signature all over Flor's statement and waited for Scamson to react. There was a long silence. Eventually Flor said. "Even if you stay you will be replaced. I should go now."

"I will not go! The King himself gave me this job. Nobody can force me out."

Doreen said. "You could have asked me or the Duchess about a loan of pay for the soldiers. Are you too proud or too stupid?... .. No matter either is too much for us. I had hoped we could train you but alas not. You will leave before ten tomorrow. Do you understand?"

"I demand to see Minda."

"Demand refused. She is ill. Go and pack or leave without your baggage it is your choice."

"I will have my men/"

"/Yes? The ones we will pay tomorrow morning and you haven't bothered about. Were those the ones you meant?"

"I demand to see Minda."

"Demand refused she is ill." repeated Doreen.

Flor added "We know it is hard for you to admit you are no-longer the commander you once were. We wish to make the blow swift for your sake. It is up to you if you ride out tomorrow with a small bit of pride or none at all. You have failed us. We do not want a cuckoo in the nest."

"What Flor is saying is that you can ride off with head held high to consult the King about important matters or you could be sent home in disgrace for your incompetence. Tied to a cart if need be. What is it to be? It is the same to us. You are finished here. Tell us Sam. We want you to go back to enjoy a gentle retirement without a hundred things that are a bit too much at your age. We will manage here without you."

"Or we could have the Black Team – Hey Doreen what an idea! We could have the Black Team take you as a prisoner back to the king with a list of your failings. Who do you think would get the best reception Sam?"

"Right! I will go back to the King and I will tell him how you have blocked me, refused me assistance and made my mission impossible."

"Good. So that's settled." Said Doreen. Now we're all tired and have lots to do so as of this minute you are relieved of your command and you will be departing before ten tomorrow morning. Are you agreed?"

"Yes."

"Go on then. – You have to pack."

"Er – Yes. I have to pack."

After he had gone Flor said to Doreen. "Thank you for giving me the openings."

"We both think like Minda now Flor. You were the one who spotted the openings. I didn't make them. Can you get – um – the Blue team to supervise him from now to half way to Top village. That's something practical for them."

"Yes mistress. But what about Minda? How is she?"

"Go and look for yourself son. You've been very patient. I know what she means to you. Purce says 'exhaustion with worry'. Please don't you or Lucky or Brand sleep in her chamber to guard her. She doesn't need guarding she needs to find her own feet in her own time. Of course we'll all help her but I want you men fresh and bright for tomorrow not worrying about her. Worry never solved anything. Get a good night's sleep knowing that I have made the best arrangements I can think of."

"I'm told I'm an orphan but I'm sure I remember having a mother. Have you been mothering Minda since she came to Bartonbry?"

"No of course not Flor. Why would I do the job you do so well?"

"Mistress! Mistress – I can put an arm around her and look into her face and give her a shoulder to sleep on but I'm not a mother! Brother perhaps but not a mother."

"A very good brother then Flor. She's in my hands now. We'll do the best between us I'm sure."

Doreen's next interviews were with Paul and Agnes.

"If anyone asks tell them Minda has had a bad fall from her horse and hurt her back. That's not the truth as you know but that's what you'll say. Agnes I will have a man at the private chamber's door who with you is not to let anyone in except Flor, Brand, Lucky, me and Perce. I will tell you to your face if anyone else may speak to her. Not even Arthur. No amount of pleading for 'just a minute' do you understand?"

"Yes miss."

"You are not to get too tired. Tell me daughter if you start dreaming while awake. I may have a helper for you. You can go."

"Please miss – Will she be alright?"

"Yes. Her spirit has broken like you might break an arm. It will be painful and needs rest to mend."

"Thank you mistress."

"Paul. You are a useful man. You have worked hard with the cadet teams. I'm very pleased. One day you will get your true reward but for now all I can give you is more hard work and long hours. Scamson is being sent home. Flor will tell you the details. He will complain to the King of course. Will you send a brief letter of explanation to the King stating the facts. Tell him also that his men will be marched to Melbun for his new commander to do with what he wishes in three weeks time. Keep that last bit specially secret. Then like you did at Melbun when you weeded out the teams I think Brand needs your help weeding the dough-boys. He says half are useless. Please make sure you see Brock at least once every day from me to make sure nothing festers. I will share Arthur with you. He is no-longer to be the plaything of the Black Team. I want him to start growing up."

"Yes mistress."

"And one day we'll have to find you a nice girl Paul. You're not at the Abbey now. It's not to late to start a family if you wanted – But hurry!" She smiled and he blushed. "Anything else I need to know Paul?"

"No mistress."

"Call me Doreen. You are one of the elite now. You have shown your loyalty and strength and we haven't made you one of the family. But now you are. And I'll increase your wages."

"Thank you Doreen. Lucky has already made me his brother. This castle is such a happy family."

"Now if you start dreaming while awake don't suffer alone, put your pens down and seek out Lucky and the others. They understand long nights followed by longer days and how a rage may be drowned by beer. One invalid on my hands is enough."

"Yes misstress Doreen."

"Now find Allesandro for me and I want to see those servants sent by their parents for the teams and tell Flor he will be doing my steward's duty from dawn until noon. I will be chasing people until past midnight so he can do the early work."

"Thank you for coming Allesandro. Since you spoke to the duchess she's collapsed. She mentioned the Black Team were to be in your care. Did she speak to you about it?"

"Yes mistress."

"Good. I have seen you as a travelling magician do you think Minda wants you to teach them that?"

"Yes mistress. Her half-a-plan was to turn their mischief into skilled mischief – being able to steal a document for example. I have told her I can't teach them street crime but I can show them how to spot it and avoid it."

"Good. Now Minda is eighteen, just a child herself. I'm older and want to see the Black Team turn from children enjoying excitement to adults taking care over each troubling day. All our teams will be the best servants for the kingdom in a few years. Minda is giving them schooling and camaraderie. She is making them think for themselves and will be getting them to live on their own resources and deal with people who don't want to be dealt with. They are learning the best sort of discipline – Self-discipline. The Black Team is exceptional – They have raced ahead as Minda's favourites – She has indulged them and they have brought home the harvest. Ask them about what happened at the abbey tonight. So Allesandro this is what I want you to do for me. I want you to pull off their blanket's of dreams and make them work at being crooked grown-ups. I have told them that from tonight they are adults not children. You will find them a handful – A happy handful. You must make them look after you." Doreen had seen shadows outside in the corridor. "Come in!" A woman servant and two men servants respectfully entered. "Hello. Welcome to Bartonbry. I am the steward of Bartonbry castle. Doreen is my name. Now I have my list here... ..Ah yes. Lizzy – You have been sent to attend to Jane Weston?"

"Yes mistress."

There was something not quite right about Lizzy thought Doreen. "How long have you been a servant to Jane Lizzy?"

"I have been employed specially mistress."

"Ah. That makes sense. Thank you. And you?" She looked at one of the men.

"Francis Falcon mistress. Hired to attend to Robin Relland."

"Thank you. And?"

"Ken Cotter mistress. Hired to attend to Simon Susiks."

"I'm sorry you have been prevented from starting your duties but I'm sure you are all footsore and weary so no harm done there. Now we don't permit our young men and ladies to have personal servants as we are teaching them how to rely on themselves. You are not the first. I expect you have brought fine clothes and weapons also?" They agreed. "The

servants in this castle work harder than anywhere else because they are treated with respect. We are teaching the youngsters how to get the best from their servants because one day they will be too busy to pick their noses. Our teams will be the steadily burning coals that heat the kingdom – Judges, merchants, ambassadors, sheriffs and so on. Your job today is to help us knock their precious childishness out of them. They are learning to do things for themselves because nobody else will. For that reason you belong to me now. Allesandro I think you should have these two gentlemen to help you. Your team can have a rest from chores as you'll be giving them more important ones."

"Thank you mistress."

"Lizzie – Have you looked after young ladies before?"

"Yes mistress. Lord Orphic's daughters until they married."

"Right I have a job for you. In case you were worried your Jane can look after herself and two run-away girls and two criminal boys. She doesn't need your help at the moment but I have a lady that does. Thank you all. Breakfast with the servants then Lizzie report to this office and explain to my deputy what I've told you. Ken and Francis you report to 'Lucky' – anyone will tell you who he is, after breakfast but he will be very busy then you will need to track down the 'Black Team'. Does everybody understand?" They nodded. "Get a good night's sleep – I know I've stolen you from your masters but we do things differently here and Jane, Robin and Simon will be writing back inside a week to explain."

When they had left Doreen called for wine. "Allesandro – can't I call you Alex? – Did you understand all that?"

"Yes 'rene". They smiled.

"Stop it you naughty man!"

"It's good to see you smile mistress."

"Did I? I must be more careful." She smiled and tested the grip of the slope.

"Do you know of one called Silks?" asked Allesandro.

"Yes Alex. I know all about him. And what Rose did and why. And Paul."

"I was speaking with Silks a week ago. We didn't discuss lace and trinkets."

"Why should you? – You're a man – They wouldn't interest you."

"Er – um – We had more important things to talk about."

"What were those things Alex?"

"Er - um"

"Why all the er-ums Alex?"

"You're twisting me."

"I have a good teacher. Tell me what was most important."

"I can't mistress. I was sworn to secrecy."

"Then it will stay a secret won't it."

"Er -um - Yes I suppose so."

"Will it or won't it?"

"Yes - No!"

"Make up your mind Alex. I am quite busy."

"Sorry Doreen. I am one like Silks."

"No! Really! And how many wives do you have?"

"None."

"Good because I fancy you. Better get yourself a girlfriend quickly or I will be pestering you!"

"Don't flirt with the men who live on the road Doreen - We know we'll only be in one place for one night and don't hold back."

"One day Alex. You are still a handsome man but until my wooden husband gives me an excuse I will not be unfaithful."

"Is a kiss being unfaithful mistress?"

"I'll give you a kiss from Minda. How about that?" The fiction was consummated.

As Brand and Lucky and Flor had guessed, Scamson didn't sleep well and so started at the first chance. The five cadets of the Blue team were chilly but ready mounted outside the castle gate as an unwanted but unshakable escort. Lucky had hammered sympathy into the boys. How would they feel if they were being sent home in disgrace? They had to think of nice things to say and keep a good look out and mind their manners and look after their own safety. They would be on their own with nothing but the Duchess' love to look after them. Lucky told them directly that this would be a day they would remember for the rest of their lives. They would see a man with no manhood sent into a darkness of shame.

Hector the paymaster had worked through the even night with assistance from one of the business clerks to tally the soldier's pay. On the top floor of the castle being used as a barracks Brand had the trumpeter blast a wake-up. "Anybody who wants to be paid this morning get out of bed and come here NOW!" All the soldiers knew Brand and respected him. "Men. I have some good news... ..After breakfast you will get half your pay. I'm sorry about the rest but you-know-who is trying to deal with five sorts of shit. I have some bad news... ..Scamson has been sent back to –" Cheers filled the hall room. He gave them a moment then continued. "Yes it is bad news because I shall be your commander now." There was silence broken by a simple "Good!" from the gloom. "That man who said 'good' come here!"

A middle-aged man came to the torch-light. "Jenkiss sir".

"Why am I a good commander Jenkiss?"

"Because you know how to command sir."

"Thank you Jenkiss. Tell your friends. After being paid you will split yourselves into ten equal groups according to your own whims without weapons. Each group will collect a days rations from the kitchens and this will be a day to remember."

Flor hadn't slept well. One of his jobs had been apprentice to Doreen for nearly three months, but after his first disaster was relegated to watching rather than running. Now he was determined to use all the goodwill in the castle hoping he could keep his head above water and not make too many horrible mistakes. As Flor waited for the deluge in the Castle office nothing happened. Arthur appeared. "Hello Arthur. The women have left you and me to look after the castle today... ..If you were in charge what would you do?"

"I'd stay in bed until ten o'clock."

"I shouldn't have asked!"

"Why not?"

"Because – er – I knew you'd give me a logical answer."

"What's logical?"

Flor was glad to have this conversation with Arthur. He wanted to be a father of children that asked such questions. "It means one thing follows from another. If you hit a finger with a hammer it will hurt – that's logical."

"So if you kiss a girl is it logical you will marry her?"

Ice water drenched Flor. What had Arthur seen? "Oh no. You can kiss someone without marrying them. You can love lots of people but only marry one."

"Oh. If I marry my sweetheart Ann can I still kiss the other girls?"

Flor was defeated by logic again. He scrambled for a respectable answer. "If they kiss you then you may get away with it Arthur."

"Why did mistress Doreen say I mustn't talk to the Black Team?"

"I don't know. I can guess. Would you like to hear my guess?"

"Yes."

"One day they must grow up and it will be easier for them if you are not with them. To grow up they need to think about adult things not little boys anymore."

"So why did the Duchess pick me to go with her to see the King? Is she not grown up?"

"Yes she's grown up but also she likes children. Women like children. Men and women are different – You must have noticed Arthur."

A world-weary Arthur sighed. "Yes I suppose they are funny." Flor was amazed at his innocent knowing.

Brand briefed the staff. "I am now your commander. We're going to spend a few days adjusting to a new way of training. I need you two corporals to supervise the cadets – one cadet for fifteen men. You are to help and encourage and only stop if there's danger or something bad is about to happen. I will deal with all disciplinary matters personally is that clear? The quartermaster, quartermaster's mate, horsemaster, victualler and Hector you all need to be on your toes – I'm going to keep everybody busy. Mid-day meal at two today then after kit inspection we'll let them have the rest of the day off. The Blue team is away today but they will be learning from you how to keep an army fed and equipped. Their days of boys at play have finished."

Lucky briefed the Red and Yellow cadets. He explained that until now they had only had themselves to look after and only themselves to discipline. In the next few hours they would change from being boys to men. It would be difficult but nothing to be afraid of. Each would be in charge of a troop of fifteen soldiers. They would have to give clear orders, stand up to cheek and excuses and think ahead. They were not

to make any threats to soldiers, he and Brand would do the serious discipline.

After pay-muster in the great hall the soldiers were told to get themselves into fifteens to suit themselves then line up in ten columns. Lucky assigned a cadet to each column based on what he knew of various characters while Brand addressed them.

"Each troop will have a boy cadet. You are to follow his orders unless they are dangerous. He is learning and you need to help him as the sooner you finish your tasks to my satisfaction the sooner you can spend your money in the inns. Now I am commander I expect you to work to earn your pay. I know you've only had half your pay but the rest will come in two or three days. That will give me long enough to see which of you are not good enough. Slackers and idiots that hold the rest of us up won't be tolerated. Let me tell you I only fight to win so my little army – that's you – will make damn sure it is sharp as the sharpest sword, faster than the fastest arrow and reaches further than the longest pike. We have an important job to do!"

Brock and his wife strolled arm in arm to the castle to see what was happening and officially share their joy. He was amazed at the energy of little groups of soldiers climbing over the walls with ladders, archery, pulling a cart, running then fighting with swords, tight marching, spaced marching and other exercises.

"I think the army is on the mend Countess." he said.

"Let's hope Minda is on the mend too Count."

"She's young and fit Eve. I'm sure she will soon be causing trouble again."

"Oh Brock don't be so mean! She's brought life back to Bartonbry. The clothiers and bootmakers have five-times too much work for themselves. The army may be small to you but that's more than a hundred mouths to feed."

"And more than a hundred to get drunk tonight."

"Cheer-up. You are enjoying your dancing now. At the last ball you were my pride and joy."

"If I'm a count will I have to host balls?"

"I shouldn't think so. Minda seems to have enough to satisfy everyone."

A troop of fifteen led by a boy hurried to the side of the path, he lined them up. "Hats off! Three cheers for the new Count and Countess." Brock and Eve acknowledged this nice gesture. "Thank you young man. You're lucky men to have someone who can think quickly. Those are the sort that keep you out of trouble while the others get stuck. Carry on!"

Inside the castle Flor's peace had long since been forgotten. When Brock and Eve arrived hoping to speak to Minda he was grateful to take a break from the castle office. "Let's go and see. I'd like to know myself."

Upstairs Lizzie had assumed the role of guardian with perhaps a little too much vigour for Flor's liking. "Is she awake?" he asked.

"Yes. Half-dressed and miserable."

"Go on Eve." encouraged Flor. "Just go in and comfort her. I think she needs rest mostly but smiles also." Lizzie relented.

Flor whispered the real situation to Brock but couldn't tell him much about the soldiers or cadets as he'd been stuck in the office all morning. Scamson had been dismissed and left. Brand and Lucky were reorganising the army.

"From what I've seen it is working well." said Brock. "One troop even rushed up to be a little honour-guard. Small boy with sticky out ears."

"Red vest? That's Herik. Clever but never finishes anything properly. Better with the pen than the sword but as Minda says 'too many people reach for their sword when they should try the pen'." Flor described the Black Team's assault on the Abbey and how Doreen had effectively put a stop to their antics. "I have some bad news for you there Brock. Allesandro the magician has been charged with taking them in hand for the purpose of teaching them tricks of deception. We can all expect our pockets and locks to be picked."

"Here's a trick Flor – Put soot in your pocket."

"I'm worried that they'll try to be clever where brute force is the only argument."

"I see what you mean. You should be training people to fight Flor not play parlour games."

"Lucky has been showing the girls nasty things to do to a man. Last week I watched three straw dummies shredded without a word quicker than three dogs on three rats. They did it for show. Strangely, the boys were shocked. When it was their turn and chose one stab then walked away. They were embarrassed."

"What did you do Flor?"

"I asked what would Minda do? She would be nice to them so I took them for ale at the Star and we chatted. I said I saw their reluctance, understood, and was not in the slightest bit worried. So long as they could protect the girls if needed I would be happy.

"Like you protect Minda."

"Those girls will be sent to dark places and have to look after themselves but they won't be on their own I hope."

"Perhaps the wealthiest houses in the land to listen for treason and fraud."

"But Brock it will only be a matter of time before they are found out."

"In that time they may have stopped an armed rising or complicity in an invasion from Lanconia. Even if they die – and I admit they could – their lives will have brought hundreds of others."

"It's horrible to think of Brock."

"Flor. Um. You have caught a bit of Minda's doubts and worries. I think I understand something of her trouble. You can come to me and we will get drunk as we send boys and girls to their doom but who can Minda get drunk with? Anyway I don't think women solve their problems with spirits."

The Blue team escorted Scamson and his small party with two a hundred paces in front and three fifty paces behind. For them this was a day of revision but they knew that there was change in the air and they mustn't get complacent. Their solid confidence of purpose compared with the acceptance of fate by the defeated hung in the air. There was no banter at the leaving or thanking them for their escort. When cadet Twosting prayed for God to look after them on their journey all he received was a sour look from Scamson. On the way back Rouse, son of the Clerk of the Royal counting house took command but none had the enthusiasm to play ambush games or horse exercises.

The Black Team were ready for anything. Being denied Arthur showed something serious was happening. They had discussed James' appointment as team-leader. Jane didn't mind one bit, sometimes it was

nice to sit back and let others do the extra work. They whispered long into the night about this 'growing-up' thing. They had already practised an emergency departure so being given an hour to organise themselves for a move to Minda's nearest country house was plenty of time. They were outside the castle gate twenty minutes after the call. Without breakfast admittedly, but proud and with a bag of bread taken from the kitchen. They left word at the gatehouse that they had been ready early and were just going to the Abbey to say sorry for being rude last night. At the abbey James asked who wanted to be the ambassador to brother Caxton. Nobody volunteered so James asked "Who would Minda pick?" 'All of us' seemed to be the answer. "No. Doreen said only one. Girls you're good at mending. We want Caxton to be our friend. If I go and we are friends he will want to be a father to me – Just me. If a girl goes he will see how we are a family together."

Their debate outside the abbey gates was never finished as Brother Caxton himself came out to see them. They dismounted and bowed. James apologised for their rude behaviour last night. "Mistress Doreen told us now is the time we must grow up."

"I wish you didn't have to grow up children – what would the world be without children – but the world never stops turning." He was smiling. "Now I'm not allowed to kiss you girls but I wish I could. And you boys! How dare you make me smile all night at the sour faces of the others. You have done the abbey a good turn though you don't know it. A lot of sores were bathed last night after you left."

"Please sir I don't understand." said John.

"The Abbey had been pretending the poison was a dream. A new Abbot would be called from a sister abbey but there were delays that suited everyone. You put a warm poultice on the boil to burst it." It wasn't often the Black Team were speechless but they were newcomers to unintended consequences.

James as leader spoke up. "Mistress Doreen asks you to dine with her."

"Tell her I will do so today if I may. How is the Duchess?"

"I don't know sir." said James. "Everyone is banished. We are being sent away."

"I'm sorry to hear that. Now come here all of you. Kneel and I will give you my blessing and God's protection wherever you go. Please give him time to keep up with you – he is an old man!" He was smiling. They wondered how much of the moment was real. So did Brother Caxton.

Allesandro found them sharing their stolen bread with a brother from the abbey. He realised the Black Team had their own horses but he was unmounted. There was nothing he could do now. Yes! There was. "Ken! Find me a horse for the week. Go!" Allesandro gently joined the Black Team and Brother Caxton. "I am Allesandro I am your new school-master. Will you introduce me?"

James remembered he was now the leader. "I am James. This is Brother Caxton, apothecary, from the Abbey. He has been very kind to us. Rachel spoke up. "He's just given us a beautiful lesson which was so – so rich – we are still trying to digest it."

"I judge by your smiles that you don't take your lessons in school-rooms." At this Brother Caxton smiled so much he had to hold onto the nearest wall.

Allesandro was now expected to continue. What was the spell of this Black Team? He'd been here a minute and been caught! "I'm sorry Brother, I am going to take these – these – demons of happiness to a quiet corner and spoil their innocence for ever."

"Look after them for me." said Brother Caxton.

"I will. Save a mass for me Brother. We two will pray together soon but not today. And I will bring a bottle and we can be young again."

Doreen's noon conference quickly dealt with situation reports. She praised everyone for putting the bobbing ducks to flight so quickly. "Brand and Lucky you are very good at training individuals. I want you to tell me tomorrow how long before we have a force to use or send to Melbun and be finished with them. There's a difference between lots of men able to fight and a complete fighting force. Scamson was supposed to get all the other things like equipment, and whatever else the army needs to work sorted out. I will ask Brock to find somebody local who has been on campaign to review what you have done."

"We still don't know what they're for." said Brand. "How do we find out?"

"I've already sent a letter to Melbun asking that very thing Brand."

Lucky asked "If we send the soldiers back to Melbun do we keep the cadets?"

"Good question. What would Minda do?" said Doreen.

Flor answered. "She would put on a display for everyone to see. They would march into Melbun with banners and the cadets would show-off to their parents as fine responsible officers." The implications of this

began to sink in as each pictured a toy army breaking up as the cadets went back to their homes to carry on their interrupted lives. Somehow all their work would be wasted.

"That's something to think about in the future." said Doreen. "I will talk to the cadets this evening. I'd like to make them feel they are growing up."

Brand said "Are we still keeping the Black Team separate Doreen?"

"I think so. Im' not sure it's a good idea teaching them deceit but let's give it a week and see what happens."

"Should we send for Delphia and Henry? Familiar faces might help Minda. I'm sure she would be pleased to see them."

Doreen had wondered this herself. "You know her and them better than me so yes. But keep it a surprise. You could almost write that letter yourself now Flor! You and Paul get it away to Lostnock with tomorrow morning's messenger. Again I'm really pleased with all of you. After lunch with Caxton I'll be in the office until three then I'll show myself to the gossips in town to calm any ugly rumours."

Doreen and Brother Caxton had known each other for many years of course. They ate alone in the steward's parlour. She apologised for the Black Team's intrusion and Caxton explained the good outcome. He asked about Minda and Doreen admitted she was exhausted and tumbled-up by not being in full command like she was used to. "Flor says she has always refused to worry about things she can't do anything about. I think she has been worrying about how to make everything perfect."

"If there's anything I can do to help then please ask."

"There is one thing which I feel is a stain on the abbey and that is Father Harris. Can you not send him elsewhere? He will never be allowed in the castle and won't be served by any shopkeepers who lease their premises from the Dukedom. He's not a very Christian man."

"I note your concern mistress Doreen and I admit I have not found him likeable but it is not in my power. I cannot banish him. It would need a command from an abbot who we don't have yet or a council agreement. In the light of the previous dispute between the castle and abbey I would ask you try not to force him out as it will harden opinion against you but in time he may be asked to leave."

"He won't be forgiven but you speak sense. We don't want another war as last time the abbey was within minutes of being burnt to the ground. I mention it as it might be another bit of stable-sweeping for you brothers

and I think his presence is preying on Minda. I shall do my best to see she doesn't do anything rash but if she broods on the man who spent hours carefully trying to ensnare her as a witch his life will be very short."

"We must try to think of more positive things Doreen."

"Indeed we must. She has complained to me that the abbey seems to take riches but Bartonbry doesn't see much result. Should there be a school for the poor or a hospital she asks. The abbey is wealthy she says so something of benefit to the people should be a small price and a worthy project in keeping with your Christian mission."

"If you were Minda herself I would say you were trying to bewitch me away from the Abbey like she did Paul and Lester."

"How do I tempt you?"

"I would like to have a hospital but the abbey has refused many times."

"Oh I see. Oh um. I'm sorry Brother Caxton I didn't mean anything like that – It was just a general thought. Minda doesn't have a plan to start a hospital or school and I won't mention it to her. She already has too many things to do and too little time to do them so I will at least get her to postpone any such ideas. That's the trouble with youth they want everything to happen at once."

"Thank you mistress. When I see the happiness and energy here and the fear of speaking freely at the abbey I wish they would have a lady abbess as wise and calming as yourself."

"That's a nice thing to say Brother Caxton."

"And a horrible one Doreen."

"Why is it horrible?"

"The abbey should be as uplifting as the nave of the abbey itself and as inspiring as its lovely windows but we scuttle in our crypt."

"Not all of you. Now you call me Doreen which I like but I don't know your name. If we are to share our fears will you not give it to me?"

"Nicholas. My mother called me Nicky."

"Shall I call you Nicky then?"

"It's a secret. Mistress I was expecting you'd ask me if I have anything herbal for the Duchess."

"She gets her reliefs from the head horseman. She has the constitution of a horse and is not very sympathetic to priests. You must know Perce – you're welcome to talk with him."

"It would put my mind at ease. Thank you Doreen."

"Thank you Nicky and God bless you."

"And you too my mistress."

Willows

The Black Team with Allesandro and the two servants led their loaded horses to the yellowstone house under the ridge that overlooked the valley ten miles upstream from Bartonbry. Beneath it the village of Willows nestled under the bluff where the river had whittled away the hill. Two watermills for corn and a little quay and a quarry with a wooden bridge on piles made this a centre for trade as well as the Duke's base for rough hunting in the hills behind. Their arrival was unexpected but the skeleton staff of husband and wife were used to this sort of thing. Allesandro explained to James that once the settling-in was done they would have the luxury of servants but now an hour of helping would achieve a lot. So the team threw themselves into carrying and airing and arranging.

Allesandro explored the house for himself for himself and carefully unpacked his own effects. He knew the weaknesses of locks and strength of bolts and wedges, an absolute ban on entering his room must be on his list of things to tell them. He had found out a bit about the lives of the Black Team before and after they left Melbun and wondered how he was going to make them into spies. They worked well together so he would build on that. They hadn't had much experience of eaves-dropping and gossip and finding out without being seen to ask leading questions. Disguising them would be like trying to disguise Minda! Impossible. Still, they could try.

When the moving-in had been set in motion and the fire in a small parlour lit Allesandro addressed the Black Team. "My name is Allesandro di Venize. I am a travelling magician and huckster of medicines by trade. I will show you some tricks in a minute and later you will learn them. You are special young people who like excitement and it is my job to teach you concentration and detail and guile and deception. There won't be much excitement in the next couple of weeks but life, even for people destined to see so much excitement as you, is mostly nothing much. You may have the feeling that you are being directed to what you do. That is true. The King himself needs you when you are older and trained to spy for him."

"What did I just say Rachel?"

"Spy for the King himself."

"What does that mean John?"

"He will send us to a foreign country to find out things."

"Yes. Good. Anything else?"

Jane answered "You work for the King."

"Good guess."

"It's not a guess."

"How do you know then Jane?"

"Because only a King's servant would teach the Kings spies."

"Does everyone agree?" Allesandro looked around. They all knew there was a trap but couldn't see it.

Jane said "If you don't work for the King then who could you work for?"

"Answer your own question. Start with my name."

"Italian? If you come from Italy you could be from the King of Italy spying in our country."

"Well done. So I would be pretending. I would be deceiving you."

"Yes."

"That's what I am here to teach you. Did I not just tell you that?"

"Yes. But anyone who works for Minda must be honest."

"Why?"

"Er. I don't know. Because you must."

"You can never trust anybody, even people you trust is my lesson. Now I'm sorry but you must not write these things down. You will come to know this soon enough and you may have the misfortune to have friends suffer because they trusted too easily. You will know this lesson so well it will sometimes keep you awake at night. Better awake than dead. Remember that bit."

Allesandro went to the door, noisily threw back the bolt nobody had noticed being shot and called for cakes. In a minute they had a plate of sweet cakes between them. "Bolt the door please John." commanded Allesandro. "These cakes have been sent by Lucky – They are luck-cakes of course. He has given me a list of spells on them – here it is. John yours is 'May you be a prince amongst thieves'. James yours is 'May you thief amongst princes'. Rachel yours is 'May you steal more than hearts'. Maggie yours is 'May you look after us in your secret way'. Jane yours is 'May you look after yourself so you can look after others'. Mine is 'Stop being boring and show them some tricks'."

"Show me that last one!" demanded Rachel. "Yes It's what is written down. But Lucky can't read nor write so I call it a forgery!"

"Well done Rachel! Actually Paul wrote it for him. Honestly."

James spoke. "I'm sorry if I am slow but you want to train us to become thieves and cut-purses for the King. That's against the law. We could go to prison or be executed."

"Yes James. Actually spies as good as you will be are always looked after by their masters but it is being found out by the people who you are spying on you have to worry about. Suppose you are making friends with a merchant from Lanconia who is smuggling and trying to find treasonable families to help him invade. If he found out you were not a simple sailor how long do you think you would live? Go on tell me."

"Not long."

"A very long time it would seem as your teeth were pulled out then your fingers burned. Do you get my meaning? When mistress Doreen told you last night you would grow up this is what she meant. For the next few days I am going to make you practice hard so you can stay alive in a world of bad people trying to do worse. There's good reason – so the rest of the Kingdom can sleep soundly at night. The games are over. What I have to teach is quite easy really. Later you will have more fun. Nobody will send you to your deaths if they can help it. You are precious to them and Minda and me and Doreen and others who you don't yet know that have been keeping you safe on your beds – One day it will be your turn. I'll give you a minute to think about that then do as Lucky wishes and show you some tricks."

Men now

The Blue team had returned to the castle and the Red and Yellow teams were now free after their troops had been dismissed for the rest of the day. Brand had warned them that they should rest because they might be needed at nightfall. At dusk the cadets were collected in the great hall. Brand congratulated them on their day's work. He explained the future role of the Blue team as the men who fed the army food and arrows and found it horses and somewhere to sleep. We will be going out tonight shortly but Doreen will say something first.

"Men you are no-longer boys. You are growing up. The Black Team invaded the Abbey yesterday evening so I have sent them away where they can learn how to behave. The Duchess is still poorly but she is

resting and will recover. Where are you Herik? – Ah – The sheriff was very impressed with your little guard of honour this morning – Well done. To show you all that no good deed goes unpunished your troop can be official guards for when we have guests. First thing tomorrow your troop will go to Weller's the clothiers to get outfitted in Black and White tunics." She smiled. "It only takes one bit of initiative to get noticed."

Brand added "And only one bit of stupidity to get killed."

As Brand says we have stopped playing games now. I am told there were nearly some accidents with ladders and carts today. One day – that one day is very soon – you will have to look-out for accidents and deliberates all on your own."

Doreen continued "Now one more thing. Yesterday you were boys and we made you write home and have your hair cut and wash your under-clothes but now you are men. I think you can guess that I would like you to write to your families – if you don't write to them they won't write to you, but unless you show us you are too feeble to become a man you will have to be your own master. Our aim is to not have any boy who is bad at anything – some of you know you know where you are weak and we will help you. Please ask for help because you will be found out by your weaknesses and they will blight you and stunt you for the rest of your lives. Your faults will be found out and used against you by your enemies. Our other aim is to have some boys that are really good at something special. Gregori you are a brilliant archer so you should ask for more time to be better and to be with other good archers. Hammond you are good at dancing and music. That's something we all like but why be good when you could be best. Remember 'Bartonbry's best! Parker you're good at poetry – I have heard some – Well become better than best. Pester me to hear what you've written. Upton you are a natural commander. Yes you are! We have watched you but you don't know it. The Sheriff has to go to Melbun soon so how would you like to command the Town watch for a week? You'll be supervised but you will learn more in a week than the rest in a year. All of you deal with your bad spots and ask for help with your good skills to make them better."

Brand added "Anyone who thinks he can stay here without getting tired will be sent home like Scamson. Tonight you are going to round up your drunk troops. Nobody goes to bed until all have been accounted for so you need to work together. Muster in ten minutes at the gatehouse with lanterns."

Minda was irritated, apathetic, angry and despondent. A thousand thoughts turned into tumbling leaves getting trapped in cold ditches. Lizzie would have died fifty times if she could be bothered to kill her. Agnes was softer but she was like having a wind that sucked instead of blowed. It was nice of Eve to come. Eve was really nice but she meant well. She didn't want people meaning her well because that meant they knew some secret she didn't. Tom. Tom. Tom! Where are you Tom?

When Allesandro went though a simple coin-hiding routine the Black Team were spell-bound. That was the object of course. He did exactly the same thing again but still they were baffled. "Tomorrow I will show you. We call it magic but it is really deception. I will teach you a little bit of that. Now it will soon be dark and I'm told you like to be out late. Shall we go down to the village and you can show me some of your secrets of hiding in the night. My job is to show you how to hide in the light."

James remembered he was the leader and looked at the others. Nobody had a negative expression or said anything so James did his best to do what Jane had taught him and look for what mattered before giving orders. Everyone was patient. "It won't be properly dark for another hour. Is there a servant we can use as a local guide to get us to the bridge? We will make too much noise or show too much light otherwise." The team looked forward to exploring in the dark of a thin moon and unhelpful clouds. James and Rachel were wondering what else the dark might allow.

In the hour of waiting for darkness Allesandro had time to think if Minda's Black Team had arrived at a village then any smugglers or outlaws might panic and bolt when it got dark. Deception and fighting were opposites. He wondered about letting them carry their 'Minda knives' in their 'Avel boots', but as this was what they knew about he asked James to make a decision for the team one way or another. They kept them. Rachel gave him a quick lesson in whistle calls as James organised the party. Allesandro was with the boys twenty paces behind the girls and the guide. James whispered that the plan was see what was happening at the bridge then wait then try and find anyone about to say hello to then come back. Openly, but quietly they walked down the road. As they came to the little church the unmistakable sound of a horse tearing grass could be heard from the graveyard. A halt was signalled but after a few seconds there was a whispered 'go on' from ahead. Soon they were in the deserted little square. The sliver of

moonlight showed three sides and a black void where the footbridge over the river must be ahead. The horse in the churchyard had appeared to Maggie to be innocent. The occasional slither of the river's current and plop of a jumping fish were the only sounds. With nothing more interesting to do they stood along the bridge. Allesandro was nudged and John's finger was put on his lip. The clunking of oars in rowlocks came from the dark river.

"An 'eap 'o silvr fer us tnite Jo."

"We'm be lucky."

"I tole you they'd drive by an we'd catch em."

"Ere be the bridge Nat."

"Wait til my missus see all this!"

The voices and sounds of cranking oars passed under where they stood then slid towards the bank. Allesandro was nudged again. As he had been last now he was first without a lantern and a handrail on only one side he had to hope nobody had sawn the bridge timbers in the last five minutes without him noticing. It was only twenty paces to the bank. When they were all back Jane took command in whispers. "Maggie and me in the lead. John and Ally to secure them. James and Rachel to deal with any friends. Ready?" Allesandro patted John reassuringly while trying not to shake himself. He was unarmed but was tall and might look scary to a surprised smuggler long enough for one of the cadets to deal with them. Even though it was only a hundred paces to the quay and there was hardly any light the girls took each gap between the large willow trees one at a time. How could the boatmen be so careless as to have two lanterns to help them unload their boat.

"Look at em Jo. They's least two shillin at Bartonbry market. Not bad for four hours fishin."

The high-low 'no-danger' whistle came from the girls ahead. Allesandro found he had been crouching down tense and stood up ready to gather round the girls in a friendly group but John held him back and pushed him back to the crouch and repeated the finger on lip touch.

Maggie's relaxed voice called. "Hello fishermen. Could I have twopence-worth of your catch." After swearing, tripping and apologies about not expecting people this time of night yes they could. Eventually while Maggie explained who they were and how they'd run away from home for excitement and ended up at that most boring place on earth Bartonbry so the two of them would explore at night. Did they go fishing every night? If they paid could they come too? Nat said yes but Jo was

the one with the brains. "Oi daren't think so. My missis won't let me out with pretty girls. Daytime pr'aps." Maggie had to take off her cap to carry the fish in but she wasn't easily embarrassed.

John pulled Allesandro back and they retreated unseen and unheard. On the way back Allesandro tried to comment but was shushed. They checked the horse in the churchyard was still as innocent as before and were soon in the hall of the house being blinded by candle-light. "What was your luck-cake wish Maggie?" asked Allesandro "May you look after us in your secret way'. You've looked after our food for Friday anyway. Who taught you what I just saw?"

"Flor and Brand and Lucky" said Maggie.

"And Minda!" said John.

"She taught us about churches being used to harness smuggling routes together." said Jane.

"Let's have supper my silent friends. I will see if there is fine wine to be had because it is time you leaned to drink wisely and anyway you men and women deserve it. I will tell you of foreign countries and try catching you out late into the night."

Brand's warning to the troops that he would sack anyone who needed to be carried back to the castle seemed to have worked. Mostly they had stuck together with their mates and those that had wandered-off had told where they were going. One whole troop remained unaccounted for and were given up for lost but not after they had been called every name the soldiers knew. This was unfortunate as they were blamelessly at the castle playing skittles in an old storeroom with some of the castle staff.

The night was peaceful but long. Doreen sat sewing in Minda's parlour with the door to her bedroom ajar. Agnes and Flor held hands and whispered. Paul read to a patient Arthur. The fire warmed and sharing the candle-light kept them together. Derek Driver looked in early in the evening but he wasn't the sort of person who could sit and stare at fire so he disappeared to the Castle Inn. Agnes would check up on Minda from time to time. Flor held her Minda's hand and waited to be spoken to. He wanted to show her the letter he'd written to Delphia and Henry. He knew she would be pleased even though Paul wrote the good copy. Despite these efforts they were unable to tempt Minda to join in with their contentment. As far as Doreen was concerned the immediate

problems had been dealt with and there was no point squeezing and twisting Minda.

Each of the next two days brought a false fair morning, wet afternoon winds and clear night. The first day tested the loyalty of cadets and troops but the Blue team had helped to give them a warm castle to return to. Cadet Upton's troop had a day and a night with the castle guards. Next week they would be side by side with the Town Watch so they'd better get used to the routine! Behind the bolted door at Willows there were many hours of concentration. Allesandro soon discovered the different tempers of his students. Jane liked to see the result then be left to work out things for herself. Maggie was best with things that could be experienced. Italian for above and under and beyond were fog to her until it was boats in the night under a bridge. Rachel learned best by doing something. Her language lesson was best practised as a discussion about fishing and rowing. The boys had the disadvantage of no education at all. Their team members had been helping them as elder sisters might but hours of concentration in a school-room was beyond them. He found that their patience and focus improved when the girls were coaching them. James was quick to see how something might be used, for example he could juggle the Italian words to haggle for the price of fish. John would make a good conjurer and wicked thief. His hands were agile, he could read and mimic gestures and he stole for the challenge. By the middle of the first afternoon of this schooling Allesandro told them how satisfied he was with their efforts and how sorry he was that it was so boring. He had seen their superb coordination in the dark now they would be using their eyes and meeting honest people. "It is easy to think that because you deceive that everyone else does it. Most people are honest – Or at least think of themselves as honest. We must always appear honest. Now last night Maggie. Did you pay for that fish with good money or counterfeit."

"Good money."

"Has anybody got any bad money?" Nobody. "Really?" Still nobody.

"Good. You will never ever pay for anything with bad money – Not even for fun John. You will be paid your costs. You need people to trust you so you can steal their secrets. You need people to trust you so you can lead them where you want them. You need people to trust you so when you turn up a year later with a bleeding wound they will hide you from your enemies. The quickest way to get a stain on your reputation that will never go away is to pay with false money. Now I want each one of you to swear on this coin – I call it an Arabian golden crown – It's made of brass – that you will never pass false money. John I want you to swear

twice!" He smiled. They all smiled. They all swore. "Well done. I'm sorry to pick on you John but I know the temptation to make fools of awkward spectators to my booth when I'm doing conjuring. Friends come and go but enemies are for life. Come on! Enough school let's brave the weather and find who owns that horse and how many fishermen there are and how high the river floods."

Lostnock

Delphia was happy in the warm bosom of the Watts family. As an outsider she could see what the smiths couldn't. As Minda's close friend she could arrange a loan and lease for a shop in the market to sell iron goods straight from stock. She'd played at shopkeeping as a small girl spending many hours inventing transactions and gossiping in her imagination. Now she could do it for real. Already her cleverness of having hinges and forks and examples of decorative ironwork for everyone to see and buy or order according to a pattern was paying a profit in increased trade. Being a pretty girl helped trade from the men-folk while being happy to gossip helped trade from the many women who wanted little bits of iron-work for their business or household and liked the idea of being able to shop without being treated as second-class ignoramuses by the smiths. People would pay a bit extra not to have to wait for nails, screws and hinges to be made when a few standard sizes would do most things. She got Henry to show her how to calculate the cost of things and after some practical lessons with forgotten costs was able to impress the innumerate Pod with how wealthy he could become. Eldest son Cain had two strengths. Firstly, once he had a task explained to him he would steadily work at it. Secondly, although he automatically obeyed every order of his father, behind the instantly obedient smith was a little bit of unused personality that Delphia had found fertile. When she asked him about anything he would find the idea itself interesting. Delphia understood this from her two years with Minda who would make her think interesting things for herself. She knew she was too young to get married but his calm innocence and sweaty hairy chest were the blanket she wanted.

Delphia was used to letters from Bartonbry in which Minda would give the news and ask for gossip, so the seriousness of Flor's message was a shock. How could Minda just give-up! She must really be very ill and Flor was being kind by hiding the truth. How could she leave the shop? Mrs Watts had started poor and having carefully climbed the social

ladder would never be seen working in a shop again. Delphia could do it because she was a rich girl with a toy. Mrs Jiller might do it for a week. If she rode through Sunday saw Minda on Monday then came back on Tuesday that would only be two working days. Straight away she went to the forge to ask Pod Watts for advice. After reading the letter to him he said she should go. He would care for the shop himself. Delphia could easily imagine his cheerful personal touch being tickled by the novelty of being a business man in the main street. After dealing with Delphia's difficulty the seriousness of the situation dawned. The start-iron girl herself was deathly ill. A fellow brother! The smith's own angel.

"I must do something for her Del. I don't know what but I will ask Johnny and Thred. Going on Sunday is a good idea. Will you take Henry?"

"I don't know. It's up to him."

"Tom!" Pod shouted into the gloom."

"Yes father."

"Go and walk down the yard with Del and make up your own mind what you want to do."

"Yes father."

Delphia realised Pod was letting decide Tom if he wanted to take the plunge for real with Minda. Was that glorious time of the first singing of the Star-iron girl song where Minda paired Delphia with Cain and claimed Tom for herself serious? She read Flor's letter to him and told him her worry it was something else and that she wanted to go on Sunday to see Minda for a day no matter what. She tried to think if Minda had ever referred to Tom specially in a letter but there were no hints there.

"I don't know what to do Del."

"If she asked you to stay and help her get better would you?"

"Um – I suppose so. Yes."

"And if she was nice to you but didn't smother you in kisses and stroke your lovely curly side-whiskers would you be brave."

"Um – Yes."

"I think she'd like to be reminded of the happy times at the Watts and I think she'd like to see you most of all the family."

"I'll go then. It's just she takes my breath out of me."

"Good. I'll get a horse for you. We may have Henry with us."

"Del. Can I ask you? I know you and Cain are to be married but do you really think Minda wants to marry me? She's a duchess I couldn't marry her anyway."

"Would you like to be a duke?"

"No. I'm happy as I am. What do I want with servants and hunting deer and jousting at the Kings court!"

"Oh stop being so miserable. Always thinking of yourself! – Only joking Tom. Just because you go to take the magic of the smiths of Lostnock personally doesn't mean you'll have to wear those silly pointed shoes and speak like you've got a flock of crows in the back of your throat for the rest of your life."

"Yes I do think of myself a lot. Right! I'm going to take *you* with me! We'll make Minda better if we can."

"Let me give you a kiss and whisker-tickle on account from Minda Tom."

The news reached Henry late on Friday afternoon after a week on the road surveying. His boss the Tax Collector had frankly told him that he had been commanded by the King to see that Henry was given every assistance to becoming a general surveyor. Henry assumed this was Minda's influence at court and had no idea that others were pulling strings. When he ask the Collector for a few days of leave he was given a hearty encouragement as his work had been outstanding. The collector's affinity with Henry was genuine but his wife often reminded him the Duchess, possibly the most powerful woman in the kingdom, certainly in their region, had Henry as her only 'brother', a fact which must be used to their advantage.

"I hardly know you Henry. You've worked for me for nearly five months and we've hardly had a meal together. We both know that you are going to fly from this office sometime and I would like you to have my friendship when you do. It is months since I was at Bartonbry and I have a scheme. Shall we go by river together? You have been in the saddle all week and the river gives us a new way to see the land. Boats leave every day and take two days with normal flow."

Henry's first reaction to this was to want to be alone with Delphia and then Minda but the novelty of going by river and the Collector's genuine respect blew that away. "I may be needed for escort duties but I would like to do that. I will tell you inside an hour and be ready to leave within three. – I must tidy today's notes."

"My servant will tell yours when the next boat leaves and if that's before three hours then forget your notes."

In the event the next stone barges weren't going to leave until the curfew closed the inns and the crew could be collected. As Tom was going to accompany Delphia Henry felt he could abandon her. He lent them his servant who was used to travelling in all weathers. Henry was also used to travelling with what he could carry so he had time to talk with Mr. Bob. He should have done that before!

"How are you Mr. Bob? Minda is very ill. I had this letter an hour ago. You remember Flor – he wrote it."

"Collapsed. Exhausted. Hmm – That doesn't sound like Minda."

"Delphia thinks Flor is being nice to us by telling half the truth. Me and Christopher are going up by boat to see her. Delphia and one of the Watts sons will go by road."

"Oh. Bad news indeed. I spent too many long hours at the Dukes deathbed worrying about inheritance so forgive me for leaving it to you to do whatever you have to to ease a safe inheritance – No matter how horrible. In her short time as the Duchess she has shown how worthwhile the frauds of Lucky and myself were. Please don't let it go to waste. Write a false will if you have to."

"Why don't you come Bob?"

"It's what she said herself. Once you get a reputation for being involved with deaths you are assumed to bring it with you and wield it like a choke-cloth. What would it look like if I was close by when she died just like I was with her father."

"Have you had a letter? You think she's dying. Tell me!"

"No Henry. Bartonbry is a bleak place when death takes a cold interest. I am only making us miserable at the thought. I'll get Danico or Davey to bring a little gift from all of us at this office to the quay before curfew."

"What's the point of curfew if nobody takes any notice of it Bob?"

"It gives the innkeepers an excuse to throw out sailors and boatmen. That gives me half an hour to write a love letter to Minda. Giver her a kiss from me Henry. Don't forget if she dies – forge whatever needs to be forged as the smiths would say."

The smiths of Lostnock held a formal Brother's meeting at Jiller's forge. Thredvald had wasted no time in marrying Crystal Jiller and making himself useful to the established smiths. They had plenty of business to

talk about but that was now left as the girl they all knew so closely and had so much to thank for was ill.

Jiller wrote on his slate "Sad".¹

"Her fire has gone out." said Pod.

Thredvald said "The smith before me at Trowstead hung himself. Minda found him in an ice-cold forge. Does she blame herself for letting that happen? Are the cares of smiths too much for her? She has her own life now. Looking after us as well must be a strain."

"Aye. Women do that." said Pod "This afternoon Tom said he wouldn't like the life of a duke. You were all there that night. Tom doesn't know if he is free or caught by her. He hasn't the strength to resist and none of us will stop her."

They waited while Jiller write "Our dautr".

"More than a daughter to me John" said Thredvald. She is the fairy that brought me here to your family. A queen of smiths."

"An angel. Your song says she looks over us and I think about that every night."

Jiller wrote "Ring star-irn"

"Make her a ring of star iron from all of us Johnny?" asked Pod. Jiller nodded. "I have no star-iron."

"Nor me." said Thredvald.

Jiller grinned with his eyebrows to say he hadn't either. They all knew the deceit that no smith's wife would ever know. "Lead on Johnny! I will run and get the old nails if Thredvald will blow and you will forge." Three slaps on the anvil sealed their crime of necessity.

Bartonbry

In the Castle inn at Bartonbry Waghorne the innkeeper had some news for Lucky. "A gentleman who claims to be a trader in spices has been asking lots of questions about the castle and the Duchess. I thought you might be interested."

"Yes of course. Do we have spicer in Bartonbry?"

"Tickens in Rottel Lane."

1

"Where is this man staying?"

"Here. He's upstairs."

"I'll be back in quarter of an hour with Tickens and we'll put him to the test. Can we use our private parlour?"

"Anything for the Duchess. How is she?"

"She is still very poorly Pat. I think it's good she has a chance to rest. Could you run this inn without your wife to help you? She has a castle to run on her own. Then those blasted cadets and the stupid army and then a whole dukedom with property spread across half the kingdom."

"Doreen and you and Flor help her."

"But we're not married! We're just her servants. First none of us knows half her business and second none of us can hold her in our arms and listen to her confession when she makes a mistake. She can't be right every time and she's only eighteen."

"Too much responsibility too soon."

"Too much responsibility for anybody Pat."

"It makes me nervous Lucky."

"Doreen has ordered us men to attend to the daily work and not to flock around Minda. She says time will heal the wound."

"Did she really fall off her horse?"

"Yes I'm afraid so. It is more sad than that but I must not tell you more. She will get better but the higher the mountain the more the snow. She will thaw but as you love her remember that despite her personal pain Bartonbry marches on!"

Lucky had no trouble dragging Tickens the spicer from his fireside. Nobody in Bartonbry would cause offence to the Duchess without a very good reason. He explained the situation and how Tickens was not to reveal himself unless Lucky said so. If asked he was to be a father of one of the cadets and question the stranger. Lucky would appear in the parlour drunk and stupid and Tickens could rebuke him but remember they were testing a stranger. If Flor arrived any of Lucky's sins should be recounted to him. This was urgent and important but they would be subtle. "I'm sorry Mr. Tickens but the reason our little army is so little is that we are finding enemies before they have time to grow into big ones. This man may be anything. You can tell me if he is really a spicer. That's all I need to know."

"I often travel abroad Mr. Lucky. I am used to talking with strangers."

"We can talk about that in the Castle inn in five minutes time then."

Another evening near Minda was interrupted by an oath, a thump and a groan from Minda's room. Flor was there in a moment to see Lizzie lying against the wall. He didn't know who to look after first but Minda was smiling. "Whistle if you need me." he said to Minda as he collected a very limp Lizzie and took her next door to the servant's room. "Agnes! Doreen! Come through here!... ...Look after her while I look after Minda." Back in Minda's chamber he smiled at her and she held out her hand. "I'm pleased to see you are getting better Minda. Hooray!... ...I've lots of good news to tell yo when you're ready. I'll deal with Lizzy. She won't bother you anymore."

"She meant well."

"Minda! You're speaking. Even better! We're better at dealing with people that mean us evil aren't we." He smiled and she grinned back. He was still disturbed by her naked eye. "We'll just have to learn." She made a feeble half-gesture that he took as encouragement. "One moment Minda..." he went to the parlour door and looked up. "...No. The sky hasn't fallen yet." He went back to her bed and kissed her. They winked at each other simultaneously. Flor was so happy she was finding herself but this unexpected shared moment was interrupted by a groan from the servant's room. He'd better be lord of events. "Get well soon my love." Lizzie was being gently shaken by Agnes. Doreen was standing by. Flor said "Minda is a gosling who has been pretending to be a goose. Lizzie has just met the real goose. I guess she told Minda she 'must' do something."

Doreen said "I'll find a softer nurse Flor. Well done Agnes. I think our lady is getting better. Be patient."

A messenger came with a message for Flor. Outside Flor took the request from Lucky to come to the private parlour of the Castle inn on business. He obtained permission from Doreen, checked with Minda by a drinking mime then hurried to find out what was going on. Brand was too occupied with his never-ending organisational duties with the little army but Flor told the messenger to let Brand know where he and Lucky would be. Obviously Brand had had enough of administration because Flor had hardly left the castle before a low-low 'I am supporting you' whistle followed by Brand's signature whistle came from behind. Flor waited.

"What's up Flor?"

"Lucky just asked me to join him on business at the Castle inn."

"I want a big drink Flor. It won't make my problems go away but I can forget about them."

"This is business. I've just left Minda to be with Lucky – not for a drink."

"Sorry Flor. The pressure is constant."

"I'll drag you back old teacher. I owe you that."

They arrived at the Castle inn. By the quick arrangement of deceivers Flor went to the private parlour while Brand went to the public for five minutes.

"Aha! So here you are Zebedee." siad Flor. Have you got that pound you owe me?"

"It's not due yet." improvised Lucky.

"I'm short. You may want to oblige me."

"Have a drink instead. It's the best I can do."

"You've been trustworthy in the past but my wife won't sleep at night for my loans and keeps waking me up to remind me." Lucky's hidden hand signals helped Flor identify 'the enemy' a perfectly ordinary man of forty or fifty with little curls of white hair on each side of mottled baldness.

"Good evening gentlemen." he said addressing 'enemy'.

"Can you introduce me Zebedee? My name is Flor I look after the Duchess' safety."

"Yes Flor this is Mr. Tickens spicer of Bartonbry. This gentleman calls himself Jean Espice and claims to be from Lanconia. He claims to be a spicer but Mr. Tickens doesn't believe him."

Brand burst in. "Flor! Have you got him! Hello! Pat says you have caught a spy." He stood with feet apart blocking the door and hand on his knife.

"It's alright Brand. There's no law against asking questions." said Flor. "There is in my book. You're too soft. I don't like spies. I fought the Lanconians at Salvonbridge and I won't forget that."

"That's enough Brand! You should go back to the barracks. This is diplomacy. You wouldn't understand it."

"Hmm. I'll be in the public parlour if you need me." Brand gave a look of disgust at the stranger and left.

Lucky thanked Mr. Tickens and promised to see he got an order from the castle soon. Flor asked the silent stranger if he would share a bottle of wine with them. The stage was set for the second act of the play.

"Welcome to Bartonbry stranger." said Flor. "We are not minded to drop you to the bottom of the river. Would you like to tell us something about why you're here and we'll see if we can help you." Jean hesitated. "I am more busy than you know mister Espice. I'm sure you don't want to sit in the Sheriff's gaol for a week."

"As you know I am not a spicer. The Lanconian ambassador has asked me to find out more about your duchess. As you so wisely said this is diplomacy. The ambassador is always keen to be friends with powerful people. He says we should do more trade and have more understanding."

"Carry on. What do you want to find out?" asked Flor.

"All sorts of rumours reach Melbun. He has asked me to tell him the facts."

Lucky said "Tomorrow a letter with your description will go to Melbun telling the Lanconian ambassador you are claiming to work for him. I don't expect he'll be pleased if you are using his good name in vain."

"It's true."

"Good because the letter will go anyway."

Flor continued "We are getting used to people coming to spy on us. If they have brought weapons or trouble with them we get quite cross – but if all you want is to know what is happening in Bartonbry then we get very friendly. Will you come to the castle gatehouse just after nine tomorrow morning and I will see you have a guide you can ask whatever you like."

"Would it be possible to arrange an audience with the Duchess?" asked Espice?

"She is unwell after a bad fall from her horse so I'm afraid not. If you have a message from the ambassador then it will have to be in writing. I will leave you to talk with Zebedee. My other colleague you saw is also safe. Please don't leave Bartonbry without seeing me first as I want to be sure you have all the facts you want, and I may have a message for your ambassador."

Flor collected Brand from the public parlour and they discussed the episode. "I'm amazed how simple it was Brand. After catching Lucky I knew what to do and you helped by showing him the alternative."

"Lucky was smart to suggest a letter to the Lanconian ambassador."

"Yet another thing to do tonight!"

"It sounds like you spoke with authority. I'm really proud of you Flor. Six months ago you were a lazy empty-head but here you are laying down the law like Doreen."

"Let's hope I get it right. I can see why Minda's exhausted. I've been doing this for a day and I need a rest."

Amongst other things Espice asked Lucky specifically about the Black Team. Lucky was careful to give the official story of shooing them out of town so they couldn't get up to yet more mischief but didn't elaborate. Lucky asked in return what people in Melbun thought of the cadets and was told that many families considered it a fashionable thing that was alright for a few months but then their children had to get back to the careers already chosen for them.

"They're in for a shock then. Their boys are quickly becoming men and they're beginning to see their own futures. The Archbishop's son wants to be a real fighting knight and will run away to find a war to fight in if needs be."

"When he gets back to Melbun his father will beat it out of him."

"I want to be there to watch. Thaddeus is now nearly as strong as the Duchess. In three months we've turned him from a clumsy clerk into a man who knows how to use his muscles. See if you can find him tomorrow."

"Are all these cadets being trained for war?"

"No. Command of themselves was the first lesson. Now they are learning how to command rough men. When they return to their families they will be able to step forward if we have war but mostly they will be able to attend to being five times better than their peers because they know how hard work builds strength and demands respect if you can put it into practice. They will be traders, ambassadors, sheriffs, tax collectors and able to manage private estates. What's the point of teaching them numbers if they don't do accounts. Let me give you a toast Jean. To the next generation – The one that will know what it's doing."

"I'll drink to that Lucky."

Lucky's manner changed instantly. He put his cup down untouched, put both his hands on the table and stared at Espice. As the silence continued Espice tried to catch-up with the situation. Lucky folded his arms and made that pursed-lips-raised-eyebrows 'I'm waiting' face that teachers use to put pupils on the spot. Eventually Espice fell-in. "Oh! Zebedee."

"Thank you. You should have twigged we are cute here. You are careless and will not be given any privileges. When I don't ask you real name why do you use mine."

"Lucky isn't your real name but Zebedee *is*."

"Thank you again. You make a simple man very happy. I can't wait to tell the Duchess. That'll make her laugh." Lucky repeated his 'I'm waiting' pose.

"I don't see what you mean."

"I caught you out using my new name though nobody here had told it to you so you must have taken trouble to find out. That makes you a professional spy and I was awake enough to spot your slip. Me! A mere swordsman catching a man of brains like you. Fancy!... ..No don't fancy I will tell you! We test people here. You have failed our most important test – We can't rely on you. You can still go to the castle tomorrow and ask what we are doing because we want people to know it. But you will never be trusted with secrets from us. A single word is enough to kill a man – or a woman. Now if you should ever come across anything that means harm to the Duchess then you can send a message to me with the symbol or word 'linking arms'. Have you got that?"

"Yes."

"You know I will not trust it but if you have good blood in your veins then please send it as I want my mistress kept safe. You see how tonight you're safe, she's safe and we work together?"

"Yes."

"Now let have a toast to working together." They drank.

The Black Team had their outings in daylight. Their first attempt at disobeying orders to go to bed was found out because Allesandro had made it easy for John to pick the key to the padlock of the shutters from his pocket and was waiting patiently below in the darkness with a bucket of cold water. Poor Jane! He lectured them that the later he had to stay up at night making sure they were sleeping the shorter his

temper would be next day. They needed their sleep because what he was teaching them would save their lives. Which bit of being grown-up now did they not understand – all of it. But for the next week they would be doing it the grown-ups way.

"John you stole the key to the shutters from my pocket. I made a point of taking the key out didn't I?"

"Yes."

"Yes *Sir* I think. Yes I did. And I made a point of putting it in my pocket then ignoring it didn't I?"

"Yes sir."

"But you stole it anyway."

"Yes sir."

"Why?"

"Because I didn't suspect a trick."

"So now you have a key. What do you do with it?"

"Test it on the shutters sir."

"Then tell your friends and they seethe with excitement. Is that right?"

"Yes sir."

"What did none of you see?" Silence. "I will tell you tomorrow why any simpleton could have seen that was a trap. Now I want you to think about that as you drift off to sleep not kissing in the dark. Good night children."

Minda had told Lucky that Paul was in touch with Silks if an emergency arose so Jean Espice was something Paul should know about. During a night of half-sleep Lucky kept getting a knot of ragged thoughts. Use secrets and the Black Team against Espice. They had nothing to hide – except the Black Team! But what was Espice's master afraid of? How did he trap him with an unfinished toast? At last, when it was too early to get up but too late to go back to sleep, he realised that if the Lanconians thought the Italians had got a foothold in the nobility of the Kingdom they would be worried and? ...Do something. ...That showed their intentions. Getting them to 'do something' that was the secret. He carefully woke up Paul and explained everything.

To Paul this was one of those unexpected moments of revelation and now promotion. Yesterday he was clerk with layers of secrets and loyalties now he was a political advisor. He had to drag Lucky to the chapel then phrased prayers to suit. Lucky registered the sweat from the stone. Paul was insecure in himself but now with eyes closed, just the two of them in the chapel, he was finding where his feet touched the bottom of the lake of uncertainty. Lucky was awed by the vastness of everything but tried not to let that get in the way of everyday breathing, running, stabbing and... ..catching spies.

Paul and Arthur waited at the gate. Arthur was dressed in his glorious 'court suit' which was a tight fit now after only three months! Paul already had the beginnings of a sneer! With Lucky's briefing they were ready. Even if Espice wasn't really representing Lanconia there was no harm in showing their strengths and hinting at others. What would Minda do? He could hardly kiss a spy! Even if he did it wouldn't have the same effect. Paul was worried as he'd seen Lucky acting but that was like a solid rock in a pool watching fluid fish swim to him, he just couldn't do it. Now where was Espice? They used 'a few minutes past' as a 'when you hear the bell start off, not emerge from your shell like a snail and have second thoughts.' Unmistakable, by his blotched bald patch as described by Lucky, Espice approached the gate. Arthur jumped out to meet him.

"Are you Mister Espice the spy?"

"Yes Er Yes."

"We've been waiting. What can we show you?"

"Are you Arthur?"

"Who do you think I am! The Abbot's tart?"

If Mister Espice had any remaining doubts about the fierceness of the defences of Bartonbry he was now 'educated'. "Where I come from we don't use words like that young man."

"Where do you come from?" riposted Arthur already in full flush.

"Lanconia."

"Where they burn Christians?"

"No of course... not."

Paul shrugged at mister Espice.

"You and I should have a talk little Arthur" said Espice. "Would you like to know lots of things about Lanconia?"

"Yes please! Are the girls pretty?"

In the next quarter of an hour Arthur learned a lot about Lanconia. The lack of Unicorns, dearth of dragons, churches twice as big as the Abbey, how they make wine and how beautiful the queen was. Arthur insisted on a full description of her and then the king also. Espice was trapped. Paul's 'isn't it a nice day to be nice' blocked any devious escape.

Jean didn't know if this was Bartonbry madness or cleverness but it was certainly different! He saw the cadets and their troops and Paul asked some of them what they'd done, what they were doing now and what they hoped to do after cadet school. As Minda made accounting classes simple and Tomlyn effortlessly showed them how to breakdown what was happening on an estate to find the gold of profit and loss from the dirt of figures a surprising number said they wanted to be business managers. The tour was at an end when Espice remarked he'd seen Blue, Yellow and Red cadets but no Black ones.

Arthur said "No they had to go with the Italian am-er-ambassador. He's from Italy..."

"Arthur! Off you go to the clothier Arthur! Get him to alter your suit." Interrupted Paul.

"He brought me a lovely present. I can't read it yet can I Paul."

"Go on. Now!" Arthur ran off without question. "Arthur is our little pet but he makes things up. I hope I've been useful. Have a safe journey back to Melbun. Good day." Paul bowed, turned and went back through the gatehouse.

Before lessons started Allesandro asked the Black Team if they had ever seen shutters padlocked before? No they hadn't. If there was a fire you could pull the shutter bolts but you'd be trapped if they were locked so it didn't make much sense did it? On the other hand it made sense if he wanted to tempt them to try the challenge. Show the lure to the hawk! Make it easy for John to steal the key and the greedy birds would fly straight to his hand. After making sure they all understood the lesson of baited traps he asked "Now here is a question for each of you. Did I deceive you or did you deceive yourselves?"

Rachel said "Everything you did was in plain sight so that wasn't really deception. You made us do what you wanted us to do. Is that deception?"

Not really either. We knew what we were doing – we just didn't think 'twisted'."

"Didn't I tell you before that I would teach you deception in daylight? I tricked you it's true but I also deceived you that I was stupid enough for you to trick me. If just one of you had said 'Allesandro has let us steal the key for a reason – he is up to something' then Jane wouldn't have got drenched. Are you alright dear?"

"Yes thank you Allesandro. I must learn to take as I give."

"Good girl. Now I'm not going to be hiding round every corner and I'm not going to wake you all up in the middle of the night just to test you. That's for others. We've started on hand-conjuring but we must also work on fooling people like I fooled you last night. Hand-conjuring is one thing but mind-conjuring is what we're really about."

Lostnock

Layers of black then slate then brown then rose then white mist stretched like blankets being pulled off a sleeping river by the rising copper sun. Golden streamers announcing his arrival. The two barges tied together were pulled by four men against the slow flow. Henry asked why they didn't use a horse. Because the tow path would be cut-up by hooves, it was sometimes hardly passable as it was. Where the path was too bad they poled or rowed so a horse would have to be put off and on then carried as dead weight. Men were much more flexible. The two men of facts asked about cargoes. The main one was freestone from the quarries at Willows to Lostnock. Upstream they carried an increasing amount of glass-making sand, raw iron pigs and general goods.

Henry sat with his notebook on his knees making notes of landmarks and river features. There is little space on a boat but a huge space in a landscape. He tried sketching a vista but as soon as he started on the details it became dishonest. Hmm. The geometric nesting of a wicker-hooped fish trap were much easier. The Tax Collector Mintern sat beside Henry enjoying a day of travel that didn't punish in so many ways. He drew Henry's attention to the illusion that objects further away appeared to be moving with them as the trees right on the banks slid behind. They discussed the real colour of the sky after you'd looked at it properly and how it was reflected in the water. Mintern suggested Henry should draw the V-shape of ripples following a water rat swimming to its burrow

under the bank. Henry tried but all he could do was get the angle of the ripples right, the rest was lines and blobs. Mintern asked if he could borrow Henry's note case and drew a single large ripple and showed Henry that it was the way the light curved round the shoulders of the little wave that described it best. Henry could see illusion as Mintern drew it but couldn't grasp how what he thought were black ripples were really scoops of light. Mintern drew the men pulling at the rope. It was only a sketch but he caught the strain through their posture. Henry was impressed and envious. "That's wonderful. I can measure these boats but you'd get their curves and strength and weight. I can draw geometry but not natural life."

"Practise looking at tiny details Henry. Start with the fingers of your hand. Compare mine and yours. Look yours are smaller and younger than mine but how are they really different? You can always practice hands. Another good subject is geese. There's the curves to study of course but every goose has some purpose in its eye. Draw the muscles under the skin. What are they looking at and defending or attacking."

They studied the operation of the flushing locks, how barge traffic and eel traps had to cope with each other, the way the waterway would be single between banks then break up into side branches and shoals where the barge had to be poled. Before dusk they tied-up in a little bay and walked a mile across the water meadows and marshes to a village that had the sense to be on higher ground out of the river's reach. Henry and Christopher were very satisfied. Tomorrow was Sunday but the boatmen would be on the move again. When challenged by priests about this neglectful policy the boatmen said it was the church that wanted stone for its churches, abbeys and minsters so they were only doing God's work. They emphasised that sailors depended on the weather and couldn't afford a rest day when the next week might be against them. Some of this was true, but mostly it was because they got paid by the trip not the day so sitting in church was a drain on their profits.

Upstream at Bartonbry the soldiers were given the rest of their pay. This time each troop commander had to present his men for inspection. The wisdom of Brand's 'pick your own comrades' was shown by the fact that there was one troop, the one commanded by Thaddeus the archbishop's son, who were the dregs. He'd been supported by Brand and Lucky and allowed to beat a couple as a lesson but they were hardened reprobates.

Brand took him aside. "We gave you the worst lot Thaddeus to see if you really had the guts to go to war. About a quarter or third of men will be

like that in a quickly raised army at the start and most by the end of the campaign. You did really well. After pay muster they will be allowed to go to town until curfew then rounded up."

"Yes sir."

"Tomorrow after breakfast they will be disarmed, given a loaf and taken outside the town gates with an order never to return. It is no shame on you. If you couldn't tame them then none of you could. You and Upton will go and dine with the Sheriff tonight. If he asks one of you to accompany him to Melbun next week then you have my permission. Enjoy the evening – He's a cheerful host.

Minda was definitely more cheerful but sighed and turned away rather than have a conversation. It had just turned dark when the Duchess' private parlour was lit. Agnes came to Minda with a happy smile.

"Someone's come to see me. – I'll leave the door ajar."

Minda knew when her staff were playing with her and she was delighted that this was the first time Agnes had the courage to tickle her. She liked being tickled. Her new habit of sighing physically swamped her good thoughts. She could hear something happening in the parlour but now had to wait to see what. She was sure she could hear whispering but she couldn't creep to the door crack in her own castle! At last 'bongnng' and instantly she knew it was Christo the musician from Heronswell with his box of resonating metal spikes and bands. Hurrah! She didn't listen to the notes but she heard a jolly dance and saw faces smiling in admiration. When it stopped she burst into tears with love and happy mystery from too many directions flying through the air.

"Agnes!"

Agnes came straight in from the bright parlour. "Yes Minda?"

"I'm going to be better! Help me dress. Tell them to wait."

Doreen put her head round the door. "You will be washed and comb your hair first young lady!" Like one of Christo's tiny hammers striking spring-iron this was a sharp note followed by mellow glowing tones.

At the evening meal the Black Team were very quiet. They had all watched and tried for themselves as Allesandro coached John in the art of the pea and the three cups. He soon managed the sleight of hand foundation but as they began to realise it was manipulating the 'mark' as he was called, the person who you were to take money off, that was the really important bit. Not only did you have to hook them to begin with

but then convince them their luck and skill was bound to beat yours for a second into their purse.

"Then you have to get rid of them. How do you do that Maggie?"

"Oh. Why do you have to get rid of them. Can't you cheat them again?"

"Exactly. Make it their choice. Nobody is forcing them to put good money after bad. Reluctantly you may accept their challenge.

Remember that bit. You need to see who his friends are and ask them if they think he should. Then he has nobody to complain to when they all say 'we told you so!' At least that will do for today. Girls you can take it in turn to be marks. John you're the conjurer and James you're the 'rabbit' the innocent bystander who is winning. Now then John girls are not good marks – they don't have loose money to lose – so expect grief from this lot! Girls I want you to make your best guess every time."

A lot of learning went on that morning inside the bolted parlour at Willows. In the afternoon there weren't many villagers willing to gamble so Allesandro simply went to the inn and after making it clear that, yes he was, as the innkeeper probably knew, the temporary lord of the duchess' house and on her business. Her mad scheme was to give men twopence so long as they would gamble one of those pennies with the huckster who would be in the square at three o'clock. Here was two shillings, twelve men he reminded the innkeeper. Even if they lost their first penny they would still have a penny left.

"Why does the duchess do this? There are rumour's she's gone mad."

"Don't worry" said Allesandro "The Duchess is just full of fun where her father was full of spite and malice. I drank wine with her four days ago and she was charming and a delight to be with. She's only Eighteen but rich and happy to throw two shillings at the good people of Willows. Between you and me she hates misery so if there's poverty here get the priest to write a nice letter making her welcome in her own house on the hill."

"There's something odd going on. You with your foreign accent. People giving money for nothing. Two strange girls in the night."

"I'll bring Jane and Maggie in later. We'll see who buys who a drink. Ha ha! Funny times as you say – but I can tell you the Duchess looks after you every single night even though you don't know it so please try to help her."

"This afternoon Rachel you were wicked. One minute you were pulling men back and the next saying 'he can't win every time.' If I was to let

John and Rachel loose tomorrow they would win a fortune. John you worked with Rachel brilliantly. Maggie – This isn't your thing. Don't be ashamed because you are good at asking for what you want and making people believe you. Rachel makes men doubt then believe themselves. Jane you are too indifferent to winning or losing pennies. Every gang needs a lookout who can be trusted to give a single whistle. That leaves James who even though we dressed him up as a peasant I don't think fooled more than half the people. It will come James but we'll have to prepare better. Did I leave John out? No I praised him for working with that naughty Rachel... ...Why didn't I say how good he was at the cups and pea?"

"Because sir" said John "That was the easy bit."

"Yes. It is actually difficult but you are a natural conjurer and made it look easy. My point is that you are a team. With the exception of Maggie you were all needed to make it work."

"But John would be the one to be arrested or attacked" said Jane.

"And you would have spotted the attackers and whistled. See!"

Jane wasn't quite convinced. "But he's still the one everyone hates."

"That's *is* the deception. Everyone thinks it is one of you when it is really four. Of course you have to keep on the move and not cross rich and powerful people but that's a lesson for another day."

Maggie asked. "Am I baggage?"

"Yes. In this case. You can watch from a distance. I will tell you why you should be a way away when this mob is operating the cups... ...You are baggage if you try to be with them at this game but this is only one game of many. Hmm. I will tell you all. Maggie will be your mother. You will be sharing a couple of candles when Maggie will say 'I wonder if something isn't quite what it seems.' or 'While you were scouting around I have found us some lodgings.' Who brought twopence of fish the other night? The rest of us were about to attack smugglers but Maggie was the first to see the real world instead of our imaginations. So you are baggage. – Do people carry baggage wit them unless they need it?"

"I suppose not."

"Let's not get into who did best. You all learned a lot and you all need time to let the seed of that lesson take root. Tomorrow is Sunday. Before church will be writing home and for the boys writing to the Duchess – The girls will help you. After church the whole of the rest of the day is yours. Might I suggest James and Jane together, John and Rachel together and Maggie with me. Remember you're grown-up now so try and behave. Am I looking after you?"

After a pause Maggie said "You look after us like a she-bear does her cubs."

"How's that Maggie?" asked Allesandro.

"You show us your sharp claws but don't use them – Oh except on Jane – to make us wonder why you have sharp claws. Then you push us outside the bear-cave. Then you hug us in you fur again."

"That's a lovely thing to say Maggie. I hadn't thought of that. See! I told you Maggie uses everything in her head."

Jed and Bob, boyhood friends Thaddeus Poolens the Archbishop of Melbun's son and Robert Upton son of the Duke of Upton master of the King's household now felt their importance coming from themselves rather than their families. They were automatically in the most privileged two dozen of courtiers. For three months they had been learning how to develop their strengths and self-reliance. They were happy that they had now grown-up thanks to the Duchess.

All children want to be independent. Many parents want their children to be independent but don't trust their children to chart their own course. There are those parents who have a very definite idea of what their children should be doing. As it happened Jed and Bob fell into the latter category. The King's hearty promotion of a finishing school for annoying boys was originally accepted as a every family has had enough of teenage boys at some stage. Now it was beginning to dawn on some that it was something more than practising high-class fighting and social graces. There was a lot of comparing notes between fathers in Melbun with the general feeling that they were losing influence over their sons and something must be done! 'All credit to the Duchess' they would say 'my boy needed a dose of discipline' and 'he actually writes like he has thought what to write' and 'she gets them to hunt for their own food and cook it or else starve'. 'All credit to the Duchess' they'd say 'but will he settle down when he comes back?' 'All credit to the Duchess but he needs to be here at court.' 'All credit to the Duchess but I don't really want my son being brought up by a girl.'

Before they left the castle for the Sheriff's Doreen had a word with them. "I wish the Duchess could see you now boys. Or should I say men! You are dressed up very fine there Bob and Jed. So you should be, you have

to practice for your time to come at court. The night is all yours, your men will be collected by others for you, and you don't have to be back in the castle by any time – but if I may give you a bit of advice don't let Brock get you drunk. He may try but you sometimes have to teach your friends that 'no' is strength not rudeness."

"Thank you Mistress Doreen." Said Jed.

"Thank you Mistress Doreen." Said Bob.

"Take care then. One day you may be fighting for the Kingdom together and looking after the rest of us. You don't have to wait until then to come and see me I'll always bake you a cake."

"Thank you Mistress Doreen. My mother never said she'd bake me a cake." said Jed.

"Nor mine." said Bob.

"Well the sun shines in Bartonbry and thanks to us all we're going to keep it that way. Bend down Jed so I can kiss you!... ..And you Bob."

The Sheriff was well aware of the status of his guests but was naturally jovial. Eve reminded him they were boys alone away from their home. The four of them round the table made a contented family.

Brock got his business out of the way quickly. "As you know boys the King has chosen to make me a Count for which I have to go to Melbun. I'm sure it is more of an honour for the Duchess but I admit I have done honest public service. I was wondering if you Thaddeus would like to accompany me there."

"Yes sir."

"And you Robert. I am told you have the gift of command. Will you be deputy to my deputy while I am away?"

"Yes sir."

"Unless the weather is horrid we'll be starting on Monday morning. Now that's enough 'yes sirs'. It's the fashion now in Bartonbry to call us Brock and Eve."

"Please sir. Everyone calls me Jed. If you need me in a hurry sir Jed is a better name."

"I'll do that then Jed."

Eventually the boys were able to lose their formality as Eve asked them about their families, Melbun, court, what they wanted to do, what their friends still in Melbun thought about it all and how they got on with all

the other cadets. The response to the last item was mixed. They found the other boys were always looking at each other on their merits as team members and were good mates they supposed. However the Black Team, although friendly, were unpredictable and best left alone.

Eve left them and Brock opened a bottle of wine. "Here you are boys – The Bartonbry Boys – That's a good name for you cadets – You did well with those men of yours Jed. Do you think that was a mean trick?"

"Somebody had to have them."

"But you had all of them."

"I lost a lot of sleep worrying but Brand and Lucky helped me."

"Was it a mean trick?"

"It was a lesson."

Bob added "You got the most difficult group because you were the best pupil. Now you're even better."

"Exactly" said Brock. "And you get a week back in Melbun as a reward."

"When will our training be finished?" Asked Bob.

"I don't know. But my guess is that because all the Bartonbry Boys – Yes I like that – all the cadets have done so well so quickly you will all find yourselves being given exciting lessons quite soon. You wouldn't train a dog then not take it hunting would you. You know Bob that you'll be losing a lot of sleep while I'm away but when you've done that you'll be able to go to other towns and see where their watch is weak. You'll be the only one who can do that – Just think if the Duke of somewhere decided to fight the King and we wanted to lure him out then send just a hundred men to go behind his back and cause havoc to his home town. Who would we send to find out where the defences were weak?"

"Um. Me I suppose."

"But Bob couldn't just walk into the town. He'd be captured." said Jed.

"But if Bob was a humble scribe whose house was burnt by the King's men with his wife seeking refuge then who would know?"

"Spying!"

"Which of the Black Team would you take as your wife?" Asked Brock.

"Maggie."

"Why?"

"Because I like her best."

"Fair enough." said Brock. "Now there's a really good reason why you will never mention the Black Team in public. Never ever. Do either of you know what it is?"

"Because you say so?" offered Jed.

"Because they could save your lives. Let us say that Jed had been kidnapped and is being held for ransom. Bob you have enough men under your command to win a fight but you have to find the culprits and trap them in a way that gives Jed a chance. The Black Team will be listening in inns for gossip and watching remote crossroads at night and torturing captives if they have to. They will give Bob the information he needs to strike. They would be your candle in the dark."

"I'd prefer to fight in the light." said Bob.

"Me too." said Jed.

"And that's why your enemies prefer to fight in the night. When I say night I mean actual night and the senselessness of not knowing where your enemy is and how strong he is. Outlaws don't send out the heralds asking the King's men to a battle. What they do is burn and murder then vanish. I'm telling you two this because soon you will be visiting Melbun where one and all expect you to have become knights with polished armour charging with lances at the head of thousands of men. Tell them what I've just told you but never mention – what?"

"The Black Team." said Bob.

"But what about if there is a war with Lanconia?" asked Jed.

"Good question. You're right. Then you would need to lead thousands of men. But even then that's the easy part. How do you feed them, arm them, get them to the right place. Pay them? That's what the Blue team are making a start on."

"But we need to practice."

"How Jed? With thousands of troops?"

"Er – No."

"You have to know how to handle surly men. We are teaching you that now. Then you have to get your mates to support you. That will come with time. You have practised a bit with your teams how to share the work and trust each other. If you are lucky to be with other Bartonbry Boys then they will soon understand and become a team again. When you are with pushy courtiers and proud knights remember that they are a force of one but you with your leadership will be many. There's lots more for you to learn isn't there?"

They agreed.

"One more thing. Outlaws and deadly family feuds will come quickly and are difficult to deal with in any other way but the sword. Countries and alliances have ambassadors and they don't really want to fight because it costs a lot and hurts trade so negotiation and trade ties at least slow down the onset of fighting. I think some of the Bartonbry Boys will be sent abroad to make friends with the Lanconians."

"Have some more wine you're not going to be called to duty tonight. I want you a bit drunk so you know how stupid you get."

"Mistress Doreen said you would try to get us drunk." said Bob.

"Well it's up to you. I've just trusted you with important things, things that as grown-ups you must never talk about no matter how much you have had to drink. Promise me and yourselves and Maggie and the Black Team that you will never get more drunk than with me and Brand and Flor."

"I promise." said Bob.

"Me too." said Jed.

"Good. Then have another cup. Now don't you want to ask me about battles and wars I've been in?"

The boys dutifully asked and Brock told them educational tales and gave them more wine. Finally he said.

"I'll give you a servant to see you back to the castle. But we have a stranger staying at the Castle Inn who claims to be from Lanconia. His name – so he says – is Jean Espice why don't you visit him tomorrow and ask him all about Lanconia and how you might learn a bit of the language."

"Why Brock?" asked Jed.

"What did I tell you about visiting Lanconia?"

"Oh – That we might be sent there."

"Why?"

"To learn – and make friends."

"Why?"

Bob came to Jed's rescue "To negotiate instead of fight"

"Well done. And to make a profit from trade. Now mister Espice is a spy who claims to be from Lanconia. He is quite friendly. Tell him I suggested it. You can also let him find out what you'll be doing for the

next couple of weeks and who your fathers are. I'm sure he will ask you slyly about the Black Team. You can say you only know their first names – then ask him why he wants to know. There is only one more thing you can say about them – which is a little bit true. They have gone with 'the Italian' but you don't know where or why. Make him fish for that information – I'm sure he will ask."

"I don't understand." said Bob.

"He is a spy so we tell him a dozen things that are true and one which is bent to suit us. He can check the dozen but for the thirteenth he has to trust us."

"So why are we telling him about this Italian?"

"Do you know what jealousy is?" They nodded. "If he is from Lanconia then when the Lanconian ambassador hears about the Italians having special access to a mysterious team what will he do?"

Blank looks. "I don't know." Bob said

"Neither does anybody else. That's why. To find out if he cares. Next week when Jed is in Melbun I expect there will be a completely-by-chance meeting arranged so that the ambassador can check with you himself. He can work out for himself that the Bartonbry Boys will be the next generation of administrators and traders and financiers and somebody is spending a lot of time making them useful to the Kingdom so you don't need to tell him that. What we do want him to know is that you are mad on fighting but just as sport and duty not for the sake of it. Tell him that the Duchess wants some of you to be friends with foreigners for trade as she hates wars."

"If he asks me can I go to Lanconia?"

"Say you would like to but need permission from Minda and wouldn't it help to learn a bit of the language first?"

"What if my father refuses."

"We will talk on the way Jed. I'm telling you this much now so that Bob can see how tomorrow's meeting with Espice is a small but important stitch in a big tapestry."

"Thank you Brock. Oh and thank you sir for your hospitality." said Bob.

"Yes sir." said Jed. "I feel like I've just grown up a foot. I'm trying to find my head."

Brock laughed. "Is it the wine or something else?"

"Both." replied Jed.

"Wait until you fall in love! That will flatten you into a sheet blowing in the wind."

3 Happy Sunday

Sunday saw Henry and Christopher back on the barge full of enthusiasm for landscape and nature. At Willows the day was relaxed with no lessons. After being watched carefully at church the Black Team drifted but despite Allesandro's suggestion they clung together. Maggie persuaded some fishermen to teach them rowing. At Bartonbry the day was celebrated by a procession through the town ending at the abbey. After lunch the amateur archers proud in their uniforms practised in the castle field. Bob and Jed ended up with more wine at Espice's expense.

Delphia felt like a matron with all the preparation and instruction-giving of the day before. Pod had purchased a horse for himself that the boys could also practise riding on. Mrs Watts privately sat on Delphia's horse a few times in the back yard of what was now Henry's lodgings but was terrified of the jerky motion as it walked. Tom knew enough not to fall off but was very pleased Delphia had thought to bring padding and balm. Even smiths had soft patches and inside the thighs was one of them. They had hired horses so they could change to fresh ones for speed. They had forty miles to go as quickly and safely as they could. Delphia calculated the expense as worthwhile for a margin of safety. The weather wasn't neither warm nor cold, the wind was neither wet nor bitter. The sun was neither hot nor false, but he kept moving and so must they.

Minda was not well. When she felt she had to get up everything seemed to pull her down. Just the weight of the air made her sigh. Tempting food was no pleasure. Doreen's gossip and the cadets in the courtyard organising their men for the parade to service in the abbey couldn't catch her interest. When she moved it was without purpose, simply floating between one corner of the parlour to another. Lucky sent a message via Agnes that being Sunday he would sing for her as soon as she wished. She sent the message back thanking him, and it was a nice thought, but being sung to wasn't right somehow. She went back to bed and refused to be happy.

Late in the afternoon Flor came and sat on her bed. "Look! I've written a letter. You'll be very proud of me."

His honest expectation was too much for her to shrug-off. "That's nice. Do you want me to read it?"

"Go on! Just for me. I wrote it all myself. Paul sent a good copy for me." Flor really was proud of his letter. Minda knew he'd worked hard at reading and writing. She couldn't let him down now.

"Alright. Let me see." She read the simple statement of her collapse and request to Delphia and Henry to come if they could. "That's good." She struggled to find words to make definite statements. In lieu of the nice things she knew she should be saying to praise Flor she embraced and kissed him. "I'm sorry to be a trouble to you Flor. I don't know what to say."

Flor asked bluntly. "Are you going to get better?"

"Yes!" That was the moment! Yes she would get better!

"Good. Henry has just arrived."

"What! How?"

"I sent that letter days ago – I've been dying to show it to you."

"Oh Flor! It's too much for me to say." She turned away crying.

"Happy Minda?"

"Yes! But I've forgotten how to ride happiness."

"Delphia should be here by tonight. Shall I fetch Doreen?"

"Delphia! You've delivered me Flor. I'm so..."

"I promised to look after you. Doreen will be here in a minute."

"Flor! Do you mean it! Is Henry really here?"

"Yes. I've asked him to rest and let you make yourself beautiful."

"Now you're at it! I am not beautiful!"

"Yes you are Minda. A little bent in the face but behind that mask there's a wicked smile waiting to trap any man. Come on darling – give me a wicked smile."

"You win Flor. Only because I'm poorly mind you." Now her grin was genuine.

"Oh – Er! In that case I better get out before you clout me!" He grinned.

"Good to see you're getting the colour back in your cheeks Minda."

"You put it there! It's alright. Help me out of bed and give me a nice hug.

When Henry and the Collector had arrived at Bartonbry quay Christopher had diplomatically suggested he should stay at an inn or with the Collector of Bartonbry so as to let Henry deal with personal matters. Henry refused. "You know a bit about Lord Levendale – We all call him Mr. Bob – He is part of Minda's family now and his support and steady guidance was really precious to Minda. She's eighteen, I'm only twenty-one. Flor her closest servant is the same age as me. She needs uncles. I introduce you as Mr. Chris! Remember she never had a proper family."

"I have shared a couple of bottles with Bob and he told me many things. In truth Henry I wanted an excuse to come here and see for myself."

"I'm pleased you did Sir. You have been like a second father to me these last two days and shown me real drawing."

When they arrived at the castle they were made welcome by the gatehouse. The phrase 'A Bartonbry welcome' was already widespread across the Kingdom but they had never expected it to be so practical. Their packs were carried for them and the smartly uniformed guard politely asked if they had a pleasant journey and please to ask any of the castle staff for any help with anything.

"Were you expecting us?" Asked Henry.

"Yes sir. Mr. Flor said to be on the lookout for a lanky man with yellow hair that speaks like him. He said you might be with a lady."

"The young lady of the Duchess' age should arrive in the next few hours with a young man with black side-whiskers. He will be very saddle-sore – They are riding all the way from Lostnock today. He is Tom. She is Delphia. Both are Minda's jewels."

"Thank you sir."

"I don't want to tell you your duty but the very moment they arrive at the gate send word inside."

"Thank you sir."

The collector said "I've heard of this 'Bartonbry welcome' and now I've experienced it for myself already I feel at home."

"Thank you sir. It's my home too. It used to be a place of cold spite and anger but Her Grace fixed that for us."

"What's your name?" Asked the Collector?

"Mark Foster Sir?"

"Thank you Mark. We all need homes. I see now more than I did a minute ago."

"Here we are. Harry take these packs. Harry will look after you now gentlemen."

Brand beat Lucky by about two seconds to greet them. Henry introduced the Collector as 'Mr. Chris' and explained that he would vouch for him as a substitute 'Mr. Bob' – But with a wife that was the opposite of Steela.

"How is she?" Asked Henry.

"Flattened but Flor is with her now telling her you're her. That will raise her up."

"Couldn't Delphia come?" Asked Lucky.

"We came by boat. She and Tom are riding. They should be here by tonight."

"Tom!" Lucky's surprise caught him out.

Henry explained to Mr. Chris "Tom is Minda's sweetheart. It really isn't me Mr. Chris. I'm not going to be the next Duke of Avel."

"I admit I had wondered Henry." Mr. Chris smiled and raised his eyebrows as if to say 'but you're good enough if you want to be.'

"So is she just weak or seriously ill?" asked Henry.

"Seriously weak." answered Lucky. "She collapsed in tears and lost all interest in everything. Completely. Not just for an hour of swirling despair but complete drowning blank."

Brand said "We're lucky we have a lady called Doreen who Minda appointed as the castle steward – our Mistress Marlene. And we have a Lewin for emergencies."

Henry's signature whistle cut across the hall. Flor ran across to them with hands in the air unmistakably overjoyed. "Progress!" He hugged Henry and whispered "She'll be alright thanks to you."

The next two hours saw four friend become five. Mr. Chris was instantly accepted, to his astonishment and bodily pleasure, as a replacement for Mr. Bob. Was it something more about the 'Bartonbry welcome' or the 'ageless-respect-for-age' that he wished he'd had when he was younger.

The next two hours saw an ugly wriggling chrysalis become a butterfly. Wooden butterfly admittedly, but already showing signs of where the paint would go on her wings.

The next two hours saw two painful travellers leading their horses creeping towards Bartonbry. Tom never wanted to see another horse in his life. At least walking wasn't quite so sore as riding but his thighs! Oooh–Arghh! Out of loyalty Delphia, even with her 'Avel boots', found every tread an agony walking alongside Tom. Eventually Tom suggested Delphia should ride. Now two people were marginally less tortured.

Whether it was because Minda's suffering was an odour throughout the castle or the Bartonbry Welcome was getting a life of its own, the guards called on Brand to see if he could provide some assistance to struggling travellers from Lostnock. Of course he could. With nearly a score of cadets and teams to hand he soon detailed two teams to take hastily made carry-chairs off down the Lostnock road. So Delphia and Tom arrived at Bartonbry on cushions – something to tell their children no doubt. In the dusk many men and boys were flying around like bees. At the town gatehouse they were greeted by what appeared to be commander of the town watch. At the castle gatehouse they were met by a uniformed troop who drew their swords on either side of them like ribs. Delphia had been trained to deal with praise but Tom felt like the tail on the winning horse. He watched Delphia clear the hurdles of protocol for both of them and hoped that a fraction of her superiority rubbed-off on him.

Finally within the castle itself Doreen was waiting to steal Delphia away without discussion. Tom was left with Henry and Lucky.

"Hows the/"

"/Don't ask Henry. Sorer than sore. You came by boat you bastard."

"Delightful..." Henry embraced Tom. "Well done to you mate. You looked after Delphia."

"No she looked after me."

"Well then go back by boat."

"I will!"

"I'll see her home. I'm on my horse three or four days every week so I get hardened. You did really well to manage forty miles."

"How did they know to carry us the last two miles?"

"Because I told them you'd be saddle-sore and they did the rest. Bartonbry is like – Oh I don't know – um – your mother and your father looking after you."

"Um – Whatever that means. I'm grateful. But I'll walk or sail back."

"Who says you're going back Tom?"

"Henry!" Tom's fears flared-up. "She's going to marry me!"

After a moment Lucky said "Why not Tom?"

"I'm not..."

"It's alright Tom." said Lucky "She's hasn't decided to marry you. At this minute she's very weak and just needs warm people to blanket her. As she gets better she will find the tickle of those blankets and snuggle back hoping for a smile. She really needs you and Delphia. You know her – she's always clear in her thought so we all catch up days later. Well now she is like a string with more knots in than you can imagine. Doreen has told us not to pull at any strand else we make the knots tighter but I'm sure holding her hand will untie a lot of those knots."

"I guess the ladies are talking amongst themselves and we will see them later."

"Yes. Come and meet our new friend the Tax Collector from Lostnock – We call him Mr. Chris. We'll await a summons."

Tom had never been waited on by servants or shown to a room prepared specially for him with a man-servant to help him wash.

"You're not the first to arrive here with saddle-sores Sir. Let me help you with balm and linen dressing Ssir."

Tom was unprepared for the size of the castle, the confidence of the staff and ease with which he was looked after. He was dreaming of course. Nobody would treat an apprentice blacksmith like this in real life. Owwww! Saddle-sores in a dream!

"Shall I shave you now Sir? The Duchess said particularly to see your side whiskers were perfectly trimmed Sir."

It was a dream! Being shaved by royal command. "Did she say anything else?" asked Tom.

"Not to frighten you and if you were frightened not to let you escape Sir."

"I don't know which way is up! I'm just a smith."

"And she's just a girl Sir. If you get mixed up with rich women they will expect you to wash behind the ears and be smart. All the castle staff have to wear a working livery now."

"All I have are my road clothes. You're smarter than I am."

"If I may be so bold Sir– I think you could see the Duchess wearing only your smith's apron and you'd be welcome. She's been very badly sad but news of your arrival has been strong medicine."

"I'll do my best."

"We all do here Sir."

By the time the alert to go to dine two bottles had been drunk between them. As a blacksmith Tom was given a quart jug of water with every cup of wine. He appreciated their friendly attention as he'd hardly ever drunk wine. The men were shown their places then Doreen came in and welcomed the visitors.

"Mr. Chris – Welcome. Thank you for bring young Henry. I hope you don't mind us being on first names – We all do it here now."

He kissed her hand. "They tell me you are steward Mistress Doreen. I wish I could manage my modest house half as well as you do this castle. I have been welcomed with friendship and served with care and respect. Thank you."

"Minda has told me a lot about you Henry. I know she wished you could help her with the figures of the dukedom but she respected your bond of service to Mr. Chris."

"There is too much world for all men together to measure Mistress Doreen but not enough love for one man to span a single woman." They all looked at him. Henry being a poet! "Have I said anything wrong?"

Flor said. "That's very poetical Henry."

Brand said. "Come on Henry. Tell us her name."

Doreen intervened "I'm sure Henry will tell you in his own time." Henry tried to kiss her hand in the same way as Mr. Chris but she gave his hand a little tug and clasped him and winked at Mr. Chris. "He'll be wanting increased pay to support a family soon Mr. Chris." Henry blushed.

"Tom!" said Doreen. "You are our special guest of honour tonight. Thank you for bringing Delphia and thank you for coming to see Minda. I know you mean a lot to her. I know it must be a strain for you Tom but from the moment you came through the castle gates you are one of us. We don't say each man in his right place but each place should have the right man or woman."

"My duty is to make Minda better. I have a present from all the smiths. Your hospitality is welcome but please don't be false with me. I'm a smith not a poet or lord." Everyone was caught out by this cold shower on their picnic.

At this moment the door was fully opened and... ! Two giggling girls in jewelled gowns and headdresses and bracelets and smiles appeared. It was more confusing and gigglesome because Minda was trying to get through the doorway while carrying Delphia in her arms. Eventually a combination of sideways steps and extra close holding got them through. Nobody had anything to say except Minda.

Mr. Chris recognised Minda from Lostnock easily enough and sketched this magnificent and symbolic picture in his head. Illness behind the door... family or why not! future ahead... bearing a happy burden with a happy smile. He must paint it! Minda focussed on Tom. She gently put Delphia down then directly and completely and singly and powerfully kissed Tom. Mr. Chris wanted to paint this as well but this time didn't know where to start. Power and innocence? Strength and Love? Predator and prey?

Tonight everyone was pleased to reach this camp. Mr. Chris loved the ambiance and was at ease with the beating heart of the castle. Henry was happy for it to be recognised that he could manage his own affairs. Tom was smothered by everything but realised it was genuine affection. Flor and Brand were relieved to see Minda getting up. Lucky wondered at his luck and renewed his acquaintance with Delphia who was overjoyed to be a pretty girl for the evening. Paul confided in Doreen that he'd assumed responsibility while Minda was incapacitated and felt confident.

"We all have Paul. I'm sorry I haven't had more time to help you".

"You were the busiest. I'm so proud to have your trust mistress. I pray for you every day."

"Thank you. I'm so lucky to have people like you Paul."

"You're an inspiration mistress. When I have a problem I say to myself 'what would Doreen do'."

"Not what would Minda do?"

"Um – Mostly you."

The unusual table arrangement with the two female heads of Minda and at the other end Doreen and Delphia in the middle made for a relaxed party where who was higher up the table didn't signify. Everyone knew that the Doreen was solid gold when it came to keeping the mill pointed to the wind. Everyone knew Minda was a good head of a family but lacked a really tiny part that a Lord needs. Tonight that part – the tough hide that takes criticism from the whole family – was out of bounds for

everyone. Minda was uncertain how to deal with Tom as their relationship had never been agreed – not even by a form of flexible words. It was more of a hammer blow for both of them. She had been dazzled by the fountain of sparks and instinctively struck to catch him. All in the space of a breath.

Opposite Tom Mr. Chris was enjoying the phenomenon of Minda and was consciously trying to be a broker between these extremes of social status. He was happy and soon happily drunk – This was one of those magical evenings that could never appear in dreams. How strange that mistress Doreen had said he was bringing Henry here? She must know the true relationship so why had she said it? Presumably as two elders sharing one of those private jokes that contained an arrow of truth. Perhaps he wanted to look after Henry as his son. But Henry didn't need his help. He turned his attention to Delphia who was full of Lostnock gossip to please him. He tried to be interested and knew he ought to be professionally but in his mind he was turning Delphia into a goose tempting passers-by in Lostnock with her fine plumage and calm self assured motion marching about the counter of a shop in Lostnock examining the customers with the most optimistic expression that geese can have.

Henry swung between nudging Tom with encouragement and asking him about the ride from Lostnock then, realising his gaffe, trying to find something else to talk about. For Tom the distance between Lostnock and Bartonbry was – to put it bluntly – everything on the inside of his legs from one ankle to the other including the bits in the middle were a different sort of agony. Minda physically couldn't hug him from where she sat and as hugging wasn't an option she held his hand and smiled.

At the bottom end of the table Flor, Brand, Lucky and Paul took their lead from Doreen's alert contentment.

After the main meal Henry fetched the two bottles from Mr. Bob and presented them to Minda with all Mr. Bob's love.

"I have something for you too." said Tom. He took a pouch from his belt and began to redden knowing everyone's eyes were upon him. "I dare not touch it. Here you are Minda."

"Untie the cords for me please Tom."

"Oh sorry." He fully blushed and started sweating. He handed over the opened pouch. Minda tipped the contents onto the table. It was a small black velvet purse. Whatever was inside made a clunk as it fell onto the wood. "Mrs Jiller embroidered the star and the three smith's faces looking up at it."

"That's so lovely Tom. I wish I was back in Lostnock. Ha! That's square faced head Jiller, Thredvald with the eyebrows and Pod with white hair on the edges of his bald patch. They're so small you can hardly see them but I know which is which. I wish I could stitch like that. Can I look inside?" Tom was already struggling and this question was beyond him. Minda tipped the contents onto the table. It was a ring on a silver chain. Black and silver steel – She knew it must be iron and bright-steel twisted together – but wouldn't know how to start forging it. She held it up to show it. "It's black and white twisted."

"They said you'd know what it was made from." said Tom.

Her jaw dropped. "Me! Star-iron! A ring. Oh Tom it's more precious than the biggest ruby." She held his gaze, then his hand, then got up and stood behind him. She couldn't resist brushing his side whiskers as she placed her hands gently over his chest to possess him.

"The silver chain is from me." The earth turned a minute in a second. Tom was bright red. "They say this is the best token of their love they can do and you must get better."

Delphia said "Did Johnny, Thred and Pod make it together?"

"Yes." said Tom.

"Thank you for the silver chain Tom." She couldn't bring herself to leave Tom and kept her hands folded over his chest enjoying his closeness. "Thank you all for looking after me when I'm weak. I shall try to get strong again." Still she couldn't release Tom. "Thank you to my visitors for kicking me out of bed."

Doreen said "Nobody kicked you out of bed Minda. You got up yourself. Come here – Leave dear Tom alone! Show me the ring." It was heavy and smooth and the black and white twists met in a little knot with a tiny pearl in the centre. She put her arm around Minda's waist "Only you could wear this ring. Go on special one – see if it fits." It was a bit too large for even Minda's huge fingers. "That silver chain was a good idea Tom." Doreen mimed fiddling with the clasp to Delphia who stood up to help Minda.

Delphia unclasped a flashing gold necklace of jewelled butterflies from behind Minda then replaced it with the thin string of silver chain and loose ring dangling haphazardly. Lucky struggled to find a nice thing to

say about the ring. "Oh I see now! The pearl is the North Star as in the song. It's not a diamond because that would be cold and hard. The pearl is soft and warm."

Doreen said "You had us all worried Minda. Try to grow up a little more slowly. A day or two won't make a difference. I tell you what. Why don't you get some fresh air before bed time and show Tom round your castle?"

"Yes mistress."

"You see Tom. Once in a while Minda does as she's asked. Go on. Don't rush – she's been in bed a week."

"I'll not be rushing mistress. My legs and – er my legs are sore and stiff."

Doreen whistled for Arthur. He appeared in a few seconds in his court suit and made an exaggerated bow – twice to make sure none of the company were left out. "Fetch a lamp and then make sure the Duchess isn't interrupted as she glides like a moonbeam round her castle."

When Minda and Tom had left nobody wanted to say what they were thinking. Doreen called the servants to chase the fire and move the table back. Chairs were carried away and replaced by low padded benches covered with fine cloth. Flor explained that Minda had seen Italian furniture in Melbun and had spent hours with the craftsmen of Bartonbry to make something like it that suited her and them. He showed them various features each was supposed to be based on an animal. Look at the carved feet and a padded head at one end and a tail-like arm-rest at the other. These were experiments and the upholstery was just woven cloth but the best ones would be embroidered. There was a tiger with orange and brown stripes. A chestnut horse with a low padded head half arm-rest and half cushion. A bear with real bearskin and clawed feet. A small pink pig was for a child. Flor told them that there were plans for a whole farm-yard for children. The trouble was, as Flor explained and as they found out, the joints in the woodwork gave too much so it always creaked and wobbled as if about to collapse. They are working on it."

Mr. Chris was captivated by the idea of representing the essence of animals in wood and cloth and horsehair without trying to sculpt them as a whole. Henry could see instantly how the business would blossom. Whoever really had the idea was a genius. Henry asked "Who's idea was it to have farmyard animals for children?"

"Arthur's" said Paul. "He got me to ask for the pig. His mother is a pig farmer."

"We'll he's cleverer than he knows. People will pay anything to please their children so long as it's in the guise of showing how wealthy they are. Bartonbry could sell hundreds every year of farmyard furniture then the adults would have to have their own at five times the price. Gold. Gold. Gold!"

Doreen quietly asked Flor to fetch the golden dagger the King had given Arthur at Christmas. This was a good time to lance a boil.

Delphia decided to discover something about Paul. "Come and sit next to me Paul." He obeyed. Delphia whispered "Minda tells me you are as solid as a rock but have yet to warm in the sunlight. Those were her words."

He hesitated. "In honesty she is right. This is the only family I've known and only since Christmas. Before then I was brought up by the Abbey to distrust all women and families. A smile from a brother was all the praise I could ever expect and a smile from a woman was a trapdoor to the fiery gates of Hell."

Delphia hesitated for a second then took the risk. "I'm already spoken-for so there's no danger in giving me a little squeeze is there? Come on. Put your arm round my waist... ..There! ...Now give me a little kiss on the cheek. ...Oh you naughty man!" She smiled and kissed him back. Slowly she started to wonder if there wasn't a magic love-spell around Minda. "See that wasn't evil was it."

"That's what I'm worried about. There is only one Heaven."

"I don't understand Paul."

"If I can be caught by your lovely – soft – gorgeous – exciting – sparkling – pricking kiss then what's to stop me being caught by a hundred other women?"

"Nothing! – I hope. Just because you kiss someone doesn't mean your soul is stolen."

"Well you've stolen my heart Delphia."

"I think Minda stole it first!"

"So she did."

"Why is your heart special? Minda can steal anything she wants."

"She gave it back."

"But she was alive to give it back."

"She told you?"

"Of course. Girls gossip about their boyfriends – and murderers. Didn't you know?"

"I would never gossip if I had a girlfriend. It would be too precious to me."

"You will – I hope. Um. You see how Minda just got knotted. Where every day was something to worry about rather than yet more possibilities to explore – she told me that herself in the end. She said she was with you all and all of you were with her but black and white wouldn't stay where they were supposed to be. She couldn't talk to you and you couldn't talk to her. Well I'll be the visitor that kicks you out of bed and you can find a few women and perhaps a wife."

Paul sat stunned. "Miss Delphia. You are like the wind blowing past a windmill with no sails set. I know you are a warm and steady wind but today I do not turn."

"Don't worry Paul. If it took somebody with Minda's strength and years of experience tweaking side-whiskers to recover then it may take you longer."

Doreen had called Mr. Chris over to sit beside her. "Thank you again for bringing Henry Christopher."

"I didn't bring him. He would have come on his own."

"But you brought him anyway."

"I don't see what you mean."

"Henry is precious and valuable – yes I know why – but he's still young and brittle. You chose to share a father and son week together. You're finding out things about him you didn't know and also showing him things he's only now old enough to begin to appreciate."

Mr. Chris collected the threads of this together and they made sense. "I suppose I did. But I came for a change not to teach Henry about the facts of life."

"I think he knows them but aren't there windows in the wall between father and son where they can talk?"

"Mistress Doreen you have just painted me a picture of a place I have never seen but I have been there."

"Will you come riding with me tomorrow Christopher?"

"Yes my lady."

"I'm only the steward – Not your lady."

"I know you're hand that rocks the cradle that is this castle. You're my lady. Sweet and clever. If I had a silver chain on me I would give it to you now."

Flor returned with a linen bag. Doreen called for their attention. "All of you listen and watch. Tom is our Minda's must-have man. I am so proud of you all to make him welcome but you cannot weld air and feathers. You all saw the value of that gold necklace. Each one of the stones in those butterfly wings would have paid for Tom's silver chain a hundred times over yet that chain must have cost him more than he can afford. Bless him! How humiliated can he be? Saddle sore when all of us are horse riders. Delivering all his savings in a simple silver chain to be smothered by casual riches he could never imagine. Bless him. And we can't pay him back without deeply wounding him." She opened Flor's bag and showed them the golden jewelled knife. "This is what the King presented to Little Arthur because his wooden sword had been taken away. It's a present to Minda of course but look at the stones and the pearls. Look at the gold. Look at the workmanship." She handed it round. "Go on hold it. Think how much one of those rubies would buy. A house? A hundred false hearts? Sapphires so pure! Remember this was a gift of the moment. I couldn't earn one of those stones in ten years and I'm the steward of the castle!"

Lucky had guessed something like this was coming a fraction of a second ahead. "Doreen. If somebody said would I have you or that golden dagger I would say I would have you without hesitation." There was a chorus of 'And mes'. "And I mean it! What good is a golden dagger to me."

4 Happy Monday

On Monday morning Brock, Jed, Espice, messenger Swift and two servants set off for Melbun as the abbey clock struck nine. Espice had asked if, as he was travelling to Melbun also, could he join Brock's party. Brock accepted on the condition that he carried no weapon. As he explained, having a stranger and foreigner who was a spy would keep them awake with spots of worry if he was armed. In return he promised Jed would look after him and he could of course have his weapons back when they reached Melbun. Espice was now well educated in the iron honesty of Bartonbry and accepted. Jed and Swift rode ahead while

Espice and Brock talked about all things. Brock had never left the country of his birth so how was Lanconia different and where else had Jean been? The promise of sun and grapes made Brock wish he'd had a chance to travel when younger and he told Jean so. The hills they were already climbing were small compared to some in foreign lands, they might be passable for only six months of the year, and then they were a week of travel on each side with two or three days amongst the rocks and gorges where the snow might be all around with very little shelter. "Go by boat or send a messenger is my advice." said Jean. "This road is an easy three days at this time of year for us. River, Lostnock to Ravengap by road and then river to Melbun in winter."

"I'm pleased I sent Eve ahead by waggon. She's not used to riding in all weathers."

"I think she'll walk most of the way. The road is not smooth."

"I brought her boots they call 'Avel' now. Look even I am wearing them. They are good for riding and walking. They are made for a woman really. Hard sole with a high heel. They are odd to walk in to start with but you soon find a built-up heel gives you a grip that the normal flat sole doesn't – and if you're lazy it slots into the stirrup."

"I must ask you Brock. I've been told how you hate concealed weapons – do your boots have a knife-pocket."

"Yes Jean. But I have put a big carrot in it for my horse at lunchtime." They laughed. "So what changes have you seen in Bartonbry since you were here last Jean?"

They were both aware that Jean had never admitted to visiting Bartonbry before. Brock guessed from Jean's knowledge of the route. Jean had to decide between being caught out lying to his friend or admitting what wasn't a crime. "It's five years since I was here Brock. There was no reason for me to return."

The moment of stress was over. "But what changes? You're an outsider it is easier for you to see."

"It was a mushroom then."

"Mushroom? I don't understand."

"Grey or unpleasantly gooey. Feeding off dead wood. Soon gone. Easily picked. Growing in dark places. In short a blight on the kingdom. Lanconia needs to know about your country to protect ourselves but Bartonbry wasn't a threat."

"What about now? Is it a threat?"

"Yes and no. Or should that be no and yes. Either way if the Duchess was violently disposed against Lanconia she would go to the King and tell him and in a year or two there would be war for who knows what reason. But I believe she wants to trade and has no reason to be make enemies with Lanconia. I wish I could have had an audience but I saw how the lowliest servant protected her."

"Who Arthur?"

"Him yes – but I am a spy so I tried other ways."

"Thank you Jean. You make me very happy. You tested the castle and the castle won."

"It makes me happy too Brock. There is no other place like this on earth. You ask the spies to spy but every poorly paid servant blocks spies. Is this Minda's doing?"

"Yes. She wins hearts – Like I think Bartonbry has won yours."

"Ha! You're right my friend."

"If Bartonbry was a mushroom then what is it now?"

"Hmm. I would say a seed or nut that is sending out shoots and roots."

"What sort of plant do you think?"

"Um. I don't know Brock. I don't think it is formed into anything yet."

"You're right I think Jean. Our Minda is finding new strengths all the time."

"And she passes them on."

"How do you mean?"

"You. You have better shoes and a sort of hospitality that embarrasses me. I wouldn't give my sword to anyone else but when you asked the sense of it was so clear."

"You can have it back now if you want Jean."

"No! Let's make young Poolen sweat on my behalf. Even if the Italians attack I'm sure you would die to protect me."

"Are the Italians your enemies?"

"Not at the moment but we are – um – rivals."

"Best we make friends with them then."

"See! That's what I mean!"

"What?"

"Minda passes her strengths on. 'Best make friends with them then' Isn't that what your duchess would say?"

"I suppose so. Hmm – I'm sure you're right Jean."

Doreen decreed that Monday would be a holiday for everyone. There was to be no riding for the youngsters but the weather was pleasant so why shouldn't the oldsters trot over to Willows and see what was happening with the Black Team. Paul and Lucky occupied a no-man's land of being neither young or old. Paul had found new energy and purpose during Minda's illness and with Doreen's approval had a partition erected to give him a lockable private office. He made sure Brock knew Minda was much better and sent a nice note to Brother Caxton. Doreen found him with Tomlyn in his new office.

"Good morning gentlemen. Still at work I see. I commend you but asked you to treat today as a holiday."

"Sorry mistress. Francis just came with an idea for using the soldiers and cadets and then he started showing me how to organise my business better."

"You know what Minda does for the smiths don't you? She finds them wives. Francis you've been married to your books for too long. Paul you're a sweet man who is going to have a lot more pressure. Lucky also needs a lady to sooth his doubts and chase him round the kitchen instead of him hiding in the parlours of the inns. I have sent a message to the clothier that you three are to visit him together this morning to be measured for fine suiting and fine lesser clothing at Minda's expense. You will also get a wage increase – Will double be alright? But there is a condition. I have sought out three suitable ladies from the town and you are to dine with them at the private parlour of the Castle Inn at my expense today." She looked at them. Francis had gone white. "Is something the matter Francis?"

"I'm not right for marrying. I'm happy in my own little lodgings working on my book."

"Book? That sounds interesting Francis."

"It's just a manual of business management mistress."

"I'm sure it will be excellent. When can I read it?"

"Er. I've had to change it quite a bit since the Duke died."

"Good. I will give you two cadets to discuss the first chapter with tomorrow. But today my men are going to be fighting-off women. I've told them to give no quarter! I'll leave it to you to break the news to Lucky for me."

Doreen, Mr. Chris and Brand rode the easy eight miles to Willows. To any observer it would look like lord and lady followed by servant. Brand was happy to be the guard and took it seriously as good practice long since delegated to cadets. When they approached the village Brand suggested they should turn the tables on the Black Team.

"Why don't we stop at the inn for some lunch and send a rumour to her house that we are here. That will be a conundrum for them."

"Why do we want to be a conundrum for this 'Black Team'?" asked Mr. Chris.

Doreen answered. "Minda's training and experience in the tax Office is that the best results come from intelligence of the area. I don't know if it's the same for the Collector but the Black Team is being trained in finding things out without being found out."

Mr. Chris took time to digest this. "The smuggling side need this. We don't. Instead we need people like Henry who can spot where the books presented to us do not match the picture seen out of the office window."

Brand said "This is more of a conundrum because they will know we have let them know."

"You've lost me." said Mr. Chris.

"Suppose I sent you a message saying I was going to burgle your house at a certain time. Why would I do that?. To upset you? Warn you?"

"I don't know. It would be preposterous."

"Exactly. But by watching what you did I would know for next time. Did you not hear about that lawyer in Lostnock that Minda persecuted? She got rogues to say to his face in the street how pleased she was that his house hadn't burned down. It cost her one shilling over a week."

"That was evil."

"It was wasn't it. Legal evil. She knows how to fight the lawyers."

"You make me fight a shadow."

"Exactly. And one day I may not be a shadow. We are teaching these boys and girls to live in the shadows."

"Girls as well!"

"Three of them!" Said Doreen. "And they are more clever than a nest of magpies."

"Wherever I look round here there is cleverness."

"We're on holiday" said Doreen "Let us relax and see what they do."

Minda, Delphia, Flor, Henry and Tom spent the morning walking round the town and castle. Minda liked having Tom on her arm. She took him to the bootmaker who now specialised in Avel boots and had Tom measured. She asked Flor to see that Tom and Henry were measured for suits at the clothier while she and Delphia went to the goldsmith to order four gold rings. Two wedding rings for Delphia and Cain and two thinner for Minda and Tom. The girls had discussed the impossibility of Tom being married to Minda. When Delphia told how Tom was reluctant that gave Minda the excuse to sadly solve the problem with separation.

"I'll give him one ring as a token of my first love and wear the other myself."

"That's the sweetest thing Minda."

"If you send the other men of your family I'll see they are suited as well. Have you noticed the black and white diagonal striped seam down Flor's suit. That's the Avel colours. Just like that star-iron ring black and white twisted together. Everyone wants a suit with that black and white stripe but I've told the clothiers they need my permission. I told them to tell the clothiers in Lostnock and Melbun that if people wanted stripes they should have the colours of their lord not mine."

"But black and white are perfect."

"Isn't it fun having what everyone else wants but can't have."

"Why don't you come back to Lostnock with us Minda? We can go down the river according to Henry and it's not much slower."

"I can't I have so much to do."

"I think your servants can cope for a week. Everyone will be pleased to see you."

"I'll think about it."

"Oh come on Minda. You know a rest will do you good."

"I'll ask Doreen. She's been brilliant."

For the Black Team Monday morning was devoted to revision. When news came that Mistress Doreen was in the village Allesandro asked them what they should do.

"I'd like to go and see her." said Maggie. "She's deliberately ignoring us to see what we'll do."

"Well done Maggie. Are you ready to go and see her for us?"

"Er. I thought we might all go?"

"Is everyone happy with that?" Asked Allesandro. They knew him well enough by now to know he was asking them to think carefully and search for possible flaws in their plan.

James said "Bait in a trap? Who is she with? Why do they want us to come to them?" This met 'ahs' of realisation. "Maybe the report is false."

"How are you going to find out?" asked Allesandro.

"We could sneak through the wood."

"Wouldn't Brand have thought of that if he's seriously expecting to trap you? And you didn't answer my question."

"We could send a servant. It's only four minutes each way."

Maggie said. "I don't mind going to the village. I wasn't worried about traps and I'm not now."

"Will you take a precaution or just assume it is all bluff."

"If somebody wants to follow thirty paces behind they can."

"So that's settled then?" Asked Allesandro using his 'are you sure' voice again.

By now Jane had worked out the possible situations for herself. "If Maggie goes then we have to decide what to do if she doesn't come back or send a message. We know Mistress Doreen doesn't need our help otherwise she would have asked for it. So let us all make a social visit if she won't visit us. Like Maggie said she's teasing us."

"Alright then off you go. No tricks. I'll follow in a few minutes with a servant."

None of the Black Team could better this plan. When they'd gone Allesandro called for a servant and told him to bring his horse down to the village in ten minutes time. "Mistress Doreen won't have walked so I may ride a way back with her. This week we will have the Cadets learning about kitchens and stables and all serving duties. If I'm away make it easy for them but keep them at it until dusk."

The three horses in the yard beside the Bridge Inn gave a good clue to where Mistress Doreen might be. By right of being the most determined in the previous discussion Maggie was ambassador. The innkeeper didn't need asking, he indicated the private parlour. She went in carefully.

"Please Mistress it is Maggie Ulex from the Black Team."

Mistress Doreen smiled and said to Brand. "See I told you it would be Maggie."

"The others are here as well Mistress."

"That's nice. I shall come out to speak to you in a moment. I'll just finish this lovely fish."

After this anti-climax Maggie reported back to the others. Allesandro sauntered into the village square and having got Maggie's information went inside leaving the Black Team with nothing to do. Eventually they drifted to the little quay and inspected the boats and nets.

Eight miles away in the private parlour of the Castle Inn three widows were eyeing up three bachelors with Juliana, the innkeeper's wife, as goddess of love acting on Doreen's instructions. The men had been groomed for this meeting with doom while the ladies needed no encouragement. Doreen added Little Arthur as page to stir the pot which he did nicely without knowing it. It was now general whispered knowledge that Arthur was the old Abbot's son and everyone knew he had won the King's heart with his innocent cheek. Arthur would soon be a young nobleman. In the meantime his irrepressible energy and ignorance of subjects adults found difficult was put to good use to make the dinner lively. On the way there Paul had explained that Mistress Doreen had told them to take time off work to meet nice ladies and see if they wanted to get married. As a convenient alternative to talking to the opposite sex Arthur was included in the conversation and soon made it known that when he was old enough he was going to marry Ann the wheelwright's daughter. This was followed by a huckster's patter describing the good points of the men. "Paul always reads to me at night and is teaching me to read. Francis adds up hundreds of pounds to the exact penny and makes me practice sums. Lucky sings nicely and has trim ankles." This made everyone laugh. They were reminded of Lucky's satirical portrayal of 'the abbot's tart' at Christmas as with Arthur as the Abbot they toured the town by cart. They laughed more and let the wine take them to a land of ease, happiness and good company. When the table was cleared and moved away Juliana explained how the premises were too small for the increased number of visitors and they would be expanding by taking over the lease from the weaver next door. Arthur was sent to find the dance master Solomon Gruze and a musician or two. In the meantime a bold Francis began telling jests. The men were astonished. Francis jesting! Not just one or two but a flood. Plays with words, silly situations, the foolishness of the people of Doddershall and clerics getting tied in knots by simpletons.

Minda discovered about what would be forever known as 'Doreen's tryst' from a flying Arthur on his way back to the Castle Inn. She was about to join in with the entertainment when Delphia suggested that perhaps they were better off being left alone. "You would be like a pike in a pool of minnows. Let them live their own lives for once."

"It wasn't me that arranged it! It's not me interfering in their lives."

"You would be. Let them have their fun. Buy them rings to bless them but it's their own magic."

"I'm an expert! Brawter, Thredvald and Cain. I can forge man and woman together."

"No you can't. That's a legend. Remember you're a legend! All you did was brought the two together they did the rest themselves."

"But the fire of love needs a spark. I carry that."

"Everyone carries the spark – It's finding the tinder that matters."

"I still want to go and see them."

"Let me go instead! Let Tom go instead."

"Why not me?"

"Because you'll be trying to light a fire that's already burning or ashes."

"But I'm the Duchess!"

"Does that make you right always? Come on Minda. I know inside you're upset about losing Tom but if you come with us to Lostnock you can have another day or two with him." Minda tried to hide her face, an impossibility in the open. "Be brave Minda. When you're in your chamber you can have a cry. Come on. Come with me."

At Willows Brand and Mr. Chris were released while Doreen quizzed Allesandro about the Black Team. Naturally Mr. Chris asked the Black Team about the stone barges and quarrying. It was another of those 'we could have thought about this for ourselves' moments. They tried to make up for their lapse by offering to find out, but Mr. Chris kindly told them that he was used to discovering things out for himself and Mistress Doreen wouldn't be pleased if he'd stolen them. "Tell her I will be back within the hour. Will you come with me Brand or did you want to test these rascals?"

"I'll test them in due course Mr. Chris. I am your servant unless any of you have something important to tell me now."

Maggie said. "We're alright thank you Mr. Brand for asking. We are looking forward to showing you what we have learned already."

"Maggie my dear you remind me of my mother. When I could smell something lovely cooking in the oven she would say 'the best time to eat it would be in good time'."

To fill in the time Rachel wanted to practice rowing. She asked at the first convenient cottage and soon got a tutor. Everyone now knew that these youngsters were the duchess' protégées and there would be a monetary reward. Once the boat was in the water Rachel insisted on dealing with the awkward oars herself. It was quite simple but with occasional complications. Those swirling green holes off the end of the oars were interesting but getting the boat where she wanted and pointing in the right direction it needed more concentration. The river had its own swirls and breaths that needed attention or you'd be rowing across rather than along in. She was sure it would come in time but today she would pay attention to a penny lesson. It cost her another halfpenny to allow her to swap places with her tutor and have James rowing. He'd been watching from the bank and so his lesson was more about degree than basics. He tried going as fast as he could and found the speed where Rachel in the back got an oar-full of water all over her in his haste. She shouted but wasn't really angry.

Back on the quayside Mistress Doreen had emerged from the Bridge Inn and was showing an interest in each of the Black Team in turn with a little private arm-in-arm walk starting with John.

"Allesandro tells me you are genius with your hands."

"Yes mistress. He is very clever."

"And so are you."

"Everyone round here is mistress. What do you want me to do?"

"That's a good question John. It show you're growing up. Um. I want you to grow up into a man with your own servants, wife and children and trade."

"What trade mistress?"

"Your real trade will be working in the dark for me, the duchess and the king. You know how the abbot tried to poison Minda and Little Arthur. There are many bad people about and it will be your duty to protect the good ones. It will be dangerous. It will need the very best people we've

got. At the moment our best people are getting older so who will take their places?"

"Me?"

"All of you. As a team. We will keep you safe for now but then you will have to keep us safe."

"What has conjuring and learning blasted Italian – sorry mistress – got to do with it?"

"That's easy John. You will have to deceive to live as a spy. We have just had a spy at Bartonbry. We detected him easily enough and made him welcome but Bartonbry is the only place on Earth that treats spies like that. The rest end up at the bottom of the river with a stone tied to their neck."

"I think I'd rather be back on the docks at Melbun."

"Well you consult with your other team members about that. If you're convinced then I will see that you return to the docks. It will be a big loss to us because Allesandro says you're one in a thousand. The other will need you."

"If you say so mistress."

"Grow up John! If there's one thing we're trying to teach you it is thinking for yourself!"

"Sorry mistress."

"Just like I learn from the duchess so you must learn from Alex."

"It's boring."

"What is?"

"Italian and sewing."

"Do you think there is a reason for Italian and sewing? Somebody as valuable as you being wasted on those things? Why?"

"I don't know mistress."

"Would we waste our time if we didn't think it worthwhile?"

"But sewing mistress?"

"If you didn't have stitches in your clothes would they be any good?"

"No mistress."

"That's not the reason we want you to sew. We want the girls to teach you to sew. Does that tell you anything John?"

"You want us to learn from the girls?"

"Yes. And they learn how to pacify restless men. Men are always restless."

"Why."

"For the same reason John. They may need that skill. Anger and action lead to things that people regret."

"I don't understand mistress but I'm sure good people like you and the duchess and Allesandro and Brand wouldn't be making each new day a new lesson without good reason."

"That's about it John. Remember what I said about the girls."

"Please mistress. Thank you for coming to see us today."

"You're welcome John. I pray for you every day. All my children died. One day I want you to walk proudly into my office brown from the burning sun of some foreign land, kiss me and give me a little gift from far away."

"I'm an orphan mistress. I will remember your request and please not to worry about me asking to go back to the docks."

"Listen to me John as we walk back. The future is a mystery. If your present is a mystery it is a good training. You will get proper reward but you must read and write."

"The girls have already showed me a bit."

"Good. See! It's not just sewing."

As the shadows began to lengthen Doreen's party set off for Bartonbry. The gentlemen trainee dancers of the castle inn saw their partners to their homes where every waist had an arm round it. Minda was packing and fretting. Flor and Henry were playing skittles in the basement. Delphia and Tom took the age-old excuse of forgotten guests who would no doubt be needed in the evening to sleep. On the steep last mile to Top the travellers to Melbun were silent except for warnings about holes in the road.

Doreen was refreshed by her day away from the Castle. Arthur's rather colourful report on the events at the Castle Inn made her more contented. Minda's recovery was continuing and the idea of a break for Minda at Lostnock was an excellent idea. According to Mr. Chris travelling by boat was restful and cut-off from the cares of the world. Just what Minda needed. The crisis with Tom seemed to have been solved. The cadets and their troops were doing fine but perhaps needed some challenges. Why shouldn't she go also? Yes she would, and get

away from Derek for a while. As Minda's illness had made them all take more responsibility so she would let go of the reins and see if the horse knew the way.

She called Flor and Brand and they discussed the next week. Who should go to protect Minda and who should keep the pressure up on the cadets?

"Flor I'm going to leave the castle and cadets with their troops in your hands. We were too hasty before but I'm sure you'll manage easily this time. I'm afraid I'll be taking Agnes to give her experience – she's grown-up in the last week. In the meantime give Minda's rooms a good airing. Lizzie knows how the best ladies live, ask her if there are improvements to be made so our duchess can live in the best style with the most convenience."

"Who will you take to guard Minda?"

"Lucky or Brand or some cadets?"

"We mustn't play games in Lostnock Doreen. There are some very nasty people with good reason to hate her and no castle to keep her safe in. I should say both Lucky and Brand. Lucky knows how to use the street criminals and emergency refuges but can't do it on his own."

"I don't like to leave you to cope alone."

"Which is more important her life or me getting in a mess here?"

Brand said "Is there a cadet we could take? Perhaps with ties to Lostnock."

Lucky replied "The Black Team would be ideal in a few month's time after some preparation but they are too raw and distracting. I can't think of any cadet that would serve a good purpose without being a worry. When Minda and me first went to Lostnock we didn't know about towns but we had a few days to adapt your solid country training. Anyway you've already got more people than can catch a ride on a stone boat. Um Nine I make it."

"Mr. Chris and Henry are going their own way. They are going to work their way back with surprise visits. Lucky and Brand could ride – she's not going to get attacked on the river. Delphia could ride that would leave me, Minda, Tom and Agnes on the boat."

"What about Paul? I know you don't want Minda to do business but you can't help it in Lostnock. Like we here are known for our welcome so the very air of Lostnock is trade. With all her properties she will get involved."

"He'll have to ride then. Brand you can be in charge of the riding party. You organise it. I'll get the boaters prepared. Flor check the boatmen are ready and tell Francis what's happening in case there is business that should be done."

That evening in the Top House Inn at Top village Brock, Jed and Jean dined together. Jed's boring day and academic training gave him an interest in learning Lanconian so the food, utensils and actions were named by Jean and repeated by Jed. "I am so used to Lanconia being scorned that this is a pleasant change. You must come to my country and be my guest."

That evening in the house overlooking Willows the Black Team were eating left-overs in the kitchen after an afternoon of manual labour. They discussed their talks with Mistress Doreen and agreed someone was looking after their every step. John said "I believe her when she says I am to become a wealthy man with my own servants but it is odd to come back and be set to serving."

That evening in the castle there was a formal feast in the great hall but the atmosphere was relaxed. The kitchens had worked hard and there was relief down the table that the duchess seemed to be better. Minstrels played, Tom was smiling, Minda's colour had returned, Flor was catching-up with Paul and Lucky. Surprisingly for someone who had just managed a crisis with great skill and good result Doreen was neither hungry or cheerful. "Maybe that fish I had at lunchtime was not fresh." was the best excuse she could provide.

That evening in the sheriff's office Robert Upton sat with Miles 'Angel' Gabriel. The day men had gone home and the night men sent out in pairs. "Remember young man drunks are a nuisance but fire is a deadly danger. Brock says you're here to learn how towns are guarded. One thing to learn is you can't be awake all day and all night to lead your men and when you are awake you will be so bored you'll wish you were asleep. Right! Come on. I'll walk round with you then I'm off to bed."

On Tuesday morning Flor saw Minda, Doreen, Agnes and Tom off from the quay in the calm first light. The laden barge was expertly poled away from the dock into the middle of the stream then with a few adjustments settled down to getting slowly smaller. Barges were like

oxen. They needed a bit of pulling but when you got them going they carried on at their own pace. A final wave then his day must continue.

5 Brock and Jed

Brock's party were well mounted and made Melbun comfortably at the end of Wednesday. Minda's house was soon looking after him. Jed went to his father's palace and Espice to the house of the Lanconian ambassador. Swift would use Minda's house as his base after delivering his messages. Now that trade at Bartonbry was perking-up it was known that the Duchess of Avel sponsored regular couriers so letters were left at her town house for dispatch as soon as her schedule allowed or as soon as the contributions of the senders would pay for a messenger.

Eve had arrived two days before by cart and was enjoying the life of a superior lady in a great city. Honorary tenants, twenty-year-old newly-weds Raysel and Richard Risket made her welcome. Raysell knew Minda's wish to grow families and there was an easy atmosphere. Brock's arrival completed a satisfied establishment of two generations.

Espice also found a welcome. The Lanconian ambassador was exceptionally pleased with his servant's progress even if it was unusual. Clearly the Italians had got a foothold which for an ambitious town and strong duchess showed Lanconia had been sleeping and something must be done to catch up.

Espice said "As they are open and friendly and cleverer than foxes might I be so bold to suggest we do likewise. I have found no animosity to Lanconia – in fact Jed the Archbishop of Melbun's son volunteered to learn Lanconian and has made good use of the journey from Bartonbry. We are making friends."

"Bartonbry, or more accurately the duchess, is taking the lead in making friends. Our first priority is to stay friendly and our second is to encourage trade."

"They say she owns half of Lostnock. I was not allowed to confirm that sir, but if true the power in her hands is enormous."

"Where there is trade there is a reluctance to fight but it generates the wealth to do so should the need arise through little jealousies. The

duchess is unmarried and perhaps we can find her a prince to share her power with."

"She is appalling ugly sir."

"But very rich. From what you and others tell me everyone loves her."

"She knows her own mind I fear and she has no reason to marry. What would she gain?"

"An heir."

"It is whispered that a serving boy called Little Arthur has been nominated."

"Ha! Little Arthur! He would make all our lives brighter. At court at Christmas he came with the duchess as a page boy and charmed the King and Queen so much he was given a Moorish golden dagger worth thousands of pounds in exchange for a wooden toy sword. He is the master of knowing fools though I suspect he doesn't know it yet. He is also the bastard son of the abbot of Bartonbry that the duchess killed. I will think about what you have so ably discovered. I have to be a friend without being a supporter. Some powerful people here are beginning to wonder if the duchess will sweep them away. As yet they have no way to bring her to heel. They worry that they may have swapped the nuisance of a few teenage tearaway boys for a teenage girl whirlwind."

Jed's unexpected arrival at the Archbishop's palace caused astonishment. His frame had filled out with muscles, his carriage was erect, his face showed complete confidence with gaze, smile and weathering. He would never have to ask for permission to speak ever again. His days of being a lolling clerk destined for holy orders were over.

"Hello father"

"Hello son. Dear Lord what has she done to you!"

"Made me a man father."

"By the look of it she's made you into a labourer. You're wearing those dreadful boots all the kids want."

"These are practical for a fighting man like me father. Look!" Jed pulled a fighting knife from the boot pocket. "I'm going to get Ulex the armourer to make me a lighter one from better steel."

"I'll decide about that!"

"Since I last wrote I've been learning to speak Lanconian and I'm invited to dine with the Lanconian ambassador tomorrow."

"So you're a statesman now as well are you? Lap dog to Lanconian traitors. I forbid it."

Jed had paid attention in Bartonbry and had thought ahead about what would happen in a confrontation. "I defy you."

"How dare you!"

"It's the youth that will make the next page in history. Your generation is already rotting. I shall go about my business. First to see mother and then to leave you."

"So she's taught you how to talk like a serpent has she! Guards! Take my son to the whipping post!"

"Oh dear father. Perhaps you should spend a month at Bartonbry learning how to manage yourself. Guards! Come here and stand to attention!... Hmm. Why don't you do up your buckles properly Travis? There was no reply. "Well Travis! – Do it up now. As for you! What's your name?"

"Welling Jed."

"Welling SIR!"

"I've seen milk maids fitter than you Welling. Get down and do ten quick press-ups." Welling looked at the Archbishop. "Look at me! Get down!"

"Come on sir. You have to go to the/ /EOUFF" Jed punched him in the stomach. "He would have done as he was told first time if he was one of my men. You need better guards. Travis! Lead on to the front gate. Get those knees up. At the double!"

When they were outside the front gate Jed spoke to a puffed-out Travis. "Please tell my mother that I love her and she will be welcome any time at the Duchess of Avel's house where I will be staying. And – " he bent until his face was a hands-breath from Travis' "don't ever let me see you looking like a goose turd again or you'll be polishing your kit with your bollocks."

[Thursday - Melbun]

Overnight at Minda's house in Melbun invitations arrived for Thaddeus Poolens, esquire and Brian Baker, knight, Sheriff of Bartonbry with his wife to attend an informal meal at the Lanconian Ambassador's residence at three of the clock. Brock's investiture wasn't until tomorrow so he decided to stroll with Eve to see what Melbun was like these days. Jed would go too after visiting parents of Cadets he knew, starting with Bob Upton's father, Head of the King's household.

"Come in Jed. Goodness you've grown sturdy. How's Bob?"

"He is healthy and trusted by the sheriff of Bartonbry to be apprentice sheriff and muster the Town watch. He's trusted by his troop not to be stupid and he's liked by the rest of us cadets. You should be very proud of him sir."

"He often writes and tells me he is learning estate management. I never thought he would do that Jed! He wanted to be a soldier."

"He will be a good soldier of the sort that knows how to use troops or raise troops quickly in time of need. He will be the one who finds the transport, weapons, food and lodgings. I'm the one who is headed for the battlefield with ruffians looking for blood."

"Yes. Your father was upset about that Jed."

"He was upset that I'm not his servant to be pushed around anymore. I don't think he's used to anyone questioning him. He will die."

"Die! What do you mean by that!"

"One day he will refuse to get out of somebody's way and they will lose patience."

"The Duchess of Avel you mean?"

"No I wasn't thinking of her. The Lanconians have a saying 'Um capitari key navygu su navy nas rocks dev sir – doh tiro antys ke possa o facer.' A captain that sails his ship onto the rocks should be shot – before he can do it."

"You are a man too now Jed. Even if that's the only bit of Lanconian you know it sounds impressive."

"I've had three days to learn."

"I wish I could learn like you youngsters. Despite what some people say it seems the duchess has done an excellent job."

"What do some people say sir?"

"That she has stolen you for her own purposes. There are many like your father. He had honestly thought what was best for you and now not only is he made to look a fool by his own child but like you say he has lost control over you. You don't care about inheriting a family fortune because the duchess has shown you how to find your own. That will make some very angry."

"Can't they see that the tree that doesn't branch will only have one leaf?"

"I have spoken with quite a few fathers and they are afraid. They wanted obedient sons and now they have cuckoos."

"The hens were sitting on their nests and hatched chicks but Minda has turned those silly chickens into baby eagles."

"Do you really call the duchess by her first name?"

"Sometimes sir. Usually 'Miss' but when we're laying in a wood together it would be Minda."

"What! Laying in a wood! What do you mean?"

"Waiting to ambush or resting out of sight. She often comes with us. You should see her blend in with the shadows so you can hardly see her even if you know she's there."

"So you're not – er – touching?"

"Yes of course. She might sleep rough with me as I'm her size. I'm the only one really strong enough to carry her any distance. She tried carrying me but only got fifty paces even though she's a right strong girl sir. We practice in the mud. I try to stick close to her unless my job is at a distance then if she's in trouble she knows she only has to whistle."

"Whistle?"

"Yes sir. When we're out we use whistles to signal. Say high-low-high which means 'I'm leading. Come to me. Follow me.' "

"Or she might smile. That says 'everything is right with the world however hard it is raining down our necks'. She actually once smiled her most wicked smile and said to me – it was in the pouring rain – 'Go on you old goat. The enemy have long gone let's have a dance in the road'. She brings sunshine does our Minda."

"Does the duchess really get muddy with you playing at soldiers?"

"Oh yes. And she's a damn good shot with arrow and throwing knife."

"Why are you learning all this fighting Jed?"

"Strange you should ask sir. Everyone in Bartonbry has been asking the same thing and so far no answer. I think it is to make us – um – I don't know – Good at doing what men should be good at."

"How do you mean?"

"Good at doing as we're told without having to be told twice. Also good at doing more than we're told not just doing as we're told."

"How do you mean?"

"I was told to be nice to the Lanconian spy but nobody told me to learn Lanconian. Now I have been learning it that makes me better and also I can see what the person who asked me to engage in the first place could see and possibly a lot more. Also I have planted seeds of friendship with Lanconia which might grow. – Who knows where?"

"Jed. I am not going to tell you what I think about your father because you might repeat it. Have I said enough?"

"You have just said too much sir. You cannot play games with me. You should say or remain silent. People that lurk in the woods are not up to good. Will you say to my face or shall I tell anyway?"

"We're both men now Jed. I've known you since you were old enough to carry your father's books. If I told you what I think of your father it would get around and do no good."

"Why? Would I tell anybody something that would do me no good?"

"No. But my words from my mouth might do me no good."

"Or they might do you a lot of good. 'Volunteer!' That's what Minda tells us. Um – Then she said 'If you are afraid to volunteer then you are in the wrong place.' Remember sir that you too have a son who will be racing the sun over the horizon. You will be judged by your children in a different court."

"Are the other cadets like you Jed?"

"Well Bob is the only other one learning Lanconian but some others are learning Italian. Most want to manage estates and money, they teach us all that. Mistress Doreen – she's the steward at the castle – shows us how to manage servants so they serve loyally. Tomlyn and his clerks show us how to use figures to watch over estates and the duchess shows us how a few boring figures can become the key to unlocking profit. She asks us questions all the time then at the end pulls out a purse of the amount of profit we might have made and pours it on the table. The next time we did that exercise she poured it out on the table first – it was a lot of money – then ignored all that gold knowing we couldn't keep our eyes off it. She's wicked that way sir."

"If accounts and trade with foreign countries is so interesting why are you determined to be a soldier?"

"She say we must be better than the rest and better at more things. I am good with weapons so I get given extra fighting practice but I know I'm only going to spend a few hours of my whole life fighting so I must do other things in between."

"What about Bob?"

"He was picked as the best organiser of troops. Joining the Town watch while the sheriff was in Melbun was something he could use to practice his organising and show everyone he was no longer a boy."

"And he's learning Lanconian as well?"

"Yes but I came from Bartonbry with the Lanconian spy so he may have some catching up to do."

"I think you may be right Jed. As my generation are writing history we have come nearly to the end of our page and soon it will be time for other chroniclers to take over."

"She says we shouldn't worry about writing history because the only history worth writing will have others crowding round to write it."

"Everything you've told me about Bartonbry and the duchess makes me regret not visiting."

"I will be returning to Bartonbry in a few days, please come with me sir. I think the duchess has appreciated being left alone to brew to her own recipe but spice like yourself will break the boredom."

"It doesn't sound like boredom to me Jed."

"It's a state of mind sir. Although I spent every waking hour of the last three days finding out about Lanconia and Lanconian I was bored with the monotony."

"I'll come then. Keep me informed. Thank you for coming. Oh and you're welcome here even if not at your father's. I shall not shoot him before he sails onto the rocks though."

"Why not?"

"I'm not on his boat."

"Oh! I see. Um."

"One more thing sir. I am due to dine with the Lanconian ambassador this afternoon. Is there anything I should know? The Sheriff asked me to ask you. I see what he means – In case there are some subjects that are not be spoken."

A servant was called in and given whispered instructions. "Like the Sheriff trusts Bob to the watch his town so I will trust you to the Lanconians. Thank you for coming Jed. Stand up and let me see you properly. You're a fine man Jed and a credit to..."

"...Shall we leave the account of credit and cost out of this for now sir?"

"Well put young Jed."

"Thank you sir." A servant came in and it was obvious that the interview was over and Jed had business elsewhere. Bob's father clasped Jed.

"You're a great man Jed. Thank you for coming."

"She also says don't volunteer unless there is someone to back you up. I will be right behind you if needed sir."

Jed was taken through back ways into the King's castle and then shown into a tiny windowless office. A short man with little black eyes in an emotionless cat's face and no neck came in. They both sat down. Jed waited to be spoken to. Despite the silence stretching into tens of seconds he said nothing.

"Good! Well done. Our Lady has taught you well. My name is Xavier. Can you guess what I do?"

"Yes sir. I can guess. But would it not be better for me to have your facts rather than my guesses?"

"Good! We have a file on all the cadets. There isn't a lot in any of them but as you will all be great men and women we might as well make a start." Jed remained silent despite the temptation to make a comment. They had done this at Bartonbry. "Good! What is your mission?"

"I don't have a mission. I have been given a week off duties at Bartonbry as a reward for hard work."

"And do you believe that Jed."

"Yes Xavier."

"Good! First names. Good!"

"I dislike your over use of 'Good!' Xavier. I have two choices which should I chose? Tell the world that you are an idiot that burbles 'good' at everything said or punch your silly head off?"

"Goo/ /Excellent! "

Jed sat back. "I'm waiting Xavier." He knew this was the way to make people uncomfortable but when had he learned it?

"I'll try not to offend you Jed. Most people appreciate compliments." Jed nearly fell into the trap but kept still and stared at Xavier. It was obvious Xavier was an intelligencer but as he'd already learned in Bartonbry spies needed to be taken out of their shadows before they could be dealt with. "I'm pleased. Very pleased. Now I'm in the Kings castle so not likely to be a foreign spy so please will/."

"/Yes you are. Where else would a foreign spy want to be?"

"You have me there Jed. I tell you what. When the duchess is between us then you will know to trust me."

"I didn't say I didn't trust you Xavier."

"No you didn't. You're right."

"But why should I?"

"Because I'm looking after Minda as much as you are. I hear you have made friends with Espice. That is good. I will want everything you can

tell me about him in writing. I hear you are invited to the ambassador's to dine this afternoon."

"I have received an invitation from him this morning as has the Sheriff. Did you want to come too?"

"Yes."

"Right then I'll ask if you can come. I'll do it now. I'll see you then Xavier." Jed stood up and went straight to the door. "Oh. Just a thought. Should I ask if the Italian ambassador can come too?" Xavier hesitated. "I will. That's how we do it Bartonbry my little friend. 'Don't think if you can't talk.' I'm sure there are lots of meanings to that. Goodbye."

When Jed had left the Chief Intelligencers' interview room Xavier sat down again. What had just happened? His skin prickled. Someone had set something alight. Jed had interviewed him not the other way round. That was a first. Jed had given him a choice between two bad things which was his job not Jed's. All he wanted to know was a bit about Bartonbry and the Lanconian agent and now he was trying to catch up with a whirlwind. If this was Minda at work she had chosen a good pupil to test him with. Well, dinner at somebody else's expense was worth putting to his credit on Jed's file. Oh Allesandro! Of course. That was the Italian connection. So was Allesandro working for the Italians as well as him? After a while he still couldn't think of a reliable way to find out.

The ambassador had adapted to Jed's wild request and made hasty rearrangements assuming he was being used by some powerful interests. The Italian ambassador and his very elegant and statuesque wife were there, as was Xavier in best court dress. Jed had no fine clothes and apologised, but as all realised he was the horse pulling their cart today so he was forgiven with smiles. Brock and Eve shared the thrill of going to an ambassadorial reception for the first time in their intimate way. This was a purely social occasion where private schemes had no place. Xavier's true role was known to the ambassadors although they were too polite to say so.

For years Jed had been used to watching courtiers parade their importance but since this morning he had become a champion for more straightforward Bartonbry ways. He had prepared a few polite Lanconian phrases but his first tentative attempt at wishing the

Ambassador and his wife good health caused confusion. "I'm sorry sir. What have I said?"

"You 'ave em just weeshed upon us to be well roasted."

"Oh dear I apologise. It is me who should be roasted. Sir. Madam." Jed blushed and bowed.

The ambassador's wife smiled and whispered to the ambassador. He turned back to Jed. "Saddeus. Zo you are! We 'ave a sayin zat a man ooh go red is roasting." He laughed. They all laughed while Jed humbly blushed a bit more. Another whispered conversation with his wife. "My wife zays you are very 'andsome when you roast."

Jed's ears roasted bright as he bowed to a lady more exciting in her coy dark-eyed beauty than he'd ever met before. He had prepared a complimentary phrase but he wasn't prepared for his emotion. In his beginner's Lanconian he said "My ship is rocking on your wreck of beauty." More confusion then she laughed with an exquisite peal and opened her arms asking for a kiss and a hug. Jed was captured and roasted all the way down the back of his neck.

When Jed's second gaffe had been explained to everyone there were little tears of laughter in eyes as they repeated it in English and then all joined in with Jed saying it one word at time to get it right to be rewarded by a joyful gasp of feminine magnetism. Jed may have been tossed in these waves of humorous correction and concentration but he was stuck fast on her.

Jed thought his eyes were his only weapon. Unfortunately when they sat down to eat Constansia the Lanconian ambassador's wife was difficult to see. Donna the wife of the Italian ambassador was easier to watch and speak to. Her English and Lanconian were practically flawless while carrying the musk of a foreign accent. Jed found there was more than one rock in the ocean. He watched her put food in her mouth. She watched him watching her and their eyes met in a tiny duel. She smiled and slowly brushed her fingers over her lips.

Everyone else at the reception enjoyed the unusual easy atmosphere and felt a new era in relations starting. Xavier, not known for relaxing, was able to take the role of arms-length guardian of Jed, and talk normally about how he hoped the few of them who didn't take 'wrecked beauty' as an insult could out-stare spite-hounds. Brock and Eve took their invitation as a sign that they were now important people just for being

important. Brock had no hesitation in making it clear that foreigners were welcome in Bartonbry. When the Italian ambassador challenged him on fugitives from the Italian law Brock simply replied that our own laws applied here. After a moment he added "Except sometimes for the church that invents its own."

"Ha! So they do Mr. Brock. In my country too."

"Give my duchess a couple of years to put those dogs back in their kennels here then I'll lend her to you at a reasonable rate of interest!" They laughed, but inside worried that the cold truth was only an arm's reach away."

Eve found Constansia very easy to talk to. Even though Constansia was shy about her English and slow there was no hint of imbecility and Eve left her the time to speak as she wanted without being made to feel inferior. Status and ways to prick at others might be the Melbun way but Bartonbry preferred to plant seeds and water them. Inevitably Donna joined them to leave the men to carry on their business. Strangely, although Eve was asked about the Duchess her straight replies about her achievements didn't get much response. When asked about her private life Eve said that she was going through that teenage stage where the world is tripping and spitting. Sometimes she would be ten women and then suddenly a frightened girl... ..Did they have any suggestions? In the silence that followed Eve caught the Bartonbry bug. "I have cared for her. She was abandoned as a child. Anytime you wish to come to her as women representing women from far lands please do so. I know and your husbands will know now or soon that she brings a lot of good things so we all need her."

"Excuse me plez Ev. Is she ell?"

"She fell from her horse Constansia. And her horse, her oldest friend, has to be put down. Her injury and that death put her in bed for a week when she would hardly eat anything."

"At least..." said Donna.

"Yes Donna?" asked Eve.

"In my country we have a leaders who crows like a cockerel to his troops. He should be put in a bed."

"In my country we 'ave men who er compete about anything. He start by saying 'I can pith further than you' then 'e say 'I can throw zis knife up to catch it in my teeth.' Idiots and madmen."

Donna said "If women ruled the world everyone would have his loaf."

Eve said "Is that Italian?"

"Yes. 'Se le donne regolassero il mondo tutta mangerebbe la sua pagnotta.' "

"I let my man rule me so I can rule him." said Eve. "Do you have that in Italian Donna?"

"No. A woman in Italy is only respected for her money."

"In my country" said Constansia "we 'ave a saying. 'A man 'e sailing away but a woman she stays in 'ome. A man 'e can't wait to be leaving 'ome but a woman can't wait to make an 'ome. A man building an 'ouse but a woman building a family. A man take a mistress but a woman take a lover."

Eve was amazed. The words were so direct and these were foreigners! How could they think such things? In a moment she realised her idea of foreigners as mentally retarded pompously preening their primitive cultures was completely wrong. Completely false. "That's the first time I've heard that Constansia. It is so true. Is Lanconia full of poets?"

"Zome still but most we 'ave sayings that come from our mothers."

"In Italia we have poets that try to beat the sayings of mothers but never do. They just puff up their chests and say what they like. The way they say it gives it weight but really they aim to inflame their audience – of men of course."

Eve said. It's all too deep for me but you know that Bartonbry welcomes strangers. Please come and visit us. She needs constant friends. Who has had a teenage daughter?" Both women replied affirmative. "So you'll know one day it is high the next lower than low. She's just eighteen. Abandoned as a child and can never marry but loves everyone. What torture is that?" Eve had to find a handkerchief before her double vision turned into uncontrollable tears.

"What's the matter?" Asked Donna?

"I love her like my own daughter but I'm here and she's lying miserable in Bartonbry."

At the reluctant end to a successful social event the men had decided that he who put in the most effort would get the best reward and there was no cheating. The women had decided to visit Bartonbry for, er, because they wanted to! Jed was in no position to decide anything. He wished the duchess was here to guide him. Xavier saw a door opening with a ray of morning sunlight coming into his office. Should he escape to outside or ride the sun-beam?

[Friday morning - Melbun]

This was Brock's big day. Eve would accompany him to the court and was almost certain to be addressed by royalty. After being accepted into the world of the ambassadors yesterday she was mostly certain that she wouldn't be a bit of dirt from an unfashionable town to be snubbed at court. She had hardly any jewels, there just wasn't the need for them in Bartonbry. After admitting this to the ambassadors' wives Constansia lent her a silver necklace with dozens of diamonds. Eve was overcome with its value and nearly cried for its beauty and the trust of this foreigner. Not to be outdone, Donna sent a pearl headdress. Eve was so excited she had to keep taking it out of its box and trying it on. She debated with Brock what to say if people complimented her on her headpiece and necklace. "Admit it dear. Bartonbry is honest. Beside how many others have been lent such jewels by both the Lanconian and Italians? Tell everyone and everyone gains."

Brock's best suit had been paid for by Minda. The distinctive black and white cord worked into the seams showed it was made in Bartonbry. Eve's gown and Jed's uniform had the same Avel telltale cords. Jed had only his best cadet uniform which was practical and already well used. He was sent first thing to a clothier for emergency repairs. Brock assumed originally that Jed would be allowed as his supporter, but after yesterday was sure that Jed would be more than his page.

They rode to the castle to avoid the street filth. On arrival at the gate the guard commander remembered that the Duchess of Avel insisted on smiles. Now he'd heard of 'a Bartonbry welcome' and thought these visitors were worth the experiment. Actually he found it quite easy to smile and even said "Welcome." As they were going from the gatehouse to the castle itself he said "Any news of the little chap with the sword sir?"

"Little Arthur! Why yes. He is fit and farts smiles."

"Brock!" Chided Eve.

"Sorry dear. He is growing and learning his ABC and never gets into trouble but is always nearby when funny things are going on. Boys!"

"Like that daft boy Jed Poolens. Whatever happened to him?" This smiling business was good fun.

The chamberlain explained the protocol. Today was a small-court where the focus was on business rather than display, nevertheless the

investiture had to be done properly. Brock reassured the chamberlain that he would do exactly as instructed unlike someone they knew. The chamberlain smiled, he would never forget the day Minda came to court and took charge. After a short wait they were led in to the throne room. The King and Queen sat together under a canopy still and serious. Jed and Eve held back as Brock went proudly to the King. A declaration of the King's pleasure at Brock's service and loyalty for far too long left unrecognised was read out. Brock offered his sword hilt first to the King. It had never crossed Brock's mind until this moment that a dress sword would be the one to use but Brock was a working man and his everyday sword might be battered but it was kept sharp and rust-free and was part of him! The King spoke.

"It give me great pleasure to/"

"/I'm sorry your highness. Could you smile? I made a solemn promise to the Duchess that I would remind you on her behalf to smile if you were pleased."

"Oh. Um. Yes I suppose so. Bartonbry!" A grin was beginning to break out on the King's face. "How is that?"

"Ask the queen sir. I am no judge of a woman's will your highness."

The spirit of Minda invaded the court and smiles grew without prompting. The King had let the memory of Minda's Christmas magic fade and now regretted it. "You are to be Count of Barton."

The ceremony gradually returned to the traditional plan but the King had found another sunray and said. "I would you like you're arms to be a smile."

"Your wish is my command sir. If I send men to battle I will have them all wearing it."

The queen realised this wit before the king and giggled sufficiently to distract the king who knew he'd now need the joke explaining in secret. Nevertheless he kept smiling. "In the last day I have been told you truly are a friend of this court. We will talk later."

Brock withdrew and linked arms with Eve who was tingling with pride. "You look lovely" he said and kissed her in full view of the court.

"Thaddeus Poolens!" The chamberlain called loudly.

"Sir!" The Chamberlain pointed to the King.

Jed quickly stepped up. "Your Highness?"

"Thaddeus your father disowns you. Give me your sword." Jed went cold. This was disgrace. He handed his sword hilt first to the king. "I

know many men who would be ten times proud to have a man like you as a son. I hereby make you Earl of Melbun. To keep the title for so long as you stand on Melbun bridge at least once every year." There was complete silence in the court. The King had done something without consultation! Courtiers and court servants had to guess how to shuffle their order of precedence. Jed bowed. The king saw his opportunity. "Do you not smile Thaddeus – Bartonbry cadet?"

"No sir. I am awed by the responsibility. To be an Earl is not a joke sir. Not for me anyway your Highness."

"You are right. Hmm. Our duchess has given you eyes that breathe." The King stood up and addressed the court. "Let it be known that cleverness in sons is a good sign."

Quietly Jed said "Clever daughters lift my heart sir."

"Oh. Yes Earl of Melbun – Mine too."

The whole court had demonstrated to itself that Bartonbry was head and shoulders above themselves. In Jed's case literally.

The court soon dissolved from a business forum into a smiling royal reception. Thaddeus was the star of the moment. In the background Eve and Brock and the Lanconian and Italian ambassadors and their wives enjoyed their own company for a while. Their generation was stepping aside for the first of the new generation. They all admitted to surprise at Jed's ennoblement. The Melbun residents explained the political significance to Eve and Brock. What! There was serious anti-Minda politics going on! Eve and Brock had been riding their own dream horse but now it appeared the road was full of potholes. They'd thought Jed was chosen because of his ambassadorial potential but really it was to spite half the lords who wanted to sneer at Minda's hard work. 'Disgusting! Let's go home was in their minds.'

"Ze Kink e was veri clevar" said the Lanconian ambassador. "E say Jed ave to stand on se britch evri year."

"Why he so cleva?" Asked the Italian ambassador.

"Zo he cannot sta away for a year. Zomeone has told im Jed he want to travel."

"What's wrong with that?" Asked Brock.

"If he stay and marry zen what?"

Brock said. "Yesterday he was a cadet thrown out by his father but you loved him. What is the title to him? If he should lose the title all six of us will love him still."

The words 'love him' had a special, practical, meaning to rivals Constansia and Donna.

Brock was taken aside to be briefed privately for a couple of minutes by Xavier. "The King made that up himself. He'd been told about Jed's skill at diplomacy and foreign leanings but the Earldom was out of the blue and clever. "Don't tell me now Xavier! If we have secret business, which I expect we do then we need a proper time – How about tomorrow morning?"

"Oh? If you insist. Alright."

"I have to speak to the King yet Xavier. Let's save back stairs talk for time when we can give it our full attention."

Jed was surrounded by instant friends. Brock winked at him to let him know he was not alone if he didn't want to be. They all asked about Bartonbry. He casually remarked how the cadets had seen the space inside their heads and the rewards for trying to fill it up. Oh yes they did a bit of fighting but mostly what mattered to a young man of business. In five years Bartonbry would be the place in the kingdom where you would hear Lanconian and Italian spoken in the streets and there would be – er – Drama! Yes like the miracle plays but not moving and about ancient Greeks and Romans. While the King stayed at home Jed would roam the world finding good things to bring back. Couldn't they see that's why he'd been made an Earl? So he could hold his head up abroad. This afternoon he would have his first Italian lesson from the Ambassador's wife herself!

"Oho! She fancies you." Said somebody.

"Something wrong with that is there?"

"Er No. But be careful."

"Careful of what?"

"You know what these Italian women are like!"

"No I don't. What are they like?"

"Er. Um. Sexy."

"I can cope with a sexy woman panting in my arms. Anything else I have to worry about?" Silence. "So you're jealous. That's what it is." Silence.

"Good day gentlemen of the court. Don't let me waste your valuable time. I will now have speaks with the queen."

"Have speaks!" shrilled somebody.

"As they say in Lanconia. Earl of er...where are you Earl of?"

Jed went to the Queen and complimented her on her lovely complexion and hair. He really thought they were lovely when he thought about them as he'd been taught to by Doreen. Her eyes were smiling too and he said so unprompted with a momentary blast of roasting of his ears.

"Your highness. My lady. The three cadet girls are sailing higher than the moon. They have this thing they call the Black Team. The three girls and two street boys. They don't lead armies but imagine a team of Little Arthurs with swords under their skirts."

"I've heard the duchess is ill."

"Yes my lady. She fell off her horse and hurt herself. The horse had to be destroyed – Nobody dare tell her while she's abed because as Perce say 'e er best frnd four tin yrs' – Sorry that's how head horseman Perce speaks. She hasn't had friends more than two and a bit years my lady. An orphan."

"She will get better wont she?"

"I hope so. As we left there were good signs. But she works so hard. She should have a rest or distraction. – er – Please your highness – I don't speak for her but I think the town of Bartonbry would agree with me that she needs a distraction. Would you go to see her? Bartonbry would welcome you."

"Thank you Jed. I'm sorry about the Duchess and I'm sorry you have been disowned by your father. I can see Ted was right to make you an Earl. You said the girls were sailing higher than the moon well I can see you are sailing higher than the sun and if you continue will be the highest in the land. Come here Jed. Hold my hand. My prayers are with you. I'm told you want to be a soldier but you will never get to a battlefield."

"How so my lady?"

"Firstly the men who know how costly battles are will ask you to talk and I'm told you are good at talking."

"Um. And secondly my lady?"

"You won't have time with all the women holding you."

Jed would have answered but found himself in a corkscrew. He smiled and bowed... ..Then shrugged and held his palms up like he'd seen the Italian ambassador do yesterday.

The King came across to the ambassadors. They bowed and their wives curtsied. "Look after Jed for me. I think the Duchess has more like him. If they please you then take them to teach them. I know I cannot do likewise with cadets from your countries but perhaps the Duchess can. I cannot think of a better way for our children to enjoy peace than to see how nice their enemies are if you see what I mean."

The Lanconian Ambassador replied. "She ave the – er – carrying the basket of roses." After a whisper from his wife. "She bring to us nuts to eat or seeds to plant."

The wife of the Italian ambassador added "We wish her well. She's a young girl and why not?"

"Why not indeed? Lady Donna." said the King. "I love her but the kingdom doesn't run on love."

"Perhaps it should your highness? Even though she is ill in bed her spirit makes Lanconia and Italia closer. A plan is born – er hatched! – to take your cadets to our countries. No bad can come."

"Lots of bad can come Lady Donna. You see I am with you but there is bad too."

The Lanconian ambassador interjected "It might be better for us to talk more privately your highness. What do you say Geseppe?"

"We are together on this sir."

"Bad?" asked Constansia? "How can the duchess be bad?"

Her husband told her. "She's not bad but she uncovers bad things."

"That's good no?"

"Very good but the King has many convenience supporters."

"You mean loyal while it suits them?"

"Yes."

[Saturday morning Melbun]

Jed called on Rachel Whin's father the armourer.

"Welcome Earl of Melbun."

"Call me Jed Sir. I promised Rachel I would bring her love and news to you. She is a fine woman in good hands sir – I wish she was in my hands."

"Thank you Jed. Has she gone mad with fighting? You can tell me. No sir. She sits like a crow on a fence waiting for the worm then takes it in

one swoop. I have played swords with her and while I could easily beat her so I could all the others but she knew when to stab, slash and step back and forwards. No ordinary outlaw would live long."

"What is this 'Black Team' she writes about?"

"Um. You might say it was teenagers having fun together sir, but they're being beaten into tempered steel like you might to make weapons. These will be the very best blade and the Duchess will wield it when she needs to."

"What about you Jed? The king made you Earl of Melbun. He must think you're strong steel too."

"I was lucky to be the first cadet back from Bartonbry. I bring the new way of doing things. Make the world work!"

"Young man. I am told you want to be a soldier and a soldier needs good armour. I know when the King has favourites that a poor armourer who helps a penniless earl will get some profit. How can I help you?"

"First sir your offer is generous as I know you wished it without reward. I did not come here to take favours. Second sir I promise you will be properly paid in good money by some means. I am penniless but surrounded by patrons. Third I have spent a month wishing for a full knight's armour and lance – and sword I suppose, but in the last two days I see I need to sparkle while other brutes protect me with their bodies. I need something, a mail vest perhaps to stop a dagger but a helmet for me is to show I know how to wear armour but don't have to. Do you see?"

"Yes of course. I only make the practical stuff for common soldiers and servants of lords. Why are we standing here when you should be with my wife and daughter. Don't worry about anything – I'll have a few words and give you introductions to the best craftsmen in Melbun so you never need be naked on the battlefield. Um – Can I warn you about something Jed? Just between ourselves?"

"Yes please sir."

"Er. There's the bloody battlefield. I'm sure you would fight well there – Rachel has written about you. Then there's the general's tent where you need your thin shiny armour. Then there's the gardens of the lords and ambassadors where you are already known, but there is another battlefield which is more deadly than all the rest..."

"Yes sir?"

"Bedrooms."

"Bedrooms sir?"

"Your name has already been connected with three women in Melbun with the clear insinuation you have visited them in their bedrooms and – er – made love to them."

"Which ones?"

"Two ambassador's wives and your mother."

"My mother! What!"

"You have very good friends Jed – And very determined enemies."

"How have I made enemies?"

"By beating them with honesty. Now they will try their best weapon which is lies."

"Bastards!"

"They are aren't they."

"Who are they?"

"I don't know."

After a while Jed said "This is the sort of thing the Black Team are for. Moles to find the worms."

"I can see for myself that's dangerous Jed. My daughter risking her neck by listening where she shouldn't be."

"Oh Sir! Minda wouldn't let the Black Team get into trouble until they were ready – any more than taking a blunt sword to battle."

By noon Jed had forgotten Rachel father's warning. Italian food, clothes and furniture were interesting. Especially when described with limpid hand movements and dark eyes of distraction by Donna. Furniture in the shape of a bed was involved but Jed was studying something softer. Afterwards he marvelled at how different the Italian women were to those at home. Would he be able to cope with sex as you want it if he went to Italy? This was a week's emotion at least! Perhaps he'd better stick to Lanconia. By dusk Jed had discovered all foreign women had just one thing on their mind. This was perplexing as he'd hoped to reserve himself for his childhood sweetheart. At least he'd learned, Minda would be proud of him, that sex and marriage are different things.

Almost as soon as he'd left the Lanconian ambassador's house in a half-dream a man took him by the arm and whispered in an oddly commanding way. "We're going to see X".

Jed was sober but knocked-about-a-bit. "Xavier. I've just slept with the wives of the ambassadors of Italy and Lanconia... DELICIOUS. Now what's the matter? "

"Are you sure you haven't had any wine?"

"Not a drop sir. I'm as sober as an oak tree – only my leaves brustle. – My roots are rooting everywhere but my leaves only brustle. Hurrah!"

Xavier knew in a heartbeat that Jed had earned the Earldom alright! Now he had to point this empty-head in the right direction. "Thaddeus you need a bath. I will show you where in a moment. You are shortly to see the King on very serious business – It's alright he knows about Donna and Constansia – He was young once. From this moment you are under military orders. Do you know what that means Jed?"

"No sir."

"It means you do as you're told and don't do anything you're not told. The penalty for disobedience is what you'd expect. No more bedrooms, you won't even leave the King's castle without permission. This is not punishment but your safety and the King's safety and the Kingdom's safety. You can help or be an annoying distraction. If it's any consolation the Duchess has set light to dry tinder of revolt."

6 Bartonbry alert

On his way back to the castle after waving-off the boats Flor saw two unfamiliar riders making haste for the East gate. The Lostnock road. Who could they be? Had they come from the Abbey? They were dressed for travel not exercise so why such hurry? Something niggled him. As current proprietor of the castle he felt he was owed an explanation. On reaching the castle gate he sent a guard to find out from the town gate-man who they were.

The mounted party were nearly ready to leave. Flor gave Delphia a kiss. "Thank you for coming. Thank you for bringing Tom. If you hadn't she'd still be drifting away in bed. If I wasn't prisoner of duty in this castle I'd come with you. Now things are settling down I promise to visit you soon."

"Come to the wedding on the first of June."

"The boatmen expect to be at Lostnock about noon tomorrow. We have all forgotten caution here. A man with a dagger could lurk in any Lostnock doorway. We know she has enemies there so stick close to her and don't let her wander."

Flor wished them God's speed as they left the castle gate eyeing up the weather and taking time to warm up their horses for the long day's ride ahead. "Tell the smith in Heronswell that I hope to come and see him soon."

The guard sent to answer Flor's curiosity hurried up. "Please Flor it was Father Harris and brother Yates."

Flor whistled high-low-high 'to me'. The riders turned and galloped back the two hundred paces to him. He held up the danger hand signal. Lucky and Brand dismounted and checked for danger. "The danger has just gone ahead. Father Harris and brother Yates have just left in a hurry. Less than ten minutes ago. Harris has hardly been out of the Abbey since Christmas. Why did he decide to hurry to Lostnock today? If he knows Minda is on a boat then how did he find out. I didn't tell anyone." All five of them tried to think if they had let the secret slip – They all knew so well not to let that sort of information out that they'd hardly thought about it. They also knew that if one of them had realised they would own-up.

Paul dismounted and came close to Flor. "When you find out send a message as fast as you can to the Tax Office. You understand why I need to know."

"Have you got your knife Delphia?" asked Flor.

"No. Tom's got it."

"Borrow mine. You're probably safe on the road but tonight you'll be in Lostnock. Paul and Lucky will tell you why Harris is dangerous. The password is 'Gipsy' for us and err 'Holiday' for messages and messengers. Minda knows 'Gipsy'."

After waving them on their way again he asked the gate guard to find out who had left the castle yesterday evening and let him know as soon as possible.

Back in the castle Flor went to the castle office. It was empty except for Arthur waiting for errands. "Well Arthur they've all gone and left the two of us in charge."

"Where have they gone?"

"Lostnock."

"When will they come back?"

"About a week I expect. Don't tell anybody. It's a secret."

"I'd like to go to Lostnock."

"You can come with me when I go. But now I have work to do. Will you quietly ask Lizzie and Perce to come and see me. Tell the cadets I want to see them in the courtyard with their men lined up for inspection at a quarter past nine."

The hired maid Lizzie cautiously pushed the office door open. "Come in Lizzie." Flor smiled and was trying his hardest to be the perfect mistress. "How are you liking it here Lizzie?"

"Very well sir."

"Mistress Doreen says you have been a great help to Agnes – and Minda of course. Minda has lived most of her life without a maid and would be happy getting muddy in the hedgerows of the countryside where we trained together at fighting. Between us I know she hates gowns. She says they just make it easier for people to realise how huge she is."

"I don't think so Sir. I can only speak for the last day or so but she's been chattering about clothes and cosmetics and accessories and hairpieces non-stop."

"Hmm. Well If that's the case then I'm pleased. Very pleased. Mistress Doreen says our duchess should have the best apartments suited to a fine lady. A miserable old Duke had them before so he had old armour stored in closets and chests but perhaps with your experience you could see how it would be improved?"

"Oh I'm not sure."

"Have a think anyway. In the meantime ask for any help you need to give her rooms a good airing."

"Yes sir."

"Mistress Doreen sent Agnes to Lostnock to give her experience. It is our way here to give people responsibility and train them. Can you ride?"

"No sir."

"Right! Daily practise with Perce to start with then we'll send you to local places with a pack horse as if you were riding on ahead."

"So I'm not to lose my job now the duchess is better?"

"No! Of course not Lizzie. If mistress Doreen says you're good then you will be well looked after. I think Doreen wants somebody older and more experienced than Agnes."

"Thank you sir."

"You can see how we make the best of what we've got here Lizzie. Don't be afraid to make suggestions."

"Yes sir."

"Did you know Minda was going by boat to Lostnock today?"

"Yes sir."

"Who else knew do you think?"

"Doreen, Delphia, Agnes. Tom of course. Agnes told me about not telling anyone about anything when I started and I heard Tom being told it was a secret by Delphia."

"Could you have let it slip? I won't be cross if you did because you are new."

"I don't think so. I was busy and try not to bother about unimportant things."

"Thank you Lizzie. Call me Mr. Flor if you like. I haven't got time now but when you get time ask Arthur what's happened in the past and why we keep secrets." Perce came in. "Perfect timing Perce. The ladies have gone on holiday to Lostnock leaving me in charge. Could you see Lizzie gets riding and leading lessons for me. Thank you Lizzie that will be all."

"Minda might be away for up to a week Perce. Does that help you?"

"If I might 'ave three days Flor. I 'ave to go further now we need more."

"Have more time if you need it. Do you want to take a Blue cadet with you?"

"Both Rouse and Parrick would benefit."

"Take them both. Will you make sure they keep their notebooks up to date. They're learning so much they will forget more if we're not careful. Ask upstairs for money."

"When shall I start?"

"Up to you. You know your business. The sooner the better I guess. Remember you are the knight and the cadets are are your pages."

Perce chuckled. "Don't we 'ave games now Flor. Me with two Earl's sons as servants!"

"They have to serve so they know how to get the best from their servants. If you stay at an Inn they can have wine but if they get drunk make them suffer. The duchess will pay for better lodgings. That way others say 'look how well she treats her servants' and 'look how rich she must be'. That makes her feel good and I'm sure you'll not complain."

"No I won't."

"Did you know Minda was going to Lostnock Perce?"

"No. I 'eard 'alf 'our ago from the gateman."

"Thank you Perce. God speed."

That only left Derek Driver. Flor tried not to have anything to do with him. Again! It couldn't be. Surely he learned his lesson from before. Last time Flor tripped over his own anger. On the whole though Driver got the beating he deserved but now, if Driver had betrayed Minda that must mean death. Oh no! The memories of those days of suspicion and waiting at Christmas came back. Horrible. Less than an hour in charge and now he had reopened the wound. The gate-man reported that the Driver had gone out twice. Once about seven for fifteen minutes and again at about half eight until about ten. As he did that most nights and came back smelling of drink it was presumed to be a regular drinking session. He couldn't put it off until Minda returned because Paul needed to know to help him trap Harris. Blast! He ran the two flights up to the accounts office. Francis and the clerks were there. "Sam and Jim get out! Er Sorry. Please leave us for five minutes. I'm in charge and everything goes wrong. Go!" When they had hurried out he said to Frances "Driver was supposed to be building you a partition. What's happened to that?"

"He makes excuses."

"Does he submit clear figures for work done?"

"Yes but they're not detailed."

"Can you check some and see if they seem right to you." Frances extracted a ledger without hesitation and scanned the recent entries.

"There is nothing I can see."

"How many men does he have. How much material would he expect to use in a month or a week. Is he working hard or just when he feels like it?"

"Oh I see what you mean Flor. I have heard he spends a lot of time in the inns."

"And not doing your partition. You knew Minda was going to Lostnock because I told you last night myself. Did you tell anyone else. Anyone at all?"

"Nobody."

"Sure?"

"Yes."

"You know at Christmas Driver betrayed me and Lucky to the abbey. I think he's done the same with Minda's trip to Lostnock. Father Harris has ridden off towards Lostnock in a hurry first thing this morning. I've checked Lizzie, and apart from those going who would hardly let out the secret I think Doreen told Derek as she must do and he's told the abbey for the price of a drink. I need this sorted out this morning Frances – Her life may depend on it. Now if I'm right it looks like I'm persecuting him at the first chance I get."

"There's two things here Flor. The first is laziness. The second is betrayal. The first we can leave but you want the second proving now."

"Is there a proper person in the town we can employ?"

"Willkins is the best craftsman but not reliable. Roberts is more practical and good at getting men to work under him."

"Thank you Francis. As you can see my tenancy of the castle hasn't started too well."

"Come on Flor. You've found a problem and you're dealing with it. It's not for me to say but I don't think Derek has taken well to being usurped by hisl. I'd give him another chance for laziness but I know you can't do that with treachery."

Flor reviewed the cadets and their troops in the courtyard. He addressed them. "Men. Last week was a great improvement. You have learned how to run around in circles and carry and pull and climb as a troop. Well done. Now we need to turn you from toy soldiers into a fighting army that can march to where it needs to be, feed itself, keep it's weapons sharp and most of all do as little fighting as possible. We fight hard and quickly. We are a small stabbing army that thrusts straight to the heart of our enemies then leaves to deal with the next. There are four 'F's. Follow your leaders. Feed yourselves. Find your enemy and Fight them. For the next few weeks you will be living in tents or resting in barns. Moving as two little armies of sixty each. You will start by

pitching tents in Bartonbry then as we get organised you will move further away. Remember each time things don't go right we learn and put it right next time. If you go hungry because all your rations were on one pack animal that bolted then you won't do that again. If your tent gets flooded you'll put it in a better place next time. Now you can drill. In two weeks time you will be able to fight. Be patient this morning while you get weapons. You'll get twopence of pay later and a free afternoon."

Flor gathered the cadets. "Well done to you. You heard what I said. There will be a red army and a yellow army. Brand and Lucky who were going to lead them have urgent business elsewhere. So I want the yellows and reds except Robert to pick a general for each of Food and shelter, discipline, fighting and finally communications and intelligence. Of the Blues Rouse and Parrick you are spending the next week on the road with Perce. Get your travelling kit and report to him. That leaves three blues to do everything at base. I'll find you clerks but you won't get much sleep and you may have to ask the Reds or Yellows for labour. Normally transport would be Rouse and Parrick. You'll have to do that as well. All of you will have to use your own horses for carrying I'm afraid. The first task for everybody is to get carts. We'll pay for two waggons and two waggoners for two weeks for each army. You must negotiate with the waggoners yourselves and remember they are not your soldiers and so you need to keep them sweet. They can probably teach you a lot – We've told you about being nice. Once you have waggons use one for tents which are apparently in a store by the quay. Find out how to put them up and take them down and repair them. The other is for weapons and food. Food for the next two days will be supplied by the castle. More later. We will have each troop of ten carrying a bow and one other weapon. Sword, pike, axe or knife. That's enough for now. This afternoon bring your notebooks to the school room and there will be lots more. Reds and Yellows get your armies working together for an hour. Blues and Robert come with me."

In the Castle office Flor told off Cadet Twosting to arrange the pay parade with one of the clerks from upstairs. Cadet Jenks would supervise and record allocating weapons to the reds and yellows. Cadet Uffingtel would record the waggoner's contracts with the aid of the clerk Twosting wasn't using and inspect tents and any other equipment as it was brought along. When the blues had left Robert remained.

"Sit down Robert. I've some news for you. Hmm. Why do we have a town watch?"

"To protect the people against fire and nuisances."

"Good. And we have armies for the same reason. To protect people. Us. Sometimes wandering around looking like we mean trouble isn't enough to protect them and we have to use force. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

"If you were on patrol with the town watch and there was a drunk with a knife threatening others would you use your sword?"

"If necessary."

"By necessary you mean you'd try something else first?"

"Err Yes."

"Good. You've tried whatever that is and there's a drunk who doesn't care about killing someone and you have your sword in your hand. Could you kill him?"

"I'd have to try."

"Good answer Robert. Now how hard would you try?"

"As hard as I could. Er – I don't understand."

"You're really going to kill them. Not hurt them a little. Could you do it?"

"I'd have to."

"Just so as you know Robert I have done that thing. There is no time to think you must be focussed on the single killer blow. Every ounce of energy. Every muscle in your body. Every day of your years of training in two or three seconds. "

"Yes sir."

"But you haven't had years of training."

"I would still try."

"I know you're an organiser rather than a close fighter Robert but very shortly you and I are going to kill a man. A man that carries a sword must be prepared to use it. Before you were a boy with a dangerous toy now you are a man who protects others with his blade. We both know you are on a ladder of many steps to great heights. Today is going to be one of those steps. It is a step you won't boast about but amongst those of us who have taken it we will understand."

"I'm lost sir."

"How old am I Robert?"

"Twenty – er – five?"

"Twenty two next week. And I am the military commander of Bartonbry, steward of the castle and only person who can organise more than five people at a time except the abbot if the brothers had got round to having a replacement. How old are you?"

"Sixteen next week."

"What day. Monday the eighth."

"Me too! Lets hope we live long enough to enjoy it Robert." Flor was about to whistle for a servant to fetch ale but changed his mind. "Um. There is a life and death matter which I have to manage very carefully. We will not be using our swords on this man today but he will be dead when we've finished with him. Who do you love most Robert?"

"Erm – Oh – The Duchess."

"Me too. But I'll have to make do with Agnes. Um. I shouldn't have told you that. It's a secret. I'll be in all sorts of trouble."

Robert laughed. "Everyone knows you fancy Agnes."

"Do they? How dare they! – Oh. Anyway pretend it's not true. Hmm – where was I – Yes. If someone had threatened the duchess what would you do?"

"Tell you or Lucky or Brand."

"Well Lucky and Brand are not here and I'm telling you."

Robert thought. "I'd protect her."

"Good. Well done Robert. Eh – If your gentle protection had failed would you strike to kill?"

"I'd strike to kill the first time."

"We'll discuss that another time. Look Robert I'm trying to prepare you for getting blood on your hands. It is not nice. It is very horrible. You will help me kill a man. Are you ready?"

"Yes. If you say so."

"Good. Now send some of your men to find Derek Driver, that's right mistress Doreen's husband. We are going to kill him."

While waiting for Robert to find Driver Flor decided he wanted the Black Team ready in case they could usefully be sent to Lostnock. He might send them to Heronswell to lurk even nearer. A messenger was dispatched to Willows to recall them. Another messenger was told to stand by to go to Lostnock.

Derek came into the office without an escort. "You wanted to see me Flor?"

"Yes Derek. Thank you for coming so quickly I know you must be busy..."

"Oh yes. Very busy. You know what it's like, a castle of this size and so many jobs."

"Francis has complained that his partition is still not erected."

"Ah. I can assure you he is on my list."

"Can I see your list Derek. I have things to add."

"Er. It's in my head."

"Here's a pen and paper. I'll be back in five minutes." Just outside the half open door were two troopers and Robert holding Arthur by the collar. In a commanding voice he said. "Arthur, will you fetch Francis." Arthur rattled up the stairs. Flor mimed to the troopers to stay silent and whispered. "One of you get rope to bind a man then stay in this passageway and wait. We're not to be interrupted." He took Robert to the far end of the passage and whispered to Robert. "Follow me. At some stage we will arrest him. Act instantly when I steeple my hands like the letter A for arrest." Arthur came back down trailing Francis. Flor crouched down like he'd seen the women do when they wanted thinking attention from a child. "Can you stay silent for ten minutes?"

"Yes Flor."

"Good because today I want you to watch silently. Do you understand?"

"Yes Flor."

Good Boy. If you feel the need to speak look at Robert to get permission." Arthur nodded.

Flor breezed back into the office followed by Francis and Robert and Arthur. "I don't know how Doreen does it all. Phew it's all figures and problems and tiny arguments. Now will you two sort out your partition argument. I'm determined to have Francis' job finished by the time the women return. Can you do it Derek or do I call in whats-his-name instead – um – begins with R?"

"Roberts?"

"I think so. I hear he's efficient."

"The wood arrived this morning. I could make a start this afternoon."

"What do you say Francis?"

"When would it be finished?"

"Er. Two days."

"It's Tuesday today. So it would be finished on Thursday?"

"Yes."

Flor asked "Lack of wood supply seems to be causing delays. Who is supplying it? Perhaps we should use another supplier?"

"I get it from the Nacton's wood yard mostly. He always takes ages to saw the boards I need."

"Oh dear. Now let's look at your list." Flor smiled and laughed "Doreen has shown me how to be ruthless Derek. You're lucky to have such a clever wife. Dealing with all of us men when Minda was ill was a great credit to her. She's made the castle happy hasn't she men?"

"Yes" said Francis. "She and Minda conspire to tease like strict mother and saucy daughter."

"Robert?"

"Oh she's always got a smile for us cadets. I try to smile like she does when things go wrong for my troopers."

"Arthur. What do you like about Mistress Doreen?" Asked Flor.

"She makes me feel important. She says one day I'll be a knight and rescue beautiful maidens."

Flor's banter suddenly formed itself into a dagger. "Aren't you lucky Derek?"

"She's unbearably smug! Knows everything. Tells me what to do! 'If I was you this and if I was you that.' It's a nightmare."

"You haven't shown me the list... What are these jobs delayed by?"

"Timber or nails or paint. It's always one of those three."

Flor continued "I like Doreen. What did you say when she said she was going to Lostnock with Minda?"

Derek was baffled for long enough to show everyone he was manufacturing an answer. "I can't remember."

"Francis. What colour would you like your partition painted. If it takes time to order it is best to say now."

Commendably quickly he replied "Anything pale."

"Have you got that Derek?"

Arthur was interpreting everything literally but by now all the others knew Derek was being softened-up in a serious display of determined interrogation. Derek was close to breaking and sweating. There was an oily silence.

Flor said "Is there a law against visiting the abbey after dark Derek?"

"No. I don't know what you're talking about. It's not illegal. I can if I want."

"Good. I'm glad we've got that straight."

"Er? What?"

"What?" echoed Flor.

"What have we got straight?"

"What you said about visiting the Abbey."

"I didn't say anything."

"Robert here is son of the Lord chief justice at Melbun. He knows a bit about the law. Tell us Robert it isn't illegal to visit the abbey last night is it?"

"No Mr. Flor."

"Thank you. So we've got no reason to detain Derek?"

"No."

"Detain me! I've done nothing wrong."

"That's what we're trying to tell you Derek. You haven't done anything criminal going to the abbey so that's why we're not detaining you."

"So I can go?"

"No."

"Why?"

"Two reasons. Firstly because there are two guards outside to stop you and secondly because I'd like to know who you spoke to."

"I can speak to whoever I like."

"Who?"

"None of your business. You just want me disgraced so I don't get the stewardship back."

"A bit late for that Derek. Who?"

"I don't have to tell you."

Flor said "It's always the stupid ones that suffer isn't it Francis? You were intelligent enough to confess your crimes at Christmas and saved your neck."

"Yes Flor. The duchess saved my life. What were you thinking of Derek!"

"I will be the steward again! Just you wait Tomlyn! And Flor you have a shock coming. I'm going!"

As Flor steepled his hands the metallic slicing of Robert's sword being drawn from its scabbard put an end to the verbal fencing. "Submit or die Derek Driver."

"You can't do this!"

In the seconds that it took for the guards to grab his arms and tie his hands Driver's bravado vanished. He went pale and limp.

Flor said "I am not angry Derek. I am not happy to do this to you. Do you understand why I must protect Minda?"

"I haven't hurt her."

"She might die in a week because of you. Your private weaknesses can't be tolerated for her life. As a useless builder you would have been given another chance. Your pride blinded you to you wife's skill. Your stupidity will cause her much pain. I am the one who will have to greet her on return with news of your death."

"I demand a fair trial."

"Demand refused."

"I didn't mean any harm."

"But you caused it and you knew it. Did you really think you would get away with it? What was your price Derek?"

Silence.

"I could see you kept safe in the sheriff's gaol or I could chain you to a block in the courtyard and invite the castle servants to treat you as they think fit. Which do you want? Peace or pain?"

"I haven't done anything wrong. You can't arrest me!"

"Peace or pain? I'd prefer peace as I don't want to have to explain to the women how the castle sank to beating you to death. Blinding you, a hundred kicks to the crutch. Do you want to die covered in shit blood and bruises being stoned by a jeering mob? What was your price?"

Silence.

"Arthur! Come to me please... ...Look at Arthur Derek. What would happen to him? You had children you loved – Here is a living child Harris tried to murder. What was your price?"

Silence.

"Arthur. Derek is going to die soon. I would like you and Francis to comfort him for me. You and Frances go with him to the gaol and sit with him for an hour. Guards can you take Driver for his own safety. Do not mistreat him for his last hours on this earth. Robert stay here."

When the sad party had gone from the office Flor whistled for a servant.

"Mary, Driver has betrayed the Duchess to the abbey. Make it known that his days are numbered and justice will be done and the evil has flown from the Abbey. Send the waiting Lostnock messenger to me then fetch me a bottle of strong wine and two cups."

"Is there anything I can do Mr. Flor?" Asked Robert.

"I need you to listen. Wait until we can be private. Until then put your brains to work. I may have forgotten many things."

Cleverly Mary brought sweet breads as well as the wine.

"Mary! If ever I have a household of my own you will be head servant!"

"But you do today Flor." She smiled. Flor was lifted by that simple gesture. "And you've brought me a smile as well Mary – If I had any gold you could have it all."

"Mr. Flor!"

"I don't know how the women manage the castle Mary but I find I need all the smiles I can get."

"Don't worry dear. There's plenty of smiles now you've caught Driver."

"What? Why? I'm not smiling."

"The rest of us serve as well as we can but he wouldn't make the effort. It was good to see him being shunned by you gentlemen but what was Doreen to do?"

"Bless you Mary. We live under the same roof but never talk about what matters. Thank you three times."

"Tuck in Bob you're a growing lad. My friends have left me. Minda makes families so I will make friends. My head's spinning."

"Please Mr. Flor. You didn't find out anything from your questioning but I soon guessed you were working to a plan."

"Well done Bob for playing along with being a legal expert. To answer your question I'm ashamed to say that I had to show witnesses I was giving him chances to see I was serious but not threatening. Does that make sense?"

"No."

"I beat him up the last time he betrayed us – Me and Lucky. We escaped by chance but I was so angry when I got back. He was only saved by Minda herself who commanded me to leave my anger. I'd told her I'd

curb her anger if I could but never thought I might need the same lesson. I will teach you in turn. Your anger is your enemy. What does that mean?"

"I'm sorry I don't know."

"It means your enemy's anger is his weakness. Now look in the mirror. Does it make sense now?"

"Yes. When you gave the arrest sign I was angry with him and if you had been too I might have hurt him with my sword just to give him a lesson."

"So you've learned something today. Now why are you here and not with the guards?"

"I don't know."

"Have a minute – a whole long minute – to think about it..."

"...I'm sorry Flor. All I can think of is that you want me here for a reason."

"Good start. I need somebody to talk to. If you learn something from it that's good too."

"But I don't know anything."

"Yes you do. Why did I go on about partitions when I'd told you he was dead meat?"

"To make him defensive."

"Exactly. See! You do know something Bob. How are you getting on with the Town Watch?"

"And you change the subject to confuse!"

"It's the best I can think of. Have more wine. Actually he didn't deny going to the abbey last night. I was pretty certain he went at about seven last night but to me it was more important to keep him guessing what I knew."

"He also had to guess why I was there." said Bob.

"Silent listeners are chained bears surrounding the victim."

"Why didn't you demand who and what and how much from him."

"I asked."

"But you let the answers by."

"All I need to know now is whether it was really him that told the Abbey Minda was leaving the safety of Bartonbry and going to Lostnock. Though he didn't admit it directly his answers told their story. I have sent a messenger with that one bit of information to our men in Lostnock so they can use it. I am convinced Driver did tell the abbey and Father Harris – who has been waiting for an opportunity for revenge since Lucky

threw him down stairs at Christmas to defeat a deadly abbey plot – could race to Lostnock to scheme with the Bishop of Lostnock and other evil people."

"Is the bishop evil?"

"He is criminal and tried to get Minda burnt for witchcraft and executed for treason together. That sounds evil to me."

"Surely not!"

"I'm afraid it's true. I told you today would be big steps up the ladder of learning."

"You were very precise in you questions Flor."

"It was hard for me and that's why I need someone safe to talk to now. I have learned from the world's most feared interrogator."

"Who is that?"

"Minda. If she questions you then save yourself Derek's agony and simply admit all you would rather not. She knows people are human and often fail. To her that's like a horse losing a shoe – 'Oh dear we'd better get this horse properly shod and put it to work again'. I've also been trained by the best person in the world who warns you when you're about to slip into a hole then helps you across in return for more effort next time."

"Who's he?"

"Mistress Doreen. I'm sure when she's around you try to be smart and please her don't you. Doreen want's efficiency. Minda needs loyalty. If they were men they would have one rule for their friends and one for the others. Why do you think Mary was so pleased about Driver being dealt with? They all knew he was lazy but that was Doreen's problem which made it an impossible situation. She demanded full service from them but when it came to Driver he could skive because Doreen couldn't rule him. Nowadays everyone in the castle expects loyalty and trust from every other. Except Driver was not loyal and has betrayed them all. Not just Minda and me but Arthur, Mary and all the others that work in the kitchens or stables. If he was left chained to the wall the servants would compete for ways to show their disgust."

"Why have you sent Little Arthur and Tomlyn to the gaol with him?"

"Good question. Have some more wine. The abbey tried to murder Arthur by poison so that's why I've sent him to comfort Driver. You saw there were no signs of remorse. Inside he will have them and Arthur

may pick at them. I will torture Driver with regrets. Arthur will be a last precious comfort to a man who knows that whatever the law says he is going to die for betraying the castle and Minda."

"What use is that?"

"His conscience might make him confess. A true confession saves so much uncertainty."

"Then what will happen to him?"

"Another good question but not quite on the target. A better question is 'how will we kill him?' It isn't other people doing things to other people but you and me stabbing or strangling or drowning him."

"Why can't he be sent for trial?"

"He's hasn't done anything criminal. I made that clear so he knew we were not afraid to act outside the law."

"I do know a bit about the law. Every man has a right to a fair trial."

"We might need to rely on that Bob. If the women decide he should be spared that is a convenient way of letting him go. It would be better if he hung himself in his cell. If he confesses – I'll see he gets a visit from one of the brothers – then with any luck he might be given enough rope to hang himself. I will have a word with the under-sheriff about Driver but not mention that last bit."

Flor went to see Brother Caxton on the pretext of telling him about Minda's recovery. He explained how he had to take Father Harris' hurried departure towards Lostnock as a sign of something amiss. They both knew enough about his dishonourable dealings with Minda to take the threat seriously. Flor told brother Caxton about Driver's involvement.

"I am not asking anything from you Brother. Driver may need spiritual comfort – I have no objection to that. Also it is lonely at the castle so you will be welcome."

In the afternoon Flor gathered the cadets to give them yet more responsibilities. As well as keeping their men together they would now have to take them out on training exercises. The Red and Yellow armies would be based on two of Minda's estates. One roughly ten miles north and the other roughly ten miles east of Bartonbry. Letters were going out to local lords asking for cooperation and where the lords had military experience they would be encouraged to show extra hospitality and encouragement to the next generation of keen protectors of the peace. "But it is up to you to be diplomatic in asking for what you want or need."

You will have money and of course your status as the King's cadets – not to mention the reputations of your families."

The servants of the castle were perfectly capable of not bothering Flor if he was busy. They knew they were allowed to take their own decisions in good faith. Flor went on a tour to give everyone a chance to speak to him and ask what was happening. There was too much to do and not enough people or time to do it so his job was guessing priorities.

Builder Richards was asked to come to the castle. Flor used Derek's list as a guide for projects. "Derek Driver was given a harmless job of small building repairs and alterations but as you will have heard he told the Abbey about the Duchess' voyage to Lostnock out of spite. I have a list of jobs which we can go and see. Can you to make an estimate of time and cost after getting the details you need for them and get approval from Tomlyn."

"Ahem. Well you see sir I have too much work myself. Since the duchess has put new life into trade everyone wants extensions. To be honest sir I don't know what to do with the work I've already got."

Flor's dream of refurbishing Minda's rooms while she was gone faded. What would she do? Something positive. Something helpful. "What's to stop you hiring more workers?"

"If I spend time I haven't got going to towns and villages around and find people they would work for me for a week then a competitor would hire them for higher wages. A waste of time. Like carrying a basket of water – I'd not have any water and end up soaked."

"How many competitors are there?"

"Four."

"Do you all need the same skills?"

"Roughly yes. The real skills needed are carpenters. I need a supervisor and clerk and somewhere for them to live and a much bigger workshop and yard."

Flor thought about the way Pod Watts had developed his business. It needed money to make it grow. Minda had lots of money. Would she want to invest in a building business? Of course she would! "What would you say if the duchess took a half share in your business in order to double it?"

Richards thought. "I would have to think about it. Everyone owes me money for work not yet complete for which I've had to buy the materials and pay wages. It is difficult."

"Let's find Tomlyn. If Bartonbry is to become like Lostnock we've got to live and breathe money."

"My wife does the money sir."

"Well please discuss your affairs with her then both of come to see Tomlyn here. He was the one who recommended you so I expect he will be favourable to a loan to carry you over the time from paying for materials to getting paid. You can also start negotiating with him for her to finance the expansion of your business."

"I'm overwhelmed sir. Next time you're in the Castle inn there will be a bottle of your favourite waiting there at my expense."

"That's very kind of you Roberts but if there is then you will be in trouble. Nobody in this castle takes bribes. If you know better I would like to know – er – another time."

After Roberts had gone Flor went up to see Tomlyn. His treat for Minda was going to be a new apartment but now she might have a new business. Flor explained his ideas for a loan and the investment then stopped.

"That's as far as I can go. I leave the rest to you. You're the one who will make a fair deal."

"Minda's affairs are complicated enough without half shares in businesses."

"How are we going to get building work done on the castle? If Minda has a half share we can use it as an example to other businesses that want to expand. Don't we want the town to get better like Minda did?"

"You know yesterday Doreen had me, Paul and Lucky dining with widows."

"Yes."

"Well now I'm as good as engaged to Widow Cantling. She's Richard's sister and already has a small interest in the business."

"Goodness Francis! You work quickly!"

"Only obeying my orders. I'm going to dine with her this evening."

"I'm sorry if I have mixed business with pleasure Francis. Why not get one of the clerks to deal with it under your supervision?"

"Don't worry Flor. I won't mention it."

"But Richards is bound to mention it to her. What will she think? She'll think you are looking at the business and not her. Or she may think you're trying to impress her with favours to her brother."

"Oh. This marriage business is full of traps."

"Don't ask me Francis. What do I know?"

"You've learned a bit from Agnes so I hear."

"Only passing the long evenings. I tell you what! Why not say that Minda has told you to find such businesses to boost Bartonbry and do loans and shares. Tell them it's a policy and I made the first move. That way they will know you're only trying to be honestly helpful."

"Yes. I suppose I could. You are right about business. But what will Minda think?"

"I know what she'll think. She'll think 'Tomlyn was good at organising my accounts but now he's better at putting money to use.' She really likes clever people."

"How can you be sure?"

"Why did she ask you to teach the clerks to learn what you did? So that you could do something else of course."

"I thought it was so she could sack me."

"Well I suppose back at Christmas your reputation was untrustworthy but you reformed in a day."

"What about my brother? Why didn't he get reinstated?"

"You were a bit of a bully that picked on weaklings just for the thrill of a bit of respect when you couldn't get any other. Tomlyn Minor was an unpleasant sex pest and would never get a pardon from Minda or Doreen."

"I haven't risked mixing with women before. Now I'm forty-five and trapped."

"A lot of people find marriage is profitable. By the way Richards tried to thank me with a secret present but I refused and told him we didn't do that here. I know there's nobody more honest in reporting his bribes than you Francis so let's keep it that way. Tell them you've been captured by Robert's sister but that Minda would slit your gizzard if she thought you accepted favours for business."

"Oh dear! For the first time in my life I was hoping for forget my books."

"Cheer up Francis. Get that out of the way – I'm sure their finances will be clear to you with hardly looking. Enjoy their homely company. Get

them to respect you for your skill with what books say not your influence."

"So it's decided."

"What?"

"They get the loan and we finance a share to expand the business."

"If you say so."

"But I have to if I've discussed it as friend."

"You have a veto. And you can say that you can't give them preferential terms because the other businesses will want the same. Urgent matters are in your hands then the rest will wait until Minda returns. How about that?"

"What if their business is rotten?"

"Then make it sound! I thought you were writing a book on business management!"

"Ah. Um. Yes! So I am."

Flor was instantly alert to this false confession but wondered how to follow it up. "Anyway when you've finished your book other book you can write one on business management – Who better?"

"It's a joke book. Promise not to tell anybody Flor. Please."

"I won't tell anybody. After all, once you've written the first sentence of your business book you can truthfully say you're writing it." Francis' gymnastical expression secretly amused Flor. "Let's think of a good opening sentence. How about – um – um – 'Each day – Every day some men get poorer and others richer. Why?'"

"When a penny changes hands who is poorer and who is richer?" asked Francis.

"The person who spent the penny is poorer." Said Flor.

"Perhaps if he bought a pennyworth of bread but he might have put that penny into a building business."

"Oh I see. That's why I do my job and you do yours."

The Black Team arrived at Bartonbry at dusk. Flor decided that Doreen would have had them to dine so he would too. Allesandro let them speak for themselves about what they'd been doing. Flor wanted to know more about Allesandro so he asked the Black Team. Their friendly and respectful replies pleased him and he said so. He explained the development of Red and Yellow armies. He slipped by saying that

originally the Black Team was to stay at Willows but plans had changed. Rachel immediately challenged him on this. He admitted the worry about Harris and that he was determined that if there were developments they would be sent to look for themselves but they were far too green to get involved in what might be very deadly. For now they were to be nice to boatmen like they had been at Willows and ask the Reds and Yellows to think how their skills might be used. "You'll have to get used to knowing how armies work so mix. For example a hundred men can't creep up silently like five of you. They need stops for food and water while you can take a quick bite and drink. They need daylight to see where they are going but you can find your way in the dark. If they need to get from some place to another place in the dark they might ask you to lead. But you must know the route first so you can be sure soldiers can use it. And you must get the commanders to ensure strict silence. We will have the Reds and Yellows trying to creep up on each other in the dark led by two of you and watch how impossible it seems. It will take weeks and many failures but when you have it then it will be worth gold and cost many outlaws their lives." Flor stirred his brains to think how Doreen would finish this evening with maximum pleasantness. Sewing by the fireside perhaps. He could hardly do that. In the end he smiled at them and said "Then we must get you back to Melbun for a week. I'm sure your families would like to see you." He remembered that the Taylors were orphans. "I'm sure they would like to see you all together."

After the Black Team had been dismissed to bed Flor relaxed with Allesandro. A while was spent discovering each other's background but as the only adults in the castle they needed to deal with sensitive matters by trust. Allesandro said "I see why you wanted the Black Team ready here. We might use them as a distraction. They don't know it but they can be larger than life if they want to. I could have them spreading rumours or offering money in inns in a way that will get noticed. Like you said they shouldn't be put to the test for a while yet."

"That's the first sensible thing I've heard all day Allesandro. At present we can't act as we don't know what their plan is. For all we know/ /Wait! Shit! At Christmas The King gave the Bishop of Lostnock three months to go into exile abroad. That time is up. If he's still there that's bad."

"Surely you didn't expect him to go just because the King said so?"

"Yes. Why not?"

"It's a power-struggle between the church and the King. The church will defy the King. They won't be bossed about. What can the king do?"

"Burn the abbeys?"

"Perhaps he should but he won't."

"Tax them. Fine them."

"And get worthless promises of payment later."

"Oh. It's like they're outside the law."

"They hope so. A bit of force that nobody would dream of using would wipe them out."

"I see where this discussion is going. Minda is the only person who would dare to burn their abbeys. That's why they want her out of the way. Dead."

Francis Tomlyn made a clean breast of his conflicting interests to Richards. As Flor had said he could see where the business needed feeding to avoid collapse and Richards easily convinced him that investment was worthwhile. Again Francis apologised. "Could you not mention this to Samfia?"

"You sound like a lawyer trying to be honest Francis."

"Do I?"

"If you're going to be my brother in law then call me Simon." Simon smiled.

"Perhaps I'm better staying with figures – er – Simon."

"You're doing me a good turn Francis. I know Samfia has taken to you. Let her make an honest man of you."

"Oh that's very clever. I'll add that to my/ /er very clever. Really!"

"Yes. All you have to do is be a little bit nice and she's yours."

"But that means I'm her's. Umm."

"Oh go on Frank! A grown man like you being afraid of women – I'm ashamed of you!"

"You know what they say. Nobody has the courage to use ink in the balance sheet of marriage."

"Samfia was telling us you're full of jests."

"You're telling me to invest in marriage to double my business. I can see it now. It's the interest on the loan that worries me."

"What? How much she pays you or you pay her!"

"Oh Simon that's very clever. Um – To be honest I was thinking how much my debt would be but I suppose it's a even bargain."

[Tuesday between B and L]

The journey from Bartonbry to Lostnock was a long day of steady riding for Brand's party. The weather was pleasantly for the end of April but just ahead was the cloud of Harris. There was no point in catching up with him. Travellers they met assured them he was still ahead. At Heronswell Flor's message was passed on to the smith who immediately inflated with happiness then asked of Minda. Brand told him the secret of her visit to Lostnock by boat and emphasised it was a secret. Agnes was going with Minda which showed how much she was treasured. The smith asked about Tom and Minda. Were they getting married? Brand had to tell him no but they were both happy and he thought that was what mattered. Brand told him about the black and silver star-iron ring made by the smiths of Lostnock.

As Minda's country house was a mile or so on the nearside of Lostnock, Paul suggested Brand and himself should enter Lostnock by different gates tomorrow morning. It was agreed the best place to meet would be the Tax Office. Then they could go from there.

Delphia must take care. They had no need to speak about the fear that someone who wanted Minda burned alive might kidnap or hurt Delphia. After delivering her to the Watts and having a private talk with Pod about the need for caution, Lucky sent a servant with their horses to Minda's town house and a message to Mr. Bob to meet secretly inside the Tax Office as soon as possible. From a shadow in the square he saw Mr. Bob unlock the door and enter. After five minutes to let any watchers give up he entered and put a wedge under the door for security.

"Mixed news Mr. Bob. Minda is better but Father Harris has come here. She's coming tomorrow."

"Thank the Lord for Minda's recovery. What was the matter?"

"Exhausted and depressed. Blacksmith Tom and Delphia brought her out. Henry and Mr. Chris cheered her too."

"Mr. Chris?"

"The Tax officer. Christopher Minton. We called him 'Mr. Chris' as a reminder of yourself."

"Oh of course! You youngsters having your fun!"

"Oh! You oldsters!" They laughed together, pleased to have picked up their easy relationship so quickly. After giving Mr. Bob all the news they discussed precautions. If Harris really had a plan to ambush Minda then it must be something to do with Lostnock and himself. He wouldn't have come unless he had a plan would he? Would the Bishop of Lostnock be involved again? Probably. Their problem was they had no idea what sort attack was being planned. More witchcraft? Simple ambush? Lucky would try to get the petty crooks to keep their eyes open then be Mr. Bob's guard tonight.

"You think I'm a target Lucky?"

"I'm sure you will be watched from tomorrow and if they are bold enough to attack Minda then they will see you as an easy meat. If I may be so bold I would say this building can be defended. I should see there's a stock of water and food just in case."

Brand told the skeleton staff at Avel Hall that Minda would probably be staying there tomorrow evening – but nobody was to know. "Let me make myself clear. There is evil around and we know this because a servant betrayed the Duchess. That servant is now dead. Tonight we will barricade the gates and doors and at first light we will start making the hall safe against arrows and preparing for an attack."

Paul said. "We don't know if anyone is really planning to attack us but we won't take the risk. We are all relying on Brand to protect us – I have a sword but it's really for show – so please help him."

[Wednesday - Bartonbry]

Next morning the military preparations at Bartonbry had an edge to them. The Black Team were dutifully helping out as a fixers. This was straightforward problem-solving they knew about. One man from each troop was designated as cook and sent to the castle kitchens for lessons. One man from each troop was designated as provisioner and sent under the charge of the castle provisioner to raid the market and traders of the town for five days food. Smith Elphe was busy forging axes for wood chopping.

Flor assured the four hired carters that Minda was the guiding hand behind everything and she literally wanted to get things moving. Trade was on the increase due to her after only three months. "Now I'm going to

tell you a secret. Do I need to tell you what happens if you tell a castle secret?"

"No sir." said one.

"This secret is that Minda is rich and will pay money on time."

"Sir. that's not a secret."

"Alright. The secret is that honest extra expenses will be paid but on one condition..."

"What's that?"

"You use your brains to help her. We're sending you out for two weeks with soldiers – and you know what they can be like – with boys in charge who can't grow a beard. You know your job so don't let anybody tell you. Is that fair?"

"Yes sir."

"Well I want you to explain and train. One day these boys may have to do the job themselves without your help. I'd like them to say 'ten years ago the duchess showed me how to do this.'" There was no response from the carters. "These are the guys that will be chasing the outlaws who might prey on you when you're trudging along a lonely road. I was in the Round Bush inn at Heronswell and spoke to a carter who's wife-to-be was murdered. I won't forget that and neither will Minda. All of our boys have been told to listen to you if you have something to say so make the effort to train them to help you."

"Yes sir."

"They will be very busy so try to find a way to get things done without bothering them. When you get back I'll buy you all a dinner in the Castle Inn and you can tell me what you think of our King's cadets."

Flor and Allesandro were in the castle office worrying about Lostnock. Neither could divorce the cadets and soldiers from the idea of reinforcing Minda. Possibilities and practicalities clashed. Arthur came with a message then said "If you had skirts I'd say you were Minda and Doreen." Two sharp answers never got spoken.

Allesandro stole James from the BT. "I want you to go to this address and ask for a dozen red roses and a dozen white ones. Not white then red. Follow instructions. Learn. You may say I sent you. If you are asked about the weather say nothing at all. That's important – not even a grunt or even a shrug or it's better some other place. You will be

tested. Once you've passed the tests be open. And one more thing. Do not tell the rest of the Black Team."

"Why?"

"I would trust the Black Team with my life and so would you but suppose somebody fed them spirits or burned their eyeballs?"

"Oh I see. What if they burned my eyeballs."

"Don't let it happen. That's good James. You've learned an important lesson today. You know what fear is and why not to share it. Would it do any good?"

"No."

"You're growing up James. We all are. By the way, I was really pleased with you at Willows. That was games but today is not a game."

Flor went to the under-sheriff Gabriel, and insisted on a walk across Abbey fields where nobody could overhear them.

"How is Bob Upton doing?"

"He's keen. Like everyone to begin with he's fallen asleep on duty but I know he regrets it and I don't know any way of curing it. He'll learn."

"Good. Thank you. Now I must swear you to secrecy on behalf of the Duchess of Avel. There is some really bad business."

"Not Derek Driver?"

"No. He's dead. If he was in the castle he would be murdered by one of the servants and all of them. Thank you for being so understanding Angel."

"Why?"

"I will tell you. Do you swear?"

"Yes. On God's truth."

"Because Derek told the Abbey Minda was going to Lostnock. The next day they sent their chief plotter to Lostnock. Father Harris was the man behind the Abbot's attempt to poison Minda. We know the Bishop of Lostnock is doing the same to Minda as the Abbot here was. He's also defying the King."

"Even I know she won't put up with that."

"But she doesn't know. She's going to Lostnock for a restful week. Lamb to the slaughter!"

"I thought that's why they'd all gone left you alone at the castle. To protect her."

"Yes they have. But we expected a small risk not an organised plot. We didn't think! Her men are honest but few. They need luck and brains."

"You want my help?"

"Bartonbry needs you to have plans to defend itself in case there is a rebellion planned. I can help a bit with weapons and a few men and myself of course."

"What about the Little army?"

"If Minda is in trouble we'll send them to lay waste to every church, chapter-house and monastery in Lostnock. Our first loyalty is to her. That leaves us. What happens if war breaks out? They have a lot of money and it will take weeks for them to raise an army but if they had twenty well-paid mercenaries they could make our life a misery. First they would burn a village or two then jeer at our gates. They may not be able to come in but they could stop all our trade by force or fear. This could be a war against the King. We are in his vanguard. He will send reinforcements in time I don't know how long but we can't rely on them."

Angel was silent for more than a minute. Flor's training had taught him the value of silence. Eventually Angel said "You're asking me to organise the defence of Bartonbry against them."

"Yes. If they come soon they won't have even a hundred but if the church buys an army and some silly lords to challenge the king then they are bound to attack Bartonbry at some stage."

"What could happen in the next week?"

"Lostnock is a day away for scouts or two day's march for troops. We must look for spies as the birds before the storm. At the end of a week there could be two score mercenaries burning villages around. But I should say two weeks."

"We could burn the abbey in retaliation."

"Don't say that! Yes we could but we mustn't. The brothers are now our allies."

"How? If they're in the church and the church is murdering Minda and the King then they should die."

"You know lots of brothers there. They don't mean Bartonbry or the Duchess harm. They have been struck down by evil – I can hear Minda's voice in my head as I speak Angel – and we have rescued them. Father Harris was the poisoned splinter that's worked it's way to the skin and been expelled. I'm sure they're happier now he's gone. A horrible man. Eugh!"

"What should I do?"

"Can you gather a dozen of the leading citizens and explain to them gently that the next few weeks might be bloody. Nobody wants to believe it but it's true."

"Then they'll leave in a panic."

"Tell them the safest place is here. Tell them they must stand firm. Swear them to secrecy as I have you. Bartonbry is strong really and the stronger we appear the less chance there will be of a quick attack."

"Do all your soldiers have to go to protect the duchess?"

"To be honest with you I don't know what is going to come charging out of Hell's gates. You've done military service so you know the worst thing is to be unprepared."

Derek Driver was visited by a brother who sat with him without demanding anything. They shared some bread and prayers and a knowledge that Driver would die. Derek himself measured his life in days. The brother measured it in inevitable eternities but inside knew Derek was likely to leave this world soon.

God! The confusion inside the outer wall! Flor looked at the cadets and men trying to organise themselves. He calmed-down with the thought that confusion must be good training for battle. Here he was directing an army when he'd never been in a battle or with an army! Allesandro wasn't much help either when it came to getting armed men in the field. While he was standing watching the troops trying to get tents off carts, erect them then reverse the process, Rachel from the Black Team walked up to him and gently held his arm with both hands.

"Are you worried Mr. Flor?"

Flor tried to explode but Minda's touch kept him steady. He needed time to make a sensible reply. "I'm shit scared."

"You shouldn't say that."

"Listen my dear. I know that fear can be strength or confusion. You will have to learn the difference between excitement and fear sometime. Best to do it now in the daylight. Within a week you may be being hunted by people who will get six month's pay for your capture. I have twice refused permission for you to get closer to danger than here."

"Well we'll do our best if danger comes to find us."

"You didn't listen to what I said Rachel. I'll send you away out of danger. You are too precious to leave around so you can be caught up in a flood of violence."

"But I – we – want to help."

"I know you're keen but your job is to discover what might happen not discover too late like the soldiers... .. as they learn their last ever lesson what an arrow does to them."

"Can't we do anything?"

"You nearly went this morning to be messengers and spies in Lostnock but we can use anybody with eyes and ears as a spy and anybody with a horse as a messenger. You are still very clever children."

"We're not children. We're grown ups now so everyone tells us."

"Oh. Er. Well I promise that if we can use you safely then we will."

"Instead of sending the Red and Yellow teams to Minda's country houses why not send them to Lostnock just in case she needs us?"

"Thank you Jane. Er. That's a very good idea. We are short of generals here and our troops are more likely to hurt themselves with their weapons at the moment so we don't really have an army. If Minda meets trouble it is probably not something troops can fight. We could try to rescue her from imprisonment but if she's captured that gives us a few days to mount an attack. By the way that's when the Black Team would be thrown to the dogs. Otherwise the close team that she's got already will look after her. What do you say Allesandro?"

"I'm not a general either but we must put our pieces on the board carefully. Imagine word got to Lostnock that our boy's army of a hundred troops were marching from Bartonbry. Fifty experienced soldiers and a dozen archers would slaughter them all."

Flor said "You did the right thing to make your suggestion Jane. We need all the cleverness we can get and you are very clever. I promise you two things. First if Minda needs us then you will go. Second you won't be sent to fight a battle you can't win."

Allesandro added "And dear Jane please explain what we've said to the rest of your team but not the other cadets. They are too tired and need to keep just one thing in mind."

"Remember that even if we were leaving tomorrow we would have to deceive watchers. You can keep a secret but not a hundred people. At present only a few of us know there might be any danger to Minda. Don't let your worry show."

[Thursday - Bartonbry]

On Thursday morning everyone in Bartonbry castle seemed to have got out of the wrong side of bed. Obviously they were trying to do too much

with too little. Flor and Allesandro patrolled watching how the cadets behaved under stress. It was gratifying how effective pulling a cadet aside and having a short talk about 'what would the duchess do' was.

Flor also had the daily management of the castle to look after. He needed some of his own 'what would the duchess do' talk to order his jobs and delegate sensibly. Already word had got round the town that the duchess would lend money at reasonable rates. Flor had to tell the traders that came to come back next week and please to tell everyone else that the building business was an experiment and they were too busy getting the little army out of the way.

[news of minda's arrival at Lostnock comes]

About nine a very tired messenger from Lostnock was brought to the office by the gateman. Minda needed the Little Army as soon as possible and Brand would meet it at Heronswell. The gateman who was standing by heard this so Flor said.

"John! This is a secret. You have not heard what this man has said – Understand?"

"Yes sir."

"Rest easy we will be helping her but you haven't heard anything. You know why she may be in hot water so we must be secret this time."

"Yes sir."

"Now see this brave man is looked after. Thank you messenger."

Shit! Shit!–shit!–shit! He whistled for Arthur. "I want the under-sheriff Gabriel and Cadet Upton here quickly. I want the Black Team to walk to meet me here. They are to come quickly but not run." Flor went outside again to find Allesandro. He made sure he walked without any sign of nervousness or haste. "She needs the army," he whispered looking around. "Our worst fears Alex. See how I don't show it. Come to my office in a minute and we'll plot our doom."

In the office Flor wondered how he without any experience of war was the man in charge. If only Brock was here he'd know what to do. Doreen would have the cadets smartly lined up in no time. Lucky or Brand had actually been soldiers they would know what to inspect. What would he check personally if he was going? Footwear, arms, password, where to expect danger, how to deal with emergencies. Oh dear! Footwear was

a good thing to check. He must muster the troops today for an inspection. He would get the boot and shoemakers to inspect what they knew. The Blues would have to check arms helped by the armourer. Cadets would have to know passwords and who would be where in the column and who would lead it. He would have to stay here. They only needed leadership to Heronswell after all. They should manage on their own if there was one commander.

Allesandro came in and shut the door. Flor told him the little he knew.

"Can an army march through the night Alex?"

"I don't know."

"We need to find out. The only way we can get our men to Lostnock without being defeated before they get there is by having them arrive before they are expected."

When the under-sheriff and Upton arrived they were admitted into the office. Allesandro used the cover of their arrival to warn the members of the Black Team outside that they might be leaving within the hour but they were to keep it secret. Back in the office Gabriel said that an army could march through the night but not very quickly and there would be injuries and delays and next day they would be tired and not very fit for fighting. In daylight with this weather it would take a full day to Heronswell and another to Lostnock. That meant Heronswell tomorrow night at the best. Lostnock Saturday night. Fight Sunday morning. They could all see that wasn't a good plan but without a better one they would make a start and leave the rest to Brand. Suddenly the waiting was over and they had a plan so let's make it happen. Gabriel was asked to check weapons at the muster. Flor very gently asked if he would consider taking them to Heronswell, finding out the military situation from Brand then returning to organise the defence of Bartonbry if needed. Yes he would if Upton and his troop were left at Bartonbry. What to do with the Black Team? Could they walk into Lostnock safely? Probably not but unless they were close by there would be nothing they could do safe or not. It was agreed they should leave inconspicuously in the afternoon to arrive at Heronswell after dark then possibly head for Minda's country house just outside Lostnock.

An hour after this meeting Jane Weston found Flor as he was about to address the Cadets. "Please Mr. Flor. I have a suggestion."

"Yes Jane?"

"If marching takes two days going by boat will not take any longer and will appear without warning and will not tire them out."

"Brilliant Jane!" It was obvious! "Yes I can see the benefits. All we need is boats. Find out if there are any. If so get Alex to pay for them in secret. And find out if they can go at night if needs be. Go!"

"The boys are already doing that. They knows quays from Melbun. I'll find out about going at night. If so can we start tonight at nightfall?"

"We'll aim to be gone before dawn. Well done to think of the cover of the night. Find out quickly."

Flor's orders to the cadets were practical and definite. He finished with surprising news. "You're going to war men. Real war. I promise you won't be sent into a battle that you can't win. This is not games. The best way not to get hurt is to face the enemy – As soon as you flinch they will be at you. You will meet your commanders before you get to the battlefield."

"Please sir where are we going?"

"Lostnock. The duchess wants your help to deal with a little problem she's got. She's not in danger herself but there are some lords who are not cooperating with her and when a hundred keen and well disciplined troops like you knock on their door their bluff will have been called. They may have a few armed men to put up a fight but nothing like an army. Anyone who resists you will have their belongings confiscated and some of that will be paid to you."

"How much?" said one of the cadets.

"You're soldiers today not lawyers and accountants. I don't know."

From the gatehouse Jane whistled the high-high 'OK' followed by Flor's signature whistle.

"Stay where you are men." Flor whistled the 'to-me' and Jane ran straight to him.

"Two barges could go tonight and another by noon tomorrow. We have to unload them first. It will take four hours unloading with twenty men per boat. Then we have to load food and weapons. That might take another hour."

"Right men! No marching for you! You're going by boat and you're going tonight. Don't tell everybody in Bartonbry. We must try to keep that a secret. Get your men ready for weapons and kit inspection and then everybody will be fetching and carrying to the quay."

John and James Taylor were given charge of a boat each to unload and re-stow. Four troops per boat would be 52 men. It would be best to put all weapons stacked together to save space. Luckily Tomlyn had long ago given each man a number which had been painted on their personal weapons. From experience the Taylors knew boats leaked but the best they could do was put sheaves of arrows at the bottom with food and weapons on top. They dealt easily with the watermen. Tents were cut up to make covers for the barges. Wattles were used to partition the storage from the space for the men. Two barges would be enough for all of them if they were careful. The third boat could take tents and more supplies they were unlikely to find ready in Lostnock.

The watch were to stop anybody leaving the town who wasn't completely trustworthy. The girls from the Black Team hurried to the Abbey and asked to see Brother Caxton. Rachel took the lead.

"Brother we have a favour to ask of you."

"Yes girls."

"You will soon hear that the Little Army is going by boat to Lostnock. Word has come that she has met trouble carried there by Father Harris. Our request is that you do your best to see our friends don't get betrayed. They are young and if they met real soldiers would be slaughtered. We will put it about by lies and bribes that they are marching by road to give them a chance."

"You are brave girls and I'm sure the others are brave also but still children. I am only one voice in many here but I will do my best. Bad things have happened. I pray the duchess is alright."

"We don't know Brother but it is thought she is unhurt, free but needs the little army to put spirit into others to quell danger."

"Let's hope so."

"We must go now Brother. Er. Is it allowed to give you a kiss?"

"Oh I don't see why not – If I can give you each a little hug."

Jane added a parting remark in a casual dreamy sort of way. "If we don't come back then the evil will come to Bartonbry in our stead."

Once outside the Abbey gate Jane's blanket of fear she'd thrown at Caxton fell back on her. "Sorry about that last bit girls. I was only trying to help him see where his own interest was. If we don't come back it's – er – because we've gone on to do other things."

Rachel said "Maggie and me ran away so we could fight. Now it's for real and who cares if we don't come back?"

Maggie added "And it's better because we'll be fighting for a good reason."

"So you're not afraid?"

"No! Cheer-up Jane we'll all be together."

Flor was trying to fit all his plates on the table. There were plagued by lack of generals. Brand needed warning about the change of plan. The moon was in hiding. The river level was low. If the little army needed to march outside Lostnock it would need its waggons. Somebody had forgotten you can't get ale from roadside inns on a boat. Flor was tempted to lead the boats but even Jane would be as good as him. Who and what should go by road? Alex was a good advisor and sharp observer but hardly a general. He could probably pass down the Lostnock road before anyone realised who he was. Flor made up his mind. Alex would take two of the Black girls by road. They needed to know what was on the road in case there was a force coming to meet them. They had to catch Brand. The sooner they left the better. Flor called Allesandro into the office and explained the plan.

"If the boats leave at an hour before dawn tonight then they will be at Lostnock early on Saturday morning. You need to be at Lostnock with Brand by tomorrow night. Do you want to leave now and stay at Heronswell or rest here and make it in one day?"

"Leave now. There could be any number of delays in troubled times. I'll be gone with Maggie and Rachel in twenty minutes and stop the night at Heronswell."

"God be with you Alex."

"And you. Let's hope we're not too late."

[Bartonbry Thursday late]

By the evening the news of the amazing reappearance of Minda at Lostnock had reached Bartonbry by normal means. The mobilisation of the Little Army and activity on the quay had the whole town chattering with excitement. As night fell torches were lit and spectators gathered.

Brother Caxton felt his duty should be to the men of the little army who were now going into danger because of the plotting of Father Harris. His prayers brought him close to the fiery question 'was inaction enough?'

Did God want him to stay in the abbey or assist the men going to war? He remembered Flor's open invitation and went to the castle.

"Welcome Brother. I am busy but will find time to help you."

"I wondered if I may help?"

"How do you think?"

"Should there be a small service of dedication as they leave on their first campaign? They may die in a few days or be drowned?"

"It would be very well Brother. The Good Lord watches over us always but it is best to pause and examine our souls before battle. The plan is to leave at midnight. That's a secret of course! Will we go together at about half eleven?"

"Shall I meet you there brother. I will visit poor Derek Driver in the gaol first."

"Oh! I'd forgotten about him. What a waste of life! Thank you Brother. Thank you."

Arthur had been flying faster than an arrow round Bartonbry all afternoon and was beginning to flag. He quietly came into the office where Flor was dealing with questions he didn't know enough about so developed the method of directing the questioner to the person most likely to be able to decide – often the questioner themselves.

When it was Arthur's turn he said. "Should the Duchess have her black and white sword to show? The one she had a Melbun. If she's at the head of an army she should have that."

"You're right Arthur. And her shield. Oh and chain mail if we have any her size. Go straight to the armourer."

"Please one more thing Flor. I will stay with you and look after the castle with you."

"Thank you Arthur. Now fly!"

The under-sheriff was on duty in the gaol while Rob Upton was being efficient watching the watchmen at the gates and encouraging the innkeepers to ask their customers how they might best serve Bartonbry? The amateur archers in their smart uniforms paraded aimlessly but at least showed they were willing. Brother Caxton came in.

"How may I help you Brother?"

"May I talk to Derek Driver and comfort him?"

"Oh. Er. Yes but I will have to find a guard to be present. I'm sorry Brother but he put the duchess' neck in a noose with help from the abbey so much as I know you as an old friend I cannot leave you alone with him."

"He may need confession which is private."

"I will have a man outside and the door closed then."

"I see you are fair and you are right to mistrust the abbey. We are like a dog that bit once and might bite again."

"Little Arthur has come each day to comfort him."

"Why?"

"Because Flor told him."

"What does Derek think of that?"

"Please brother ask him yourself. My job is to hold criminals and drunks. I've never had a traitor to his own family before and it makes me clammy. He hasn't been charged with anything but we all know he will die."

Brother Caxton was left alone with Derek Driver without a guard. When Rob Upton returned from his inspection and learned of this he went outside for a couple of minutes then returned.

"Sir. I would like to thank Brother Caxton for visiting the gaol. Our prisoners need God's comfort as well as everyone else. May I fetch him some food?"

"You're up to something Rob!"

"I'll fetch the food and you will see." A few minutes later Rob returned with bread and a bottle of wine. "Here it is Sir. Bread and wine." Rob stared directly at Angel. Eventually the religious significance appeared.

"Go on then boy. It's an act of kindness."

The efforts of everyone, Little army, boatmen and the town in general meant that they managed to have all three boats ready for departure by midnight. The enthusiasm of the Little army in a town that had been slowly decaying until the Duchess came was rewarded by casks of ale paid for by subscription as they worked by the flickering torchlight. There were no casual volunteers to go with them from the townfolk as everyone had work and wages but there was goodwill. In a period of less than five minutes the pressure of work eased and vacant expectancy took over. Flor and Little Arthur arrived at the quay.

"Are you ready Jane?"

"Yes sir."

"If not say so."

"We're ready."

"Come and sit on this pile of whatever it is with me. I don't know what you'll find when you get to Lostnock. Your job is to get them there and let them fight if they have to or hide if they have to or deceive if they have to or sail downstream if they have to. You will arrive before anyone expects you so use surprise. You are the general but you are to send your men to die so you can return."

Silence.

"I have to defend Bartonbry. You have your cadets who are getting really good at thinking for themselves. Make sure they rest. Look after them on the river and they will look after you at Lostnock."

"Yes sir."

"We are all guessing but Brand should be on the quay to meet you and he will know what to do. One thing is certain every man must be ready to use his weapon as he steps ashore."

"I will get them there sir."

"I know you're tired and use 'sir' to keep yourself straight but you'll be even more tired soon. That's good as your men will be rested. Come on give me a hug. We're all tired.".. ... "Even if Minda dies we will revenge her."

Brother Caxton arrived. A cart of hot pork came courtesy of the customers of the Sun Inn. A cart of warmed bread courtesy of the customers of the Castle inn arrived. A cart carrying a cask of wine from leading business arrived. Flor guessed Richards was behind the pork but was being too cynical. He stood on a pile of stone and blew his whistle.

"Little army listen to me! If there's any of that food left I will whip each and every one of you. Blue team! You make sure everyone gets something. While you're taking what you've earned I want silence." The quay went almost silent. "Thank you townsfolk for these gestures. I'm not the Duchess so I can't come and kiss you all but all our fates are tied with hers. Our town has woken up and is blinking in the sunlight thanks to the Duchess. None of us know her peril but on this quay there's a hundred souls that are going into battle. Soon they will step off this shore onto their surging river. We will wave them goodbye and watch them go into the night. Hey! Give me a cheer for the brave boatmen

who are steering these boats through the night." The quay erupted in cheers. "Yes these men and boys are going into battle. Their swords will be drawn the next time they step onto land. Hey! Give me a cheer for the men that leap ashore ready to fight for the Duchess!" They quay erupted in cheers again. "Tomorrow we will look to defending our own town but now we must take our leave of our loved ones and ask God to care for them." He turned to brother Caxton.

"Dear Lord. Please care for our boys. Please care for our men. Our God in Heaven you can see everything but no man can conquer evil on his own. One man's evil may need a little army to conquer it. Evil is all around but if we are strong together we may defeat it. I have seen evil and not been strong enough to deal with it but this town can deal with all evils if it wishes. You have wished tonight! Our Lord bathes us with his love and in time we get clean. The worse stains take longer but Bartonbry has found the best soap to help." He followed Flor's lead to finish. "Hey! Give me a cheer for God's love and man's love." The quay erupted in cheering again with a 'Good old Caxton' heard in the crowd.

Flor quickly briefed Jane then blew his whistle. The quay went silent. He ducked to take off his whistle.

"Your commander for the voyage will be Lady Jane Weston. If any man objects then I will tell you that it was her idea to save you two days walking. Now does any man object?"

Silence. He passed the whistle to Jane who blew the shortest peep then spoke.

"Red, yellow and blue commanders please leave as soon as you are ready. We have a job to do." Flor could have hugged her twenty times for this simple demonstration of leadership but kept clear now she was commanding. His instinct had been right! The quay started to empty to orders and the boats began to be overrun with confusions and then settle down. Four polers on the red and yellow boats and two on the lightly-loaded blue boat waited for orders and last-minute instruction by the professional boatmen. Lines were cast-off and the black water separated the boats from the fixed world. When there was a foot between the quay and the blue boat Brother Caxton stepped onto it. The boats were soon swallowed in the blackness. Only the torch at the bows of the leading barge could be seen for five minutes before the river curved round the castle walls.

Flor stayed on his pile of stone until the crowd of spectators on the quay had gone. He wished he had kissed Jane before she went to meet

blades beyond her comprehension. Arthur was still, probably asleep, leaning on a cask. Flor wondered if Caxton had planned to join the little army and could he really be trusted. He could have got him brought back when he saw it happen but put it down to Bartonbry's volunteering spirit. He would have to use that now to organise the defence of the town. How to encourage rather than demand. He couldn't remember what Minda had insisted on... Oh well it was too late to worry. The watchman of the quay appeared below Flor in his own torchlight. "Will I see you and Arthur Gridds home sir?"

"Please do watchman." Flor was about to continue but fatigue struck. It was all he could do to stumble down the heap of stone without falling over. "Arthur!"... "...Come on little man we're going home to bed."

A strange woman's voice took charge. "Flor take my arm. Little Arthur wake up. Wake up. It's Lizzy."

The men got home without remembering how.

"Lizzie and her accomplice kissed them goodbye."

7 Minda arrives at Lostnock

[Tuesday on the river]

There is plenty of landscape to be in but not much space to be in on a barge. Going downstream the laden barge was kept out of the backwaters and shallows by poling. Within a few minutes of boarding Minda and Tom had assessed the size, quality and difficulty of manufacture of the iron parts. Comforts for the all-male crew were limited to a small space at the front of the hold and a brick oven for cooking. Cushions and a crude tent over the rear of the hold had been arranged by Flor for this voyage. Minda tried hard to make friends with the captain but he appeared to be made of the same substance as his cargo. He wasn't rude, just uncommunicative. Tom had no difficulty. Evidently boats were meant for men and not women. Minda vowed to tease this splinter out later. This was a nice way to travel and yet could be so much better – How could the boatmen be so stupid not to see!

Doreen spoke to Minda. "What should I do? Derek drinks and is abusive. He says he should be the steward not me. I hear he's now saying things against me in the inns. Where ever I go I get little complaints about him. He want's me to resign so he can be steward again."

"If you resigned Flor would be steward. Tell him to make the most of what he's got or go."

"How can I tell him to go. I can't just throw him out of my house."

"Yes you can. What's stopping you?"

"The law. He can say what he likes and be believed."

"I say who lives in my castle. If you don't want him then he must go."

"Where?"

"I don't care about him. You are worth a hundred Dereks. A thousand."

"I still care for him. He's just lost in jealousy and ridicule."

"But he'll never be half as good as you. I can never trust him for being stupid at Christmas. We gave him the opportunity to be a useful servant. I must say I haven't heard anything good about his work... Oh I'm sorry. Err I was thinking you would pull him up. Now I see I should have done it myself. Sorry Doreen. I don't think I'll understand men for as long as I live."

"What do I do Minda? I came with you to get away from him."

"I will take him up the highest tower and hold him over the edge until he reforms or I get bored with his excuses. How about that?"

"It sounds too violent to me."

"We've shown the rabbit to the dog. If he won't follow it what are we to do?"

"I don't know Minda."

"I won't have unhappy people in my castle."

"Let me hug you Minda – My child. For the last week you have been drowning in unhappiness."

"No I've not been drowning it's just that the air of everyday conversation turns sour and it is easier not to breath than choke."

"Whatever it is I'm pleased you trust Delphia and me to guide you as you get better."

Minda whispered "It was Tom. Delphia made me get out of bed but Tom dragged me out of my bedroom."

"Bless him."

"Yes bless him."

"You handled the difficult situation really well Minda."

"I wish I was a milkmaid and could marry him."

"If he was prince you couldn't marry him."

"But I would anyway."

"And end up with your own version of my Derek?"

"But Tom's not like that."

"Neither was Derek – But he is now. I still don't know how to deal with him."

"I'll have a talk with him when we get back. 'Behave and be happy or go'."

"Thank you Minda. I've told him that but he won't listen to me."

"Stop his wages and wait for him to compla // Oh I'm sorry Doreen. That was a stupid thing of me to say."

"Arguing isn't going to solve it. First thing when we get back I'll give him one last chance."

On the river the passengers sometimes walked along the tow path to make a change from sitting still. Minda asked if she and Tom could have a go at towing to see how hard it was. The secret was not to hurry and then be constant, but even so their legs soon began to hurt. They also had a go at poling which suited their strong arms better but only when they managed to get the unwieldy pole positioned correctly. When she looked at the tons of stone being carried it was remarkable how easy it was to move. She also asked about using horses instead of men and thought how to deal with the problems. It would be nice to have a light boat that would take her between Bartonbry and Lostnock. You could write letters, eat a meal, take the air and avoid the dirt and danger of the roads. She would have to get started on Lostnock now Bartonbry was doing well. According to Francis she owned a lot of property in Lostnock, and with so much trade there must be ways to invest. Perhaps Pod should move his smithy and foundry to a larger site right next to the river so he didn't have to cart coals and iron. According to Delphia they needed bigger premises already even though Thredvald and Jiller did sub-contract work. She was looking forward to returning to take her rightful place at the head of Lostnock society. What a pity she would arrive at the grubby stone quay in her dowdy travelling clothes.

[Wednesday afternoon - Lostnock]

Mr. Bob sent a servant along the tow path to give advanced warning. He came back quickly to report that there was another watcher. "Well done Pike. Now go back as far as you need to see the other watcher and when he starts to run back come straight here." When he'd gone they all knew the war had started. Someone else wanted to meet her. Only Harris knew she was coming by boat so this was definitely trouble. "I'll ask Davey and Danico if they want to volunteer. I'm sure they will. Brand can you mobilise the smiths and their friends to smother whatever forces there are against us. Block the lanes and so on. Lucky we need some hired blades very quickly. I'll be on the quay. I'll leave you to take whatever positions you think best."

Brand said "Don't trust even a single washer-woman."

The ragged skyline of Lostnock on its hill was reinforced by its unforgettable smell caught on the light wind. Minda stood with Tom on the tiny deck while Agnes and Doreen sat back and left them to their moment. Minda could see Mr. Bob waiting and with him her friends Dan and Davey from the Tax Office. How nice. She waved. Only a few yards of water left. Tom asked why they were armed.

"You're right." An ENEMY HERE low-high-low whistle! Bob and the labourers turned to see the Town watch marching into the stone yard. Minda reached for her knife. Tom's only weapon was Delphia's knife and that was snug in his pack. "Grab a pole Tom!" Another whistle! Low-high-high DISENGAGE-GO! unclogged Minda's brain. "Shove off Tom. Let the rope go men! NOW! Bob saw the problem and threatened them. Slowly the boat crept away from the quay as Tom heaved. The sheriff in his full helmet and plate demanded she return but now they were fifteen feet into the stream and out of pike range. More people were beginning to arrive and already the town watch were getting caught up in arguments. In half a minute the commotion was remote. Minda wondered what they should do now. "How do we stop drifting?"

"Anchor!" Said Doreen.

"There isn't one."

"Use a stone." Said Tom.

"Agnes, Doreen pull that rope in. Tom help me get a stone out." With rocking and sliding they managed to get a block onto the deck. They did their best to tie the rope round it then slid it over the side. They were

soaked with the splash but the rope took up tension and they seemed to have stopped drifting. The pair of boats began rearranging themselves to face upstream. "Get you knife Tom. We may need to cut that rope quickly."

"It's chain for the first bit. We can't cut it."

"Shit!"

Doreen said "I'm keeping watch. They've made Mr. Bob a prisoner!"

"Bastards!"

What were her strengths? Friends in the town. The quay seemed very crowded. She looked around. Swimming was no good. "Agnes look for anything that moves or is sharp or heavy." Stone wasn't much use for anything.

"There's a rowing boat coming! It's got three watchmen and the Sheriff and two rowers."

"Quick Tom we can drop a stone in their boat when they get alongside. If that doesn't work we'll have to smash it with the poles." It was easier now they knew the technique and they soon had a three hundredweight lump poised on the deck."

"Surrender in the name of the law!" cried the sheriff from the back of the boat. "I arrest you for practising witchcraft and the murder of your brother."

There was silence as the sheriff's boat closed the gap between it and where Minda was standing. The leading oarsman drew in his oar and reached for the painter ready to board. As the boat bumped alongside Tom and Minda bent down and tipped the stone over the edge. It fell two feet. Crushed a watchman's leg. Smashed the bottom of the boat and tipped it over. In a second or two the Sheriff and watchmen had sunk in splashing turmoil.

Without the weight of armour and helmets to drag them down the boatmen were afloat. "Quick Tom a pole! Give them something to hold onto. Minda lay on the narrow deck. "Doreen. Hold my legs I'll pull them out." Minda stretched over the side and caught the hand of one of the boatmen. He had blood washing all over his face but seemed alive enough to help himself. "Hang on!" She pulled him to the barge then getting a grip under first one shoulder then the other scraped him up the side using her strength the eighteen inches or so to deck level. That was as hard as moving the stones. What next? How to do the last bit. Agnes lend a hand! Eventually with more effort he was fully on deck. Bloody, wet, but perfectly alive.

"Now the other one!" Tom reminded Minda she had to do that all over again.

Tom pulled the second boatman to the side with the pole. Minda leant out over the edge again, caught his hand then repeated the under the shoulders manoeuvre to get him up as far as she could. The first boatman leant down to catch his legs and swing him up. Minda was puffed-out from the awkward straining. "Doreen patch this man if it's bad. Agnes don't take your eyes off the quays. Well done Tom."

There was complete silence on the barge as the horror and speed of four men drowning within arm's reach was realised. Four men beneath them at this minute. For Minda it was more painful because she was already a murderess and had nothing to lose but now the others had deaths to answer for in this world or the next. Could she risk boldly challenging Lostnock having defeated the sheriff? She had too few strong friends and too many determined and unknown enemies. She needed every friend she could find. "Agnes can you see Brand or Lucky? Tom can you see anybody you know?"

"I'm sorry about what happened boatmen. I will pay for your boat and I may have a good job for you in a while but now I need your help. I have to escape and the river is my friend. Will the boatmen of Lostnock help me?"

"I owe you my life Your Grace."

"Me too Your Grace."

"You were right to murder your brother."

"Even if you do a little bit of witchcraft it's all been good. I'll help."

"But how can we help?"

"Do you know Smith Watts?"

"Yes."

"Tell him my plan is to leave by ship and go to Melbun by sea. I'll bring back a very angry King. Tell him to arrange a ship. He will know how. Don't tell anybody else. Not anybody. In the meantime I want the boatmen of Lostnock to command the river in my name. Can you call some. There will be a reward but you may have to wait a few weeks until I return with the King's army to put a few evil people to death. Tell everyone that the watchmen were innocent and died because they helped a corrupt sheriff. If you help me well I will have an annual feast for the boatmen. How about that?"

"Please Your Grace I would help you anyway but you are very generous."

"You'll get paid for your boat by my friends if you say the Gipsy told you."

"Oh a special word."

Minda's knife was at the boatman's chin. "Secret!" It vanished as quickly but his slow response made him step back right to the edge of the barge and was about to topple into the river but Minda's reactions were as good as they always had been in a crisis and caught him. "Sorry. Right let's call your mates and we'll get on our way."

While a rescue boat was coming out to them one of the boatmen asked.

"Please Your Grace are you a secret boatman as well as a secret smith?"

"No but I wish I was. When I return you must give me lessons. I'm quite strong. What made you ask?"

"You picked us up out of the water by lifting under the armpits."

"Is that special?"

"Everyone else pulls people out by their arms. Boatmen know you shouldn't do that."

"Why?"

"It wrenches muscles horribly."

"Well at the first annual watermen's feast you can tell me what I have to do to join the brotherhood. Could you row all the way up to Bartonbry say one rower to one passenger? Think of that. Ladies like me and men like Tom that have saddle sores."

"Did you Tom!" Evidently the boatmen knew Tom well.

"Yes Frank. I rode all the way to Bartonbry. Never again! And Joe you can take that smirk off your face or you're going back in the river!"

"Sorry Tom."

Once the new boatmen were confirmed as friendly Minda told them that one way or another the families of the three watchmen would get support. She would give a sixpence to any man that raised a body and a shilling to the head watchman to arrange dignified funerals for his friends.

The barge owner came out in a boat with a woman presumably his wife. The owner came aboard then his wife...

"Lucky!"

"Shssh!"

"Comfort the others Lucky I'll comfort the owner."

"I'm sorry Mr. Long. You know more about what's happened than me. I have to escape now by sea then return with the King's army to deal with the evil people here. They will die. I know I can trust you. You will never dock again at Bartonbry if I can't..."

"I trust you like the weather miss. You're not constant but we need you."

"Hmm. I'll take that as a yes. I will get a ship sailing to Melbun to come over to the barge then you can get your barge back to the quay. The negotiations should happen in the next hour. How long would it take for them to set sail?"

"Two to four hours?"

"If money makes it quicker then I have money and my friends will pay straight away. You know how I deal with things at Bartonbry. Honest effort gets good reward but cheating gets punished. Teach them that in Lostnock while I'm away."

"When will you return?"

"As soon as possible. The sea journey to Melbun is down the river, along the coast then up river. I understand that may take all sorts of time depending on the weather. Then the King has to get a thousand men and a score of lords to crush the evil here. Tell the ordinary people of Lostnock the King is their Lord and I will be their mistress and not to aid the Bishop and his allies."

"It is easy for you to take a stand miss but the likes of me have to live here without guards."

"Do your best. I know how evil these people are but I also know how most people are innocent of malice like those three drowned watchmen."

"Yesterday when you pulled my boat I saw you really would work for the ordinary man. I would be proud to have a daughter like you."

"Have you got any children Long?" Her favourite 'making friends' subject.

"Yes miss. One is a puller who would be with us but he has a poisoned foot/"

"/Stop! Will money make his foot better quicker?"

"No miss it should be nearly better by now."

"How did he get it?"

"Trod on a thorn. As simple as that."

"Does that happen often?"

"About once a year for my pullers."

"We must talk more about this when I return. It may be better boots or a path that's kept in good repair. I could do both. I like the river. Thank you for showing it to me Long."

"It has many moods miss. There is a lot more to show."

"I think you are my friend Long. I am going to trust you with my life now. Are you ready?"

"Yes miss."

"If I manage to get onboard a ship to Melbun I want you to bring your boats back to the quay about dusk."

"Why?"

"Because I do. Don't ask me or tell anybody else. Just do it."

Minda hugged Lucky quickly. "Everyone can see us." She whispered. "Wait on the quay after dusk. Believe me. Tell the others. Thanks for being brave. Don't forget your disguise as you get into the rowing boat or out of it." Lucky silently mimed an argument with wagging finger, hands on hips and goose neck to Minda's face.

"You bitch!" Minda smiled. "I would kiss you but it will have to wait until tonight. Good bye and thank you for coming."

The truce of the afternoon was marked by four sad bodies being caught then dragged one leg first to the surface. Minda watched on behalf of the others who she commanded not to look. She explained they were innocent accomplices just as the watchmen were innocent servants of the sheriff. She also explained her escape plan.

"I'm sorry but we must flee and come back another day. I have been taught many times the rule that running away is a very good idea."

"What about Mr. Bob?"

"There's nothing I can do about him so I'm not even thinking about it. He may be dead already or just under house arrest or Dan and Davey have freed him. That's for the people on the land to sort out."

A message came that a ship would be leaving in two hours. Minda made certain requirements known. Eventually a ship detached itself from the quayside and drifted downstream guided by four rowing boats

with ropes. It raised a sail to slow as it reached the barges. The length of the ship was hardly more than both barges. Minda in her red cloak and her hair flowing hair was first up the side and across the deck to arrogantly face the town quay a hundred paces away. Agnes followed with her hair packed tight in her cap. She waved to whoever was on the shore. Next was Tom. He held his fists up in a gesture of strength. Doreen slowly climbed up then showed herself. Minda dived back to the barge on the blind side as Agnes released her hair, put on Minda's eye patch and cloak and was held up by Tom as if she was over six foot tall. The ship made its escape. Firstly measured in inches then feet then before long in furlongs and miles.

The barges were brought back to the quay with the help of a rowing boat and three men to break-out the stone anchor which luckily came out of it's rudimentary harness. Minda was clearly on the ship that had gone down the river so couldn't be on the stone barge. Of course the crew knew but nobody on the land would.

After true darkness fell Minda and Lucky found each other on the quay. Lucky, still in skirts only had to say once 'my husband will call me a gipsy' in his quietest voice to tell Minda she was free to come out of hiding. She hugged him very tightly. She whispered "What's the plan?"

"Brand is free. The rest of us are watched. Pod is a statesman. Bob is free but a marked man."

"Smiths?"

"Suspect, watched but not targets yet. I think."

"Is there somewhere I can stay hidden for an day or two to gather our strength?"

"A messenger is riding through the night to Bartonbry."

"What is his message?"

"Force needed before yesterday."

"Where can I stay hidden until that force arrives?"

"Our plan was to house you in the guard's quarters above the Tax Office. But that is probably watched. We could defend it but we want them to think you are out of the way for at least two weeks so our first plan is secrecy."

"Why?"

"They will have to decide what the general threat to them is. If they knew you were here they would do everything to kill you. You killed the sheriff so they know killing anybody is allowed."

"Who are 'they'?"

"Definitely the Bishop of Lostnock. He should have left for exile over two weeks ago."

"Shit!"

"He's defying the King."

"Oho! Then this is my duty. Silly man will get a smacked bottom."

"Head on a pike you mean."

"Yes I do."

"I could take you to Avel Hall tomorrow but as nobody would expect you to be in your own house and Henry has made it secure why not hide there at least tonight?"

"Will it be watched?"

"I have a man watching the front and one watching the back."

"I've been thinking on the boat but I need to talk to hammer a plan into shape and put an edge on it. They can't watch everywhere. Their plan was to arrest me. If they'd waited an hour or two they might have done it. Now they might be watching Bob and Pod to see what they do but not everywhere. Why don't we all meet at Henry's house."

"Oh! Your house. That'll be watched."

"Who are all these watchers?"

"They only need to follow one of us to discover a meeting place."

"Then what? Who is going to harm us? Are the citizens going to come in scores with swords and armour?"

"I don't know."

"Right! We'll meet at Henry's in half an hour then the bolt-hole is the Office and if that fails Mr. Chris'."

"Follow me then Minda."

Lucky lead their way through the squashy black lanes of Lostnock. Minda's training came back to her but there was a the burden of worry she never used to feel. There was definitely somebody following them!

"It's Brand." whispered Lucky.

"Oh I forget. I've spent too much time alone." Carry on.

This was the first time she'd seen her Lostnock town house. Being hurried in through the courtyard gates wasn't the best way to get first impressions but this was the largest house she'd been in at Lostnock. There must be room for offices and guests. It was empty except for Henry and he'd turned every flat surface into a place to put maps. After Brand had shown her round she returned to the ground floor and made sure she knew the escape routes. Flor was good at that sort of thing. How was he getting on at Bartonbry playing with the Little Army? He would soon have a shock! Now she was hungry and had a servant fetch hot birds that reminded her of her first day at the office. "Pike!"

"Yes miss."

"How are you? Has Mr. Bob lent you to me?"

"Yes miss. And so I may take messages in secret."

"Good."

"Am I forgiven miss?"

"Forgiven? For what Pike?"

"The day you came in through the upstairs window and held me up by my collar for rudeness."

"Oh yes so I did. At the top of the stairs wasn't it."

"Yes miss."

"Well – Um – Yes of course! An ugly brute like me breaking into houses would scare anyone. How old are you now pike?"

"Thirteen this summer."

"Growing up! Come here and let me embrace you little Pike."

Minda's mischief was returning. What had the bargeman said? She was like the weather. Well that had been a dull patch and now for April showers. Sunshine, hail and lightning.

They sat round the parlour table with only two candles and the windows firmly shuttered.

"Stop looking nervously at the doors men. You've set your guards so let them guard while we plan. Um. Paul! What have you got to report?"

"The bishop is defying the King. You are bold enough to deal with him. It suits the King to let you sort it out."

"Why?"

"Because he doesn't have complete loyalty like you do. He is nervous and old. He might be a nice man but he is old because he doesn't interfere

too much with the schemes of powerful people. This way he can look his couriers and magnates in the eye and say 'hasn't she done well' without giving them a chance to argue or betray or combine or dither."

"A-B-C-D! That's good."

"No Minda. You're good."

"So if I send word to him that I want a thousand men I would have to wait a month and get a hundred?"

"That's about it."

"Right! We're going to Melbun and sorting out some loyalty of our own when we've finished here."

"You're already doing some of that in a backward way with the cadets. Many of their families are annoyed and worried about the way their boys adore you."

"Good!"

"Anything else Paul?"

"I've sent two messengers to Melbun by different routes. One to the King himself saying today's facts and telling him telling him you will be arriving at Melbun by the fastest boat to lead his army to Lostnock."

"Did you write that! Bad boy!" She smiled.

"Father Harris once told me 'Sow small discords amongst your allies so you may heal their disputes and become their leader'."

"Oh that's is evil. Heh heh heh." The rest of the table was silent. "What are you looking at me for!"

Mr. Bob had the courage to speak "We are your allies."

"No. You are my friends. I am already your leader." There was still an awkward silence. "I promise never to sow discord between you."

"Amen" said Lucky still in his women's clothing.

"Are you a nun Lucky?" She asked.

"Really Minda! I'm a respectable weaver's wife. Keep teasing – Please."

The silence was warmer. Chuckles broke out. Paul continued "The other message was to the man with the black hair and green hat." He gave her a moment to remember that 'black and green' was the signature of chief of secrets 'Xavier'. Luckily Lucky brought the message you were not leaving for Melbun before I'd completed my first version. I've told him Lostnock needs a new Sheriff and to expect the Bishop to be killed and that you've done this before in Bartonbry so not to be too worried but it

would be really nice if the King himself could give you support in the early days of your victory."

Everyone looked at Minda. She thought in silence. "The King thinks I'm coming to Melbun to take command of an army though."

"Exactly. I've told black and green that the earlier information is false. It is up to him what he does with it."

To break the uncertain silence Minda explained. "I have met this man we call black and green. You all know Silks, he is like him. I think he is as honest as I am. I trust him to think before telling people what they ought to know."

"Mr. Bob? You were arrested as an accomplice I hear? Give my love to Dan and Davey."

"I was. I will. They made the Watch arrest them as well as me and with a crowd around jeering nothing much happened. There was a lot of huffing about resisting arrest but when you sank their boat I thought 'What would Minda do?' She would sympathise with the watchmen for the hurt and – er deaths of their friends. I did that and so did Davey and Dan. Actually I was sympathetic. Then I thought what I would feel if Davey and Dan had been in that boat. I lectured the watchmen man-to-man on how we fell into the trap of sowing conflict and reaped the harvest. I asked them straight if they thought you meant to kill their colleagues and they said no. I asked them if they thought the sheriff was corrupt and they said yes. 'Arresting us now is not a good idea is it?' I said and they agreed. I invited them to my office at noon tomorrow so we may deal with anything then. Thank you Minda."

"Thanking me what for?"

"Teaching me how to deal with the situation."

"I'm sure I never did. – But it is what I think I would have liked to have done."

"Minda. Do I stay here or vanish for a while?"

"I don't understand Bob?"

"You told me about running away. I'm not afraid to run away if that makes your job easier."

"You can be my Little Arthur of Lostnock Bob. If anyone touches you they touch me and they can guess what that means."

"Shall I be the Bishop's tart then?" jested Lucky. This was received in thoughtful silence.

"Pod. You have been very quiet. Our diplomat. Thank you for arranging that ship."

"It was not too difficult. Expensive but now I'm a man that deals with so much money I'm respected more."

"Well I love you Pod. And your family. And poor Tom who is being blown like a leaf in the wind by events. Did Delphia tell you I've got him measured for a suit at Bartonbry – you can guess how expensive that will be. I will clothe you all if you come to visit me."

"Did you get the ring?"

"Yes I wear it on Toms chai/ /IT'S GONE! I had it before we arrived! Oh no! Pod! I've lost it! In the river when I pulled the boatmen out maybe. Oh no I've lost it! It was so – so – beautiful to smiths." She couldn't keep the tears away.

"I would rather you lost it that watched a man drown said Pod."

"But" sniff "I could have rescued the men and not lost it."

"Don't worry dear. It's a bit of metal."

"How can you be so calm about a star-iron Avel ring!"

Pod had forgotten the 'star-iron' bit. The three of them had enjoyed their intense evening of practice and perfection combining a nail a needle and a knife from their households but knew there wasn't a speck of star-iron in it. "It was only when Delphia came back and she told us the black iron and white steel combined were the Avel colours. Cheer-up! It's bound to be found in a fish's stomach. Rings always do according to legend."

"Stop! Legends are for round the winter fire. We must act. Well done Pod. Is Delphia safe?"

"I don't know Minda."

"Please be extra careful."

"Brand?"

"The little army has been sent for. Bartonbry should get the message tomorrow morning. They can't leave until the morning of the day after tomorrow at the best. Marching with carts will take two days. I guess they will make better time but we shouldn't expect them to be fighting before Sunday. It's Wednesday today that gives us three days to survive without support."

"Can they fight?"

"Yes. They will be enough. The cadets don't know how weak they are and the soldiers are well fed. I'm sure if they know you are a prisoner here they will try hard."

"But who will be in command? Who will direct them? Er – What will they be attacking?"

"I will meet them at Heronswell. When we get to the gates we'll find a way to frighten or fight."

"Who will be holding the town gates against you?"

Brand was blank. "Er The town watch."

"So we must deal with them before you arrive?"

"That would save a lot of trouble yes."

"If you can go to Heronswell why not me? Can't I put on armour and lead them on a fine horse into battle?"

"We've had this discussion before Minda. No. – You would be good at leading but every arrow and charge of the enemy would go straight to you. Your flag will do the leading. Your work was done when you smiled at soldiers and paid them and teased the cadets. They're all keen."

"That leaves you Lucky."

"Thank you Minda. Many days I ask the Lord 'am I worthy to tread on his earth and breathe his air?' I wonder why he lets me. Then he gives me a chance to look after you – his angel on earth. Red Ken and his scrag-ends of humanity are at your service. I have found two mercenaries who are the weasels I was when you rescued me. Nobody has been recruiting mercenaries. I have paid them to spend three days in Heronswell searching for fish nests."

"Why?"

"They are no use to us but might be to our enemies. Also they will tell their friends I have money so that might be bait."

"Can I tell you my plan gentlemen? Pod – what we do is debate our plan openly then decide on one thing. If there are doubts or confusions we deal with them now so speak up."

"Yes Minda."

"You're a strength stronger than you know it to me Pod." She got up and placed her hands over his shoulders on his chest in a symbolic hug for all to see. The same tableau as when she owned Tom at Bartonbry. "You make me steady and brave." The room was expectantly silent.

"My plan is to walk straight into the sheriff's office and win-over the under-sheriff and watchmen. I have money and goodwill in my purse. I can win the watchmen's hearts with simple kindness but that isn't enough. I must also turn the under-sheriff to be my supporter. I was

thinking in my solitude on the stone boat that I should do what Paul said. I've already done this! Turn the town against the church. If I'm here in the open then will the people of the town protect me against the church? Will they then see there is evil to be squeezed?"

Pod said "Yes. Without doubt. Lostnock is for progress. It likes sauce as well. If you can lead the under-sheriff by the nose then Lostnock will be delighted. He's a good-sort really. I'll come with you if you like."

"Thank you Pod. Um – I'd rather you stayed the shadowy diplomat. I may have to be quite horrible and you're so nice."

"The offer remains dear."

"Thank you. Bob? You live here and know the feelings of the town."

Bob replied "I think you have the mood of the town Minda. We have to survive four days without being attacked. If the watch gives the lead I'm sure the others will follow."

Brand said. "You might make it known that your colours are black and white and let it be known more quietly that citizens could show their support."

"Oh Brand! You were always spreading rumours about me at Trowstead."

"What's the point of being good at something if nobody knows about it?"

"You told straight lies – I know."

"So what?"

"You might at least have told me what miracles I was supposed to have done."

"Why? The rumours soon took a life of their own."

The plan was agreed. Minda would surprise the under-sheriff and charm the watchmen. Brand would collect the fighters. Paul and Lucky were responsible for intelligence about the Bishop and his friends. Pod would be a tree in a flood that townsfolk could cling to. Everyone had doubts about the many grey areas but happiness in the comradeship of their friends.

Mr. Bob walked into the Gaol and asked to see the under-sheriff. The watchman on duty was about to ask that Bob should remove his weapons when the obvious absence of a sword struck him. The thought was obvious. "It's alright. I have no weapons. You're Richard aren't you?"

"Yes sir. Richard Brongly"

"You know I'm the Tax officer, Lord Levendale, the watch tried to arrest this afternoon?"

"Yes sir."

"Good. You see I'm not armed but I would have a word with the under-sheriff."

"I'll ask sir."

"Tell him a lady wants to give some money to the fund for watchmen's families."

"Yes Sir. Please wait." After only a minute Bob was invited into the sheriff's office.

Bob whistled the 'follow-me'. The not-quite shut street door opened. Minda strode through and the watchman nearly fell over backwards with surprise. "Good evening watchman. You're still alive so I'm friendly. I'm a woman so I know what losing a husband means. Now I must see the under-sheriff. There will be no more deaths if I can prevent them." She followed Bob's lead into the private office. "Sheriff. It is me. I am not here to kill you but I will be leaving here free and alive. Do you understand Michael?"

It took a while for the reality to sink-in but the under-sheriff noted the threats and use of his Christian name as part of an inevitable pattern of obeying orders. "Yes Your Grace."

"I will kill you Michael..."

"Minda!" cried Bob. "I thought we'd agreed that you wouldn't kill him."

"I've changed my mind."

"Stop Minda! He hasn't hurt you. He has a wife and children. Think of them!"

"Alright Bob. You deal with it!" Minda acted a petulant teenager too easily so she thought. She leant against the wall scowling, fidgeting and fingering her knife while Bob tried to smooth things.

"Michael. Minda says she will live freely in the town she owns so much of. You know your men are for her. You know the town will block the watch and you know in your heart that the charges against her are false – oh except that she killed Humfrey – she did that alright."

"She couldn't have done. There were a dozen good citizens in the Sun Inn with her when it happened."

"And I was there too. But I know she did it."

"Impossible Lord Levendale."

"So you're telling me she'd definitely innocent even though I'm telling you she's guilty and so do you want to arrest her?"

"No. I know she arranged Humfrey's killing as well as you but that's in the way of a private feud and she did the town a favour. Witchcraft is the other charge. I say this lady is a witch but that sort of witch that polishes our lives not brings a maggot. I know jealousy when I see it."

Minda took over the offensive. "Only a witch could sail down the river and appear here."

"There must be an explanation."

"Of course. The people of the town helped me just like they did in Bartonbry. Have you heard how that town was sad and is now happy and growing?"

"Yes Your Grace."

"And I'm going to do the same here. Are you going to help or hinder me?"

"I must help you Your Grace. You have made your point. I cannot stand against you."

"That wasn't my point Michael. There's evil about will you defend me while I deal with it? I will tell you a secret if you swear to keep it a secret."

"I swear."

"The King himself has left me to deal with the Bishop. You won't know this but at Christmas the Bishop was given three months to go into exile for his crimes. He has refused. What does that mean?"

"Er – It means he refuses to obey the King."

"Is that treason? What's the penalty for treason?"

"Death Your Grace."

"Will you execute him... ..or will I?"

"You Your Grace."

"Three month's notice is enough I think. How do you think I feel when the bishop is a scofflaw Michael?"

"I don't know Your Grace."

"Have another think."

"You are cross."

"And?"

"He hasn't hurt you."

"Yes he has. He's hurt all of us by ignoring the King's law."

"He's sent the Sheriff to his death as a result. He's challenging all of us. Will you deal with him?"

"I'd rather you would. You know more about it than me. I try to keep the peace on the streets not deal with feuds between lords."

"Very wise. The sheriff of Bartonbry is at Melbun this moment being made a count by the King for his services to me and Bartonbry. My troops have been training at Bartonbry for two months. I train my troops not collect unemployed farmhands and stick a pike in their hand. Now here are my orders. First you will leave the troublesome few who you know and the church to my men when they arrive. They will not kill without reason. Second I will be passing freely through this town. It would be nice if your guards showed their loyalty with two always beside me. I'm not a demanding mistress but I'm sure you understand how important it is the people of Lostnock know that I bring peace and prosperity even though I have to call on my army to make it happen. Your men will be symbolic of a fresh future. Third we are different sexes and different generations but one family. I'm here to protect you and I know you will try your best to look after me. Any questions?"

"You are a witch. I will look after you. Please can we avoid bloodshed?"

"That's the best thing anyone has said to me today Michael. I... ..Oh no it's too horrible to say what I did."

Outside Bob said to Minda "I don't know when you're acting and when you're real."

"Me neither sometimes Bob... ..But I've learnt that the best sort of acting is being real."

"Give me time to think about that. Now I shall try to be real." He spoke to their accompanying watchmen. "Stop!" All four of them stopped in the street. "Men. This lady killed three of your friends today. You are very brave to put that down to misadventure. She didn't mean it."

"Yes I did Bob. Any man who attacks me is dead. I hate killing." She addressed a watchman. "How many men have you killed?"

"None Your Grace."

"Good. There are enough widows as it is."

"And you?"

"Er there was this er time when/"

"/That will do. Not nice and something to be ashamed of."

"Yes Your Grace."

"I rolled that stone into the boat. I saw it crush a man's leg. I saw those men take their last breath as they fell in the water... ..I also saw their bodies being fished-out. That was just as horrible. I watched all four."

"But you saved the boatmen."

"Of course. I would have saved anyone who floated." For Minda this statement of the obvious lit a fuse. They didn't float. They sank. They drowned. There was nothing she could do! Unexpectedly she found an embrace – It was Lucky! – Still in his woman's clothes. Where had he come from? People looked after her – That was all that mattered. "Come on sweetheart. The town is behind you but you must rest to be bright and cheerful tomorrow." Minda felt the claws of whatever caught her at Bartonbry clutching her. Warm and smiling and soft talons. She would try to resist. "You've got to be ready to lead your little army tomorrow Minda. Oh and a witch has told me that Tom is in trouble. He will ride a hundred miles with saddle-sores if he can sit under a tree now." Explaining this and her concern for Tom and guilty pleasure at another's suffering combined to shake off her black mood.

Tom wished he was dead. Agnes and Doreen didn't seem to suffer from sea sickness! It was only the barrage of useless advice then dismal fatigue that kept him on the ship."

8 Fear in Lostnock

[Thursday Lostnock]

Now Minda had done the best she could about her own safety it was time to go onto the offensive. What were her objectives? To humble the Bishop. To show the town she was strong as well as ruthless. To get the town to love her perhaps? To find out who else was supporting the Bishop. Did the King want her to humble the whole of the church here as a lesson to others. Being the King's servant was a good cover for her personal feud. Yes that was it. She would show the kingdom that if you defied the King a very unforgiving Duchess would swoop from a clear sky and have you for crow food. He couldn't complain at that. What was to stop the Bishop escaping when he realised he was beaten? He could just walk down to the river and get on a ship with a chest or two of treasure. That wouldn't do. It would be a disaster! How could she keep him a prisoner with a handful of men? Hmm... Money! Of course Lostnock breathed money like air. Rewards for his capture. How simple!

Minda had the following notice put up.

I, MINDA, the DUCHESS of AVEL, was personally present when HIS ROYAL MAJESTY KING EDWARD decreed that the Bishop of Lostnock was to depart His Kingdom for ever not later than the first day of April. As the Bishop has defied the KING I declare him to be a TRAITOR and subject to the penalty for that crime which is DEATH. Furthermore be it known that the KINGS DISGUST at being treated with CONTEMPT means a fine of ONE HUNDRED POUNDS of lawful money for EVERY DAY the OUTLAW BISHOP remains at large to be paid by the Chapter. A reward of FIFTY POUNDS will be paid to anyone who delivers the Bishop of Lostnock dead or alive to the Sheriff's office. TWENTY POUNDS will be paid for his accomplice FATHER HARRIS likewise.

Ha ha! She was already thirty pounds ahead at the worst. Now she would show the town she had such control of the situation that she could play. She let it be known that she had been to get a lesson from the dancing master and there would be a grand ball as soon as her companions on the barge were returned to her. She also made a point of privately thanking Davey and Danico from the Tax Office for looking after Mr. Bob yesterday. Of course all the staff at the Office wanted to know how she was and how she came to be in Lostnock when everyone had seen her sailing down the river. It was great to be back among friends. "Spread the word I will spend one day a week working in this tax office and that anybody who hasn't settled their accounts by say, Thursday next, will have to deal with me. Whisper it around I have a long list of suspects and won't be very patient with any I have to chase."

"Miss you haven't changed a bit being a duchess and all that." Said Davey.

"Yes she has" said Dan "She used to frighten people with her spinning knife now she does it by whispers." he smiled. "You're very wicked Miss. Um please Miss could I have a quiet word downstairs in the warehouse?"

"Yes of course Dan. Come on." Davey came too.

In the dusty aromatic warehouse beneath the office Dan said "It is only Miss that if you are in peril and are being brave not to show it then tell us and you will have a safe and secret hole with us one way or another."

"Let me hug you both."... .."Well said Dan. You know me too well. Of course I am in peril but only a little bit. I am hoping that my enemies will be in a bottle by now and soon to die for their treason but jealousy and spite may sneak where an army may not pass. Steela is just one

threat. If someone brings you a message about a gipsy it will be from or about me and really important. For now I am accompanied by two ordinary watchmen and a street ruffian or two at a distance. Thank you again. Now here is something for you to think about. You know most of the low-life in odd ways. Some are very horrible people while others know nothing better. As time goes by I am minded to hang the bad ones and help the others. We will always have crime but I want to control it." After she'd gone Davey and Dan realised she could easily have meant command crime not contain it. That gave them a lot to think about.

The Bishop was building himself a palace. Lucky was organising men at cost of about a pound a day all told to watch the gates and warn-off provisioners and building contractors any other man carrying more than a bag from aiding the outlaws. With his Bartonbry experience he looked for secret ways over the walls and found two and saw how to create a trap. He found an out of the way spot to explain his plan to his chief thug Red Ken, the man who had been sent to stab him only a few months ago.

"Listen Ken. I will give you my best suggestion for catching them. It is up to you who does what and how you share the reward. You're getting paid already but you might have fifty pounds walking into your pocket."

"What do I have to do?"

"We will discover one secret exit and make a big fuss of it. Hopefully they will think we don't know about the other which will be poorly watched by someone who appears to be a bit lazy. Either Mr. Lazy falls asleep or someone bribes him or buys him spirits. Good! Now we know they are planning to use that route and you and some others will be waiting round that corner just after dark. They may not all come tonight but I bet you some will have a try. When you get them we must have them alive as we must find out from them what's happening inside. We don't know how many there are, if they are armed, what they are debating and so on. You will get a reward. I know you trust the Duchess and I can't say what the reward will be because we don't know what the Cathedral will spit out do we?"

"I see you are doing me a favour Lucky. I won't forget it."

"It's just work Ken. I'm setting one dog to catch another. You'll get the marrowbone."

"Er Lucky. Can I ask you a question?"

"Yes Ken."

"Er I was wondering how she sailed down the river and yet appeared here a few hours later. That's impossible."

"She doesn't tell me everything Ken. But shall I tell you something else. Last week she decided I needed a wife and forced me to dine with a widow. Can you imagine me with a wife Ken! Well it was nice enough to start with – you know – small talk about events and the weather but then we felt that we should share some more wine together so as to flirt. Can you imagine that Ken? Me flirting! Then the other slaves to Minda's decree that it was time we got married started a dancing session. Can you imagine me dancing? Well one of the ladies had seen our escape hole and brought the dancing master so the hole was blocked and we had to dance. It's quite like sword fighting where you match your opponent – er – partner and try to steer them the way to go. Anyway to cut a long and lovely story short I have learned that women don't like too many questions."

"What's that got to do with the price of fish Lucky?"

"Don't you see? She's hoping you are one to scoop the reward because she likes you and wants you to succeed."

"Really?"

"Yes. I know you can't do it on your own but that's up to you. She has a hundred things to do. Knocking the Bishop off his pedestal is just one of them. 'Lucky she says. Get that Bishop! To be honest with you Ken she wants him alive so she can torture him. You know how unreasonable women can be. If you get him alive she'll be thrilled."

"Is it true about the King banishing the Bishop?"

"I sat outside the room where it happened and we talked about it later. He is dead meat. Profitable dead meat but more profitable live meat if you see what I mean."

"Your Minda is/"

"/Our Minda. If you live in her town – and this is her town then she's your lord whether you like it or not. Spend fourpence on black and white ribbons and get your men to wear them proudly. Her colours."

"I've heard the talk on the street but I'm not sure about showing any allegiance. That won't be helpful."

"That's alright Ken. You know your business best."

"That sounds er snide."

"No I mean it. In Bartonbry we try to speak plainly. You have spoken plainly and now I see why your men don't want to be noticed. That's fine. But I am sure of one thing Ken it won't be long before if you don't

show black and white you will be the odd one out. I should buy as much black and white ribbon as you can and sell it at a profit."

"Now you're pulling my leg."

"See if I am Ken!"

Lostnock gradually acquired a festival look. Practically every house and business found a way to display something black and white together. When Minda walked through the town in the most convoluted way she could think of, merchants politely called out to her welcoming her back to Lostnock, ladies managed to be in her way for a fraction of a second before bowing out with an apology. The news of her approach was sent on ahead by excited boys. Just herself with only two ordinary watchmen who she would occasionally link arms with to show she was having fun at fate's expense. What nobody knew was that she was carrying a sheet of steel on her back under her cloak just thick enough to stop any arrow and take the killing power out of a crossbow bolt if she was lucky.

Having broadcast her carefree and actual existence she checked with Delphia's blacksmithery shop. Delphia wasn't there but Pod was in charge.

"How are you liking being a shop keeper Pod?"

"Very much Your Grace." He winked to tell her the 'Your Grace' was for other people.

"I hear you are doing good business Pod."

"Yes Your Grace very well. The whole of Lostnock benefits from ready-made fixtures that can be wanted at ten and be working at half past ten. And if I may say so Your Grace you look in fine health this afternoon. Might I suggest as the seasons change that I could send one of my men to your kitchen to see what we may be able to provide by the way of superior pots and pans and iron ovens which serve many purposes which your cooks will know of and curse if they have to use primitive utensils and ovens used by the Romans. The shame of having to send out for food is unthinkable for a lady of your standing Your Grace."

Under her breath she whispered "Do you know what you're talking about?" Pod nodded. Back in her duchesse's voice. "I have money, I don't mind spending it on improvements – Huh! – Where would we be without improvements? – People are so suspicious nowadays. Anyway I know you have good smiths in Lostnock and we should praise that. I would also like Lostnock known for cast iron. Even ovens! Bartonbry is

already known for many things it is time Lostnock looked to its strengths and made the world say 'nearly as good as one made in Lostnock'."

As she was being talked about her conversation with Pod would no doubt be reported. If Lostnock could get a reputation for ironware that would double its trade. She would have to warn Delphia about the perils of a business growing out of control.

Lucky had to look after his own safety as well as manage intelligence gathering and what he called a noose round the cathedral complex. Even sitting with his back firmly against the wall of the Sun inn he hardly dared to take his eyes off the door or certain of the other customers to eat his supper. He wished Flor was with him so they could watch each other's backs and divert attention as required. A message arrived on a piece of folded paper on a platter tucked under a cake he hadn't asked for. Without attempting to take the paper Lucky examined the other customers again to see which were the likely senders or conspirators. Ha! That clerk over there pretending to make a whole meal out of a small loaf and a smoked fish. Still without touching the cake or the paper Lucky looked at the clerk and called him over with a crooked finger then continued his own meal.

"Can I help you sir?"

"What can you tell be about this fly on my peas?"

"I can tell their colours."

"That will do."

"I'm going to look at that paper. Yours?"

"Yes."

"I can't read."

"I know Mr. Lucky. Look at the paper." Lucky picked it up and unfolded it. It was blank! Gradually the cleverness of the clerk developed in Lucky's mind. The clerk was testing him. Lucky felt he'd got top score. Now what? Only X's agent would understand the black and green reference. Only five key people in Bartonbry knew it as X's signature.

"Watch the door for me. I'm hungry." Lucky applied himself completely to the lovely meat pie and pastry. Bread and gravy. Beautiful. All thanks to Minda! If it wasn't for her he's be one of those poor men watching the Bishop's palace or sent to kick their heels at Heronswell.

The clerk whispered. "A double rap at the Basket-makers in Chipping street then return two minutes later and the door will be unlatched."

"You'd better go then while I take my time to eat this lovely cake. I will be followed. Almonds! My favourite. No knocks leave it unlatched I will do my best to visit in the next half hour. With honey! Password is Gipsy. Now go."

Five minutes later Lucky emerged from the Sun inn, staggered then slumped drunk against the wall opposite. He tried to untangle his feet and roll along the wall in jerks. Two shadows closed in on him. Two shadows gasped and groaned then slid into the gutter. Lucky blessed his dagger teacher for making him use both hands. Now to X's agent in Chipping street.

Inside the basket-maker's house Lucky drew his finger across his throat then held up two fingers.

"What? Assassins outside now?"

"They are outside the Sun and they are dead. I wasn't followed and we will know who they were in due course but now what is your business?"

"Did you kill them?"

"Yes! What do you expect? If I can deal with blank paper I can deal with them. Now get to business I am a very busy man. Darkness holds many secrets for me to find."

"I was told to help the Duchess however I could if she needed it Mr. Lucky."

"Good. And what help have you brought?"

"Eh? I don't understand."

"How do you propose to help her?"

"By being helpful."

"Good. That makes it clear. For a moment I thought you were going to help her by being unhelpful."

"I'm only trying to help!"

"Look, you were really clever with your piece of paper trick tonight and I think you know I'm one of the best, but I haven't got time to play around with clever people who aren't actually helping."

"Don't you want intelligence."

"Yes of course. Have you got any?"

"No. But I will put out feelers if you want."

"Brilliant! Feelers! Just what we need." Lucky grabbed the agent by his neck. "Take a two minute walk to see those bodies opposite the Sun then come back and you can tell me who they are and who they worked for and who claims the bodies. Go!" Lucky opened the door and pushed the agent into the night.

After five minutes Lucky decided he had more important business outside the Bishop's palace where the second easy escape and entrance was. Something had probably happened by now as it was at least an hour after dark. He opened the door carefully and looked into the lane. He forgot to check at foot level and tripped over a body. It was the agent. SHIT! He stepped back into the basket-maker's and wedged the door to have a think. Who was out there with a dagger? Somebody from the Bishop's or an outsider brought in? Whoever it was knew the clerk was an agent. That pointed to good intelligence – the agent wasn't stupid. He must get to Minda's side. She must be the main target. Minda's house was less than two minutes away but it seemed to take ten minutes for Lucky to dash from one corner to the next.

When he reached Minda's house the guards at the door let him in.

"They got 'em alive Mr. Lucky."

"Where are they now?"

"Inside. About fifteen minutes ago."

"Thank you. Keep very very awake there's death on the streets tonight. Don't stand close together."

Inside Lucky found half a dozen men milling about. Two house guards were ineffectually trying to control them. Lucky saw Red Ken. "Ken! To me. The rest of you silence! Report!"

"We got two sir."

"Who?"

"Harris and Collark."

"Who's guarding now?" The half silence became absolute. "You idiots have already got one death to answer for. They say Riskin died in an argument in an inn. Anyone know which inn?" Three different answers came. "Anybody see him die or his dead body with their own eyes?" No response. "Thanks to your stupidity Riskin has escaped over the wall and has already killed. Nobody gets paid until he's dead. I'm very angry. Now get back in the gutters where you belong. Oh and find out who the

two men I killed outside the Sun were. GET OUT! Oh and somebody go to the Watts and tell them they are in grave danger to bar their doors and windows and not to step out until eight tomorrow morning."

From the far side of the hall a kitchen servant mimed drinking. Lucky nodded then showed two fingers. By god he was thirsty. When Lucky tried to run up the stairs the guards at the bottom of the stairs said he should go to the cellar to see the prisoners. "What about the Duchess?"
"Down with em."

"Why are you guarding the bottom of these stairs then not those to the cellar?"

"Our job sir."

Lucky gave up. He was too angry to beat sense into these hired guards. He went to the top of the cellar stairs and whistled the 'to-me' and Minda's signature. In about five seconds Minda was at the bottom and coming up two at a time. "It's alright Minda. Can we talk in your parlour?"

"Yes Lucky. What's the matter?"

"In your parlour."

Minda shouted down the stairs "Wait 'till I get back."

In her parlour Lucky sat next to Minda on a padded bench. He put his arm round her waist as a brother. "It's not going all our own way. They have had two men attack me outside the Sun – I killed them in the dark. Then X's agent has been killed within feet of me without me knowing. You know that nasty assassin Riskin who tried to murder you in Heronswell? He was supposed to have died in a drunken fight but I think that's a lie. I think he sneaked out of the Bishop's palace after your two and is now looking for revenge. I've sent word to the Watts to stay inside until well after daylight. Mr. Bob is with you I take it?"

"Mr. Bob is not happy in the cellar."

"Why isn't he happy?"

"They are suffering."

"Why?"

"I'm torturing them."

"Why?"

"I want to."

"Stop it. Stop it now."

"Why should I? They are evil."

"We want information out of them don't we? You are good at twisting it out of people but these men are professionals and you won't tell their truths from lies if they say anything to save a bit more pain. You may have to give them up to the watch and if they are burned and broken unpleasant questions might be asked."

"So what if they are?"

"The townsfolk think you are an angel chased by evil men. Do you want to let them see you are really a vicious thug like all the others?"

"I could say they died being captured."

"But all Red Ken's men would say different." Lucky looked hard at her. "You are getting your revenge on the Bishop but that comes through stealth not wasting your time on your prisoners."

Minda was silent for a while. "I suppose so. You want me to burn the branch not the leaves."

"You need a plan for when the Little Army arrives in a few days time. If we can find where these two were going we might tell if they have allies."

"That's what I wanted to find out."

Lucky took a deep breath and tried to look like Doreen when she suspected something devious. "You want to hurt them don't you?"

Minda rested her head on Lucky's shoulder. "I'm not yet better am I?"

Lucky smiled and tightened his grip on her waist. "None of us are out of the woods yet. If Ken's thugs don't get Riskin he will kill as a fox amongst chickens. Let's talk to the prisoners. They might need persuading but I don't think they're in any doubt about their fate."

"Xavier wanted me to deliver Harris to see if he could be used in the King's service."

"Well let's ask him straight like we do in Bartonbry. I'll do the hurting you do the asking how about that? I'm in a mood for hurting."

In the cellar the two gagged men were hanging naked by ropes from their wrists to beams against a brick wall.

"Ah Collark my friend. How long do you want to take to die? Oho! that's very clever Your Grace. Can I try miss?" Lucky pulled Collark away from the wall and let go. Despite the gag there was an 'Eouff' as Collark's body smacked back into the wall. "And the higher the swing the more

the blow. I'm impressed. What do you think Mr. Bob? Riskin has just killed one of ours so we could take turns. Let's have a wager on how many swings to kill Collark. Hmm I say um Fifty medium swings. Guard! Take Harris' gag off. What do I want to know Minda?"

"Will Harris work for the king."

"Really? I think we should say no to that."

"Somebody thinks he's clever enough so we must try."

"Hmm. If you say so Miss." Another 'Eouff!' as Collark's back then legs thudded against the wall. "We'll count that as two then Mr. Bob."

"I'm not mean Harris – You can have a free swing." Eougg as he swung into the wall. "Somebody killed a friend of mine this evening." 'Eouff!'

"Three. You're not answering my questions Collark!" 'Eouff!' "Four. Any ideas who could have killed my friend Harris?" 'Eouff!' "Five."

"Riskin." Said Harris.

"For that you get a nice big swing Harris. Riskin died in a fight."

Eougg!. Collark was nodding and pleading.

Harris said "Riskin didn't die in a fight. It was my idea to hide him."

"Nod Collark if that's true." Collark nodded. "I'm going to have a little think. Guard! Ask the prisoners if they are thirsty. Now what possible use would a hidden Riskin be? An assassin lurking unsuspected in Lostnock – Ask them! Not *give* them a drink! – Who might he kill? No! Don't tell me Harris! Mr. Bob I'll give you two free swings to use as you like, big or small. Come on while you're still breathing. Riskin is on the loose you won't be going anywhere without two good guards in daylight and nowhere at night until we have him. Two swings are all yours."

Mr. Bob was confused. How was swinging these men going to help him. On the other hand Lucky was clearly working to some plan. 'Eouff!' 'Eougg!' Now he wished he'd swung them higher.

"Thank you Mr. Bob. They call me Lucky and I'm lucky for you two because I'm not letting Minda swing you. Are you grateful Harris?"

"Yes Mr. Lucky."

"Collark?" Collark nodded. "Sorry I didn't hear that." Collark got another 'Eouff!'

Mr. Bob said "He nodded."

"Not the same as a proper 'yes' though is it?"

"How can he say yes when he's gagged!" said Harris.

"Is either of you going to offer anything that might help us? Strangely enough Collark you could walk free as there are no crimes against your

name except failing to keep out of my sight. Harris you have one option and that is to cooperate and become a King's servant. Help me or die. Which?"

Harris said "I'll confess." Collark took his lead from Harris and nodded.

"Listen you two. Her grace could have killed you over hours if I hadn't stopped her. She can still kill you in seconds if you displease her. I should start with some really serious pleading for mercy. She *likes* killing vermin. Oh and for God's sake! Put some clothes on." He showed the follow-me sign and left.

Upstairs in the hall the three of them hugged silently. "Well done Minda I'm really proud of you." said Lucky. "You watched their suffering – I know you don't like it any more than me – but you stayed."

"I was watching your flames licking at them Lucky. Fascinating."

"Why is my mission death? Why can't I be like Brother Caxton and defeat it?"

"Oh Lucky I'm sorry. Two deaths at the Sun and X's agent."

"I killed them."

"If I'd been with you I'd have killed them."

"No you wouldn't Minda. This was really special killing. You'd have got one though and may have scared the other off."

"We're saving the town of Lostnock from itself Lucky. It's our duty. We are drawing out their poison. Here they look the other way at crime and carry on with making a profit. What's a few more bodies in the gutter to them. They let me kill Humfrey with a shrug. When we get back home take a week's rest in Willows with Brother Caxton and Paul – You carry the spark of holy spirit to relight it when we clean the hearth of the smoking ashes left by the Bishops and abbots. When I'm king you can be archbishop! How about that?"

Lucky smiled. Mr. Bob gave an encouraging grin. Lucky said. "I knew I wouldn't sleep tonight but you have soothed my fears like a mother does her child."

"I'm trying not to think about death. But you have done well and I don't know how big my lake of tears would be if you'd been killed. We must hope our enemies stay one step behind."

"Minda, would you think about how we're going to use the Little Army when they come in two or three days? Bob would you stay safe here tonight and get the confessions of the prisoners. We need to know their

strength inside and their allies outside. I will sleep and dream of widow Carnet before taking the dawn watch."

Minda said "I should have just given those orders."

Lucky replied "You have other people to give orders for you now. Your servant Your Grace."

"I'm so lucky to have you Lucky."

"I'm so lucky you showed me how to see round corners for myself. Will you watch from now until you're too tired then wake me."

"Come here." She hugged him and kissed him. "We've forgotten bad days together before let's hope we'll soon be able to relax with our friends again."

9 Maggie and Rachel

[Thursday night]

Allesandro, Maggie and Rachel rode to the edge of the village of Heronswell after dark. Rachel walked casually to the smithy and knocked on the cottage door with the rhythm of the Star-iron girl song. The door was cautiously opened by the smith.

"I'm a messenger from Bartonbry smith. Is it safe for the Duchess here tonight?"

"Yes."

"Thank you smith." Rachel turned to go.

"Is she here girl?"

"No I'm sorry, but some of her servants want to rest a while and there are bad people about."

"Is she alright?"

"I don't know smith. We've come from Bartonbry. Your news from Lostnock is fresher than ours."

"They say she drowned the sheriff then escaped down the river then appeared in Lostnock walking free as if nothing had happened."

"Thank you. I would tell you If I knew more. We're secretly going to help her."

"God's speed to you then. Is Flor with you?"

"No. He is defending Bartonbry. Agnes is with Minda. I will see you get news of her as soon as I have it myself. I must go. There may be another verse to the song yet!"

Maggie and Rachel were left in the dark while Allesandro made arrangements with the innkeeper of the Round bush. Their plan was to be inconspicuous and watch for anybody else who might be on secret missions. This soon became impractical as, unlike Bartonbry where teenage fighters were commonplace, two girls dressed in leather and carrying weapons were instantly noticed. If they couldn't hide in the darkness they would have to brazen it out in the light. Outrageously for young women they swaggered into the public lounge. Rachel took the lead.

"Butler we will have two quarts of your best." She turned to the room. "Did I hear a grin?" Silence. "Good. So as you all know, we're on our way to shave the Bishop of Lostnock's whiskers for our Lady the Duchess."

"'Bout time too! Stuck-up arse. Oh beg your pard/"

"/Don't worry, my friend Maggie here starts giggling at rude words. I'm Rachel from Melbun. What's your name."

"Carter Inton miss from Bartonbry. You're that Black Team aren't you? I heard what you did to the Abbey."

"Yes. That was fun but we didn't do it for fun."

"What's life like on the road this week Inton? asked Maggie.

"Dry and plenty of business."

"Good. Which of you is from Lostnock?"

"Me miss – er Maggie."

"Have I seen you at Bartonbry?"

"Possibly miss. Are you going to rescue the Duchess?"

"Oh dear. The last I heard was that she didn't need rescuing but her enemies did. There's a rumour she drowned the sheriff."

The carter gave them a fairly accurate account of the events at Lostnock up to the previous evening. Another added that a messenger had said that she was walking about in the open this morning.

Maggie cried "We may be too late Rachel! – She may have dealt with the bishop before we can get there and do it ourselves."

"Oh well that's life for you. You spend months practising and then the stuck-up arse gets himself killed before you arrive."

"Waste of good boot leather going there if you ask me Rachel."

"Let's have fun. It's not fair. Who knows a song? – Alright I'll start.

I took my lover to see the sea

He liked the sea more than me

I took a lover to see the river

He said he'd not marry me ever

I took my lover to see the wood

He said I wasn't any good

I took my lover to see the well

He said he'd see me next in hell

I took my lover to see his wife

And had the best time of my life

To see him twist and squirm

As she beat him with a broom."

This sauce was pitched exactly right and the evening would have continued except that two obvious mis-fits came in to the parlour. Maggie and Rachel instantly saw they were subtly armed and trained close fighters. (Thank you Lucky!)

Rachel called-out. "Butler! Drinks for these two soldiers on my account. I am Rachel in the Lady Avel's service who are you?"

Even the carters could see this was a frontal attack of some sort not a friendly reunion. The uncertain looks on the newcomer's faces betrayed them. Everyone knew they had just walked into a trap. Maggie moved to support Rachel by smiling at the one nearest the door and waving him over with her finger and patting the bench next to her. The authority of authority itself inched time forward in reluctant motion. (Thank you Minda.)

Rachel addressed her victim in public. "Hoping to kill somebody tonight are you?"

"Me? No! I've just come for some ale."

"Good. So you can leave your weapons with the Innkeeper or under your seat."

"Er – Yes I could."

"Or depart. – In a cart like the last two mercenaries caught here by Minda. Riskin and Collark. Do you know them?"

"Collark wasn't a mercenary."

"What of Riskin these days?"

"He died in Lostnock."

"Now has Maggie over there who you haven't been watching but –" The mercenary looked to see she had her knife at knee height dangling as innocent as a heron's bill over a stream. "– slammed a knife into the side of your skull? No. So you don't need your weapons against us do you?"

"Er no miss."

"Good."

"And because we're from Bartonbry and trained by the duchess herself we will guard you from your enemies. (Thank you again Lucky.)"

"Please miss/"

"/Stop arguing. All weapons on the table now!"

"As you wish miss. If you are from Bartonbry you may know who sent us here. To watch. I know you're from Bartonbry by your actions. So I will tell you that a very fortunate man asked us to meet you."

"All of them! The fortunate one who we love touched us all over to teach us where to hide weapons." By now two swords, two rapiers, a horribly wavy knife and a pontil had been shown. Maggie gently slid her knife back into her Avel boot and smiled. The silence framed one of those few moments where our existence is nailed with iron heartbeats.

Rachel released the tension. "I will be on guard duty. You enjoy you ale with the carters and Maggie." Silence and no action. "Carters! These men are armed for the same reason as we are. There is shit flying at Lostnock and some may come our way. They weren't going to harm you but they don't know how to be harmless. Now they are. I'll wait by the door just in case war comes our way in the next half hour." Nobody in the room doubted her ability or determination to guard.

It emerged that these were the two mercenaries Lucky had hired to get them out of Lostnock. They said Riskin had been killed in a fight in an inn a month ago and Collark was with the Bishop as far as they knew. Maggie made it clear that if they had secret information it was to remain secret. After a while Maggie casually showed the 'let's go' hand signal to Rachel and got the 'I'm following' sign in response. Maggie stood up "Thank you men. This road may be very busy towards Lostnock in the next two days. Those of you who guess why do not tell the others as every whisper may mean a dozen deaths. Another time I want to sing more songs with you but now good folk of Heronswell we're going into

the dark night." She finished her quart, smacked the empty leather jug down and left the men to whatever they wanted to talk about.

Right outside the door they met Brand waiting with folded arms and a smile. He pointed upstairs and they followed his hint immediately. Brand and Allesandro followed. Brand indicated a room to enter. Maggie was still alert and pushed the door open with her foot then whipped round the doorway with knife ready to throw. They all went in and Maggie closed the door and put wedges in before anyone said anything. Brand swept Rachel off her feet and carried her to kiss her. There was no possible happier degree of happiness.

Maggie shouted "We got em! We got em!" Allesandro hugged Maggie close and tried shushing her. "And where were you men! Leaving us girls all alone!"

"And hungry" said Rachel.

"Bloody bones of Christ so I am" cried Maggie.

"Bloody bones of Christ I'm hungry!" cried Rachel in alcoholic triumph.

"Oysters!" shouted Maggie grinning.

"Food of love." added an enthusiastic Rachel. Allesandro and Brand exchanged looks.

"Come on Rachel. Let's raid the pantry." The girls untangled themselves from the men but found the ale had been a bit stronger than expected.

Allesandro said "Now then girls. You are the heroes of the hour. Will I fetch you some hot food?" A week of instruction at Willows told their fogged brains to go along with this. Allesandro kissed each one on the lips then left Brand to look after them.

The girls knew Brand as physical teacher who could be pleased by trying and most of all by trying twice. He tried to calm them down but as he was so pleased with their masterly domination of the two mercenaries he wasn't calm himself and knew he may never have such a glorious moment ever again.

"Girls! Listen a moment. I need you trained not dead. Minda is not in great danger. Allesandro has told me of the where your friends are going and the town is not going to fight them. I want you to fade away with Lucky's mercenaries to where they may be resentment. The Bishop must have allies some who may see an opportunity to support him for their own reasons. We must be sure there isn't a storm brewing outside

Lostnock that will sweep over it. Come here Maggie. You must be loved by me as well as Rachel."

[Friday morning]

Brand left Heronswell before Allesandro and the girls. He'd ordered them to go by back roads to Trexton, a sort of Heronswell, half a day's ride out of Lostnock on the Ravengap road and wait for instructions. There was no hurry, the spring flowers brightening up the roadside in the cool morning air was relaxing especially after the last two days at Bartonbry. A couple of miles into their journey Maggie asked Allesandro if they could have ten minutes weapons practice with the mercenaries. Allesandro watched as fighting happened in pantomime slow motion. Fighting in a way to ensure nobody got hurt. The girls were soon happy to admit that the men knew how to fight better than they did. The men agreed that the girls would one day make really good fighters and today could out-match an ordinary sword-carrying thug. The Black Team's precise anti-ambush training was new to these men. Confidence and trust made them an effective fighting unit. Obviously Allesandro would have to be looked after but now they were able to defend themselves. The men secretly hoped they could protect the girls and the girls hoped that they could let the men protect them while they got on with their own fighting. Lucky had been lucky for the mercenaries as usually they were given unpleasant jobs and not trusted by anyone. And he'd paid them expenses in advance and half their wages. Now they were mounted at somebody else's cost with two young, well-dressed, well-armed and handsome girls eyeing them up.

Rachel gave the 'enemy' whistle from the front and rolled off her horse into the ditch. Maggie followed in the rear. The girls shouted to the mercenaries to get the ditch. "Alex! Stand between your horse and the hedge opposite me." Called Maggie.

Everything was quiet. Two girls with bows ready. Two mercenaries with swords and shield ready. The man next to Maggie asked "What's the problem?"

Maggie shushed him. "Rachel's in front. She will tell us. Keep still."

The silence continued except for the occasional fidget from the horses. Then a low-high-high hand sign. Maggie explained to the men. "We're getting out of here. Quietly retreat."

Rachel added "A score of men on foot half a mile away. Take our horses men."

The mercenaries hesitated. "Go!"

Maggie raced to Rachel and was briefed. "Can you see where the road comes down the other side of this little valley. They will be at the ford in a minute." Maggie left Rachel and scouted round for cover and anything else useful. Rachel came back up the road. "Twenty men with pikes. Two mounted at the front and a two horse cart at the back. Walking speed."

"Do we attack?"

"Not us two. Come on we must reform." They jogged back up the road.

"They could be friendly." Here they were in a wood.

"They could be enemy." They soon caught up with the rear-guard mercenary and held a conference on the move. Both Rachel and Maggie spotted the ideal ambush location a hundred paces ahead. A quick high-high which Alex understood as 'stop' then a brutal decision by Rachel. "Alex. You deceive the enemy that we are just going round that bend ahead. Then look after yourself by running away. Go!" He hesitated. "We're fighting. If you can distract better without being hurt then do so. There's twenty pikemen. Go! We're staying."

Rachel had already decided she would be the stop point herself. Somebody had to ask their loyalty. Jumping out would be simple and as effective as fancy games. A quick conference and strict instructions to the mercenaries including the 'Bartonbry smile'. The mounted men would be shot by Maggie from the hedge. Rachel would jump up the embankment to lead the troops to the killing swords of the mercenaries and arrows from Maggie in the back. Rachel would go to the back and cause havoc there then Maggie will call on them to surrender. They might have to kill ten of them before the rest surrendered. Two or three each.

The road was uphill for the troop of pikemen but clear. Rachel walked out ten paces in front of them. "Stop!" Her girlish voice didn't carry much command. "Stop! You are surrounded. Put down your arms."

Because Rachel had used language they understood, like idiots they stopped.

"Are you for or against Avel?" Asked Rachel pointing at the leading rider?

"Who are you?"

"Unless you say 'for' you will die in the next ten seconds."

"Against!" Shouted the other mounted man. – Then fell off his horse with an arrow in the side of his head. The first rider looked to see what had happened and had his fatal arrow in the face." He slowly bowed down then nose-dived to the ground.

Rachel nearly ran up the bank according to the plan but as the troops were stunned she ordered. "ABOU-T FACE!" They were completely disorganised and demoralised. "Lay down your weapons and you will be let go. Do it NOW. I am the duchess – do not anger me!" Bless him! One of the mercenaries made sword scraping and shield banging and the other joined in. Pikes were soon laid on the ground. "It's alright men. You are now protected by the duchess. You will be fed and warmed by her grace. FACE ME!... ...You!" She pointed at a man who would be an easy shot for Maggie. "Will you promise not to carry arms against the Duchess of Avel?" He looked at his comrades. "Look at me, answer 'yes' or die."

"I don't know—" Maggie's arrow penetrated just behind the eye socket and he swivelled at the knees to collapse with groans on the ground.

Before this atrocity had been completed Rachel called "Next Man. Do you promise?"

"Yes!"

"Good. Breathe in and enjoy breathing. Your friend is dying next to you. NEXT!"

And so it went on. The mercenaries were detailed to ensure everyone left standing was disarmed properly. Rachel addressed them from the bank. "You are my prisoners. Every man is my prisoner. Well done men you are the men this kingdom needs to make it strong. Now I set you free. We will have food back down by the ford then see you home safely. Now get that cart turned round and we'll be off. You there! Lead those two spare horses. Maggie remained hidden as Rachel's troopers and the mercenaries moved off down the hill.

"Sing me a song troopers. You're happy and alive and the war was short. Sing a song!" Gradually singing started. Rachel hadn't reckoned on most

of the soldiers thinking that the usual rude words were not suitable in the circumstances. "The next man that mumbles a rude word will never manage any natural function again." At the ford they stopped for lunch. Rachel addressed them. "My archers are not far away and they are going hungry while you are eating. That's how we do it in Bartonbry. Our friends eat first."

Earlier the mercenaries had a detachment about their pleasant and light duties, now they knew very well who's side to be on. Two girls against twenty two men! Maggie still hadn't appeared. Rachel hoped Maggie and Alex were sharing a cheerful bit of bread and fish and not worrying about her. She went among the soldiers and cheeked them and asked them about wives and sons and daughters and then where they came from and eventually why they were on the road and who had been killed. It was a shame to spoil the occasion with marching orders but they had to get on. Rachel reorganised the troops according to her whim, based upon her chatting. When they were ready Rachel addressed them again. "I'm sorry you have lost a slow-witted friend. Let us pray for his soul. 'Dear Lord in heaven above us in your glory, please take Samuel Doings to your heart. He was a nice man who was trapped by horrible fate. Amen.'"

"Amen."

"I'm really sorry. Bartonbry hates killing. Now you're going back to your peaceful homes. The Duchess will protect you in need. Ask and she will send me and my archers and perhaps a few more. Now more rude songs! We have more than ten miles to go yet!"

Rachel still hadn't made contact with Maggie and Alex, but she assumed they were behind. Gradually she found out more about this little expedition. Sent by Lord Ruswell whoever he was. The horsemen Maggie had shot were the Lord's son, he was the one who stupidly declared against Avel, and an old soldier who was to have joined forces with other old soldiers under the command of their old commander Baron Porlick on the way to Bartonbry. Rachel felt she had to keep leading these men until they could be discharged safely. Her thoughts turned to how to make the most of the situation.

Maggie and Alex galloped up from behind. As the trailing mercenary had been shown he whistled the high-low 'no danger' to Rachel at the front. Rachel didn't even turn round, she continued marching and talking to one of the more experienced soldiers and held up the low-low 'I

understand' hand signal. The mercenary explained what he knew of the situation to Maggie and Alex in whispers. Maggie skirted the troops and rode twenty paces in front. Rachel realised this was to have a private conference so she mounted and rode to be beside Maggie. Rachel gave Maggie the intelligence.

"What's your plan Rachel?"

"I don't know Maggie. I want to leave these men safe and harmless near their homes. We're nearly there."

"What about teaching whoever sent them a lesson the other lords can learn from? We can't fight a dozen or a score of anti-Avel lords but we could frighten them."

"And that would put fire in the bellies of those who might support Avel."

"We could deliver his troops back to him and demand loyalty to the king or death or burn his house down. There's four of us mounted and armed. These men are unarmed at the worst we could escape."

"Lets do it! You do the punishing I'll make sure of the escape." Rachel turned her horse and waited for the company to catch up. "Company! HALT!" The newly conscripted troops shuffled to a halt. "Men. I'm very proud of you. Who here is married? Put your hands up! ... You men tell your wives that a girl from Bartonbry has brought you home safe. Let others get killed for no reason. My troops on the other roads have the same orders to see as many of you safe home as possible. Now my friend here is going to have a word with Lord Ruswell who has already lost a son for his treachery. Against Avel is against the King! At the least he will pay a pound to the family of Samuel Doings or she might burn down his house. Who will come with us to collect that pound and your unpaid wages?... We go right here do we to get to Lord Ruswell's house?" So the whole company went to claim it's wages. The mercenaries exchanged glances of astonishment.

The little company made its way to the hall which was a glorified moated farm. The main door was open with an old man who Maggie was told was Lord Ruswell standing splay legged as if to block the entrance. Maggie tried to read the windows for threats and the house for its wealth and the man in the doorway. She kept them marching to within ten paces of the house. Rachel kept watch at the back.

"Company! HALT!"

"That will be all the unpaid wages of these men and a pound for the family of the late Samuel Doings. Porlick is dead. You can thank me for

bringing your men back safe. The duchess has intercepted all the troops against her with instructions they be returned unharmed to their families.

"Where's Thomas?"

"Your son?"

"Yes. Where is he."

"He died. He was a stupid boy sent by a foolish father on a traitorous mission. Now are you going to pay these men?"

"I don't know who you are but you are most unwelcome."

"Are you going to pay these men?"

"Go away strumpet!"

"Insults won't work. Are you going to pay these men?"

"I don't take orders from girls!"

"You do or you die. Your son wasn't good at answering that question and he died. Are you going to pay these men?"

"Yes."

"Now!"

"Later. I haven't got my purse."

"Now! This minute!"

He drew his sword but only got it half out of its scabbard before receiving a thrown knife in the forehead. Maggie would remember the puzzled look fading from his face then his complicated collapse for a long time. She stayed on her horse for whole seconds to watch instead of rolling off, making a moving target and heading for safety, but this time she was lucky. Cold sweat at her stupidity was forgotten when she remembered the pikemen.

"First two ranks go inside and take everyone to the main hall. Others do the outbuildings and grounds and bring everyone you find to the main hall. GO!"

The mercenary at the front realised he should be supporting Maggie and crouched by the door with weapons drawn. The mercenary at the back had no idea what to do. Rachel told him to get the rear troops moving, then shouted "No more killing. The Duchess hates killing!" Now they had to be ready to escape. Rachel leapt down and collared a pikeman who was trying to follow events so she could get the local geography. Alex was making himself invisible behind the cart. Something hit

Rachel hard enough to spin her round and then the pain came in her side. Alex shouted "Crossbow window upstairs on the right." By now Maggie had managed to wrench her knife from the head of Lord Ruswell. It was bloody and horrible and bloody and horrible and bloody and horrible! Rachel's cry woke her up to an unfinished job. God she felt tired. Her mercenary saw Maggie trying to formulate an order to get upstairs and get lethal revenge. He could understand lethal revenge and raced carefully up the stairs in bursts to see what he could do. Maggie followed him in elastic dream-time without knowing why. In the corridor at the top of the stairs there was screaming and a struggle. An old lady entangled with a crossbow was trying to beat the mercenary with it. Maggie saw the target, and went for it with the knife in her hand. Punch into the stomach then dig upwards. Her knife vanished. The mercenary's face and the lady's face merged in horror and disbelief.

Five minutes later Maggie had recovered some thinking faculties but didn't realise that she was covered with blood front and back. Rachel was bruised and scuffed just under her left breast but being an armourer's daughter she was wearing chain mail which turned a penetrating bolt into a glancing bruise and possibly a broken rib. It very soon went from annoying to a grinding distraction.

Alex took charge of the gathering in the hall. He used every bit of his experience of capturing crowds. "We came in peace but were offered war. We should burn this manor down to teach others a lesson. You sir! Shall we burn this house?"

"No."

"What a wise man ladies and gentlemen."

"What's your name sir?"

"Tom of Trickell"

"Well wise Tom Trickell I shall not burn this house. Burning things is not a way to live our lives is it sir?" Alex pointed to another random person.

"No."

"Right. This manor is forfeit to the King by treachery. You all are to write to the King and tell him what has happened and now you seek a wiser lord. Do you all understand?" Murmurs came back. "Now I want three unpaid volunteers to see us on our road. We have more business to do. Who will be the first volunteer? You sir. You look like you know the roads. Pick two others and we will meet outside in one minute. Come on girls!"

Trexton was easy to find. After a mile they stood on the edge of a broad and fertile valley. They thanked their guides as if they weren't hostages and as if Maggie hadn't brutally killed five people they knew.

Maggie said "This is a nice place. I wish I lived here. I am sorry to bring death to it. Spread the word that nobody had to die today but they chose to defy the King's servants. We will be meeting the rest of our force in Trexton. The sooner lords come there to swear allegiance to the king the sooner we can sheathe our swords."

When they were alone Rachel addressed the mercenaries. "Well done men. Tonight and tomorrow are going to be dangerous. We need your brute strength and all our guile to survive. Alex you must look confident and we all smile!" They had to convince people they were invincible and could punish in moments or smile to bring out the sun. It was agreed that local lords would be summoned to swear allegiance to the King on Sunday morning. In the meantime they had to rest safely and if possible cause more dismay among Avel's enemies.

Trexton was laid out as a large square 200 yards on each side surrounded by inns catering for the busy trade between Lostnock and Melbun via Ravengap. The small river that skirted it had been cleverly dammed to provide shallow stream crossing the square for watering animals. Somebody was looking after Trexton as it was tidy even if it had to deal with scores of waggons and carts every day and herds of livestock being driven on the hoof. It looked like the road toll was being put to good use. Alex would have to find the reeve or mayor or lord straight away. The girls would wash and recover and the guards would take it in turns to guard and listen to the gossip. Before Alex went on his mission Rachel gave him a thought. Should they pay for a gibbet to be erected tomorrow morning in the square to show they meant business?

As they arrived Maggie's bloody appearance caught everyone's attention. They asked for the most expensive inn and said the news would be given in the public parlour there in ten minutes. Rachel took the lead with the innkeeper demanding two private rooms, a maid and lots of hot water. "We are on the King's business. I'll be here two nights. Here is ten shillings so you don't think I'm going to run away without paying. Now I am to tell the news. I will tell it once in the parlour then we are not to be disturbed."

Alex and the mercenaries vanished. Rachel addressed the full parlour. "People of Trexton I think you know the Duchess of Avel is seeking traitors and destroying them in Lostnock. This King's business is bloody – Look at my friend! Avel has been about the country disarming troops sent to hurt her. The King's will was done today as I executed Lord Ruswell and his son for royal treachery. We also bring news that Baron Porlick who was to lead the revolt is dead. The King gives notice that at Sunday noon all Lords within half a day's ride of here will assemble in this square and be offered the gibbet or a pledge of loyalty backed by money. In the next few days you will probably see bands of Avel men going about their unfinished business but you have nothing to fear unless you fail to pledge loyalty to the King."

"Any questions?"

"Who are you?"

"I am Rachel Whin, warrior from Bartonbry and Melbun. This is Maggie Ulex also a warrior from Bartonbry and Melbun."

"How old are you?"

"Twenty years each. Now will you please let two tired and hurt girls wash the blood off ourselves and bind our wounds."

Bloody Maggie added "The Avel colours, the loyal colours, are black and white. It would please me greatly to see those colours worn by the town. Go in peace people of Trexton, we hope to be gone soon."

Upstairs Allesandro had begun organising their two rooms with the mercenaries. This was his first opportunity to talk with them alone. He introduced himself then asked their names. Wennet and Yarnel.

"First names. You are part of our family now."

Jack and Sam.

"These girls are hard and precious diamonds. Jack you will scheme how we escape from here if attacked. The girls can leap out of windows if needed. Running away to fight another day is what we do as well as say. Sam I want you to keep this inn safe. The password for ourselves is 'diamond'. You may get a 'gipsy' password but that is old and might be false."

Once everyone knew their role the girls insisted on being left alone with a maid. Anyone could see Rachel was distracted by pain but Minda had told them the importance of having a good gossip-ear, gossip-mouth and local knowledge in the form of a maid. Denise the maid was horrified by

the blood on Maggie's clothes, that wasn't dirt under Maggie's fingernails but dried blood. At first sight Rachel's injury looked bad and felt sore but really looked like a bruise with scratches from the mail rings. It would no doubt be very tender for a few days.

"I'd heard the Duchess at Bart'n go killin' men – well that's to be expected being all orphaned but how many more like you are there?"

"It's a secret Denise" said Rachel "but we're only fierce when we have to be."

"You're not twenty you two! My daughter's older than you and she's nineteen."

"Shssh. Teenage girls try to run away with us if they think we're their age, and the boys show off with silly games and hurt themselves."

"I s'pose you know your business girls."

"We're learning" said Rachel smiling expecting a smile from Maggie in response but not getting it. "My jacket needs patching, could you get it done for me? Maggie's clothes need a good wash. We need to be on the road by noon tomorrow, please make sure they are properly looked after. I think we'll dress ourselves in our spare clothes now thank-you Denise."

After teaching Denise basic security the girls were alone. Rachel wedged the door top and bottom. Maggie flopped half-dressed onto the bed and sighed with exhaustion. "You were doing so well then I spoiled it. You did brilliantly Rachel. You captured a score of men."

"You shot three of them Maggie. What happened after we left? I said my archers were in hiding ready to shoot the first slacker."

"I searched the bodies but only got money purses, no documents. Alex helped me drag them off the road then we followed you. It was clever of you to make them sing."

"Why?"

"Singing numbs the mind. You marched beside them so Jack said. They didn't know you had a knife ready to defend yourself. What was to stop them just knocking you down?"

"Why would they? They wanted to go home alive. I was leading them away from death in the woods."

"That's five to you and none to me Maggie. Not bad for our second day on the road."

"I killed Lord Ruswell when I should have just had him arrested and then it went really really wrong."

"It was my fault Maggie. I should have been watching the windows properly or run up to him for you but I was looking from the rear mazed by tension."

"Me too. I should have let him attack me with his sword then he was the aggressor and I would be defending myself."

"We must practice two against one in a strange place."

"When I threw my knife it hit him perfectly but I sat there like dead meat myself watching his life gutter as he stared at me. I am so stupid! I must have sat on my horse for five, maybe ten seconds. Then I woke up and was so cross I lost all idea of what my plan should be. I was standing on his head heaving at my bloody slippery knife trying not to look at his face. When you got hit I stamped it out then ran up stairs desperate to find more blood. Jack was grappling with her – she was an oldish lady – no danger to anyone... But my knife saw her belly and in and up it went – right past the hilt like paper. It was horrible." Maggie wondered why she hadn't collapsed in tears. Three months of extreme self-reliance and alertness had killed her self-pity.

"Oh well. We've learned a lot today." said Rachel.

"Is that all you can say when I've murdered two harmless old people?"

"I would have done the same."

Maggie said "I thought I'd be the slow one looking after the rest of you with marketing, cooking, being mother and leaving you quick ones to disappear to cut throats."

"Well I was mother today. Mother to twenty untrained peasants ordered to go and die for their lord."

"You really are very clever Rachel. I wish I hadn't killed the last two. How's your wound?"

"It's not a wound. Bruise and scratching. – It's bloody sore!"

"You were lucky to have chain mail."

"I suppose so. I was just as green as you, I should have taken cover like Alex."

"Well we're alive."

"Now what do we do?"

"You know what she says 'If you have nothing to say say it' – well we haven't thought of anything to do yet so until we do we might just rest."

"You did really well Rachel."

"And you Maggie. Don't forget news of bloody deeds will get round and frighten the others."

"Who are the others?"

"Let Alex find that out. He's been baggage so far. Let him earn his bread."

[Friday - Hinterland]

Henry and Mr. Chris were working their way back to Lostnock using their King's warrants to spot-check accounts. They took side roads to improve their map and knowledge of the lands ready for a purge of late and little payers. Sometimes they would visit a landowner together and take it in turns to ask tricky questions and get the victim to offer a compromise. They knew they could never get all that was due but they could block big leaks and blatant deception. Henry reckoned that if he could get three done in the time allowed for two then he would be getting an extra fifty per cent return, not to mention the greater number of people warned that the King hadn't forgotten them. His plan was be the most important thing and so get dealt with quickly to get him away. He was always friendly with the simple gambit of saying he knew everyone fiddled their taxes and this was an opportunity for some admissions to be made without trouble. "I can come another time and pick your books to pieces and demand payment or have you arrested and then we argue it out in court. Mostly I want to get at the big frauds so you little men don't have to pay so much, but you must do your bit too." He would try to find useful things to say about how a little investment in something or other had paid-off elsewhere, or commiserate with the state of the market and suggest ways to deal with the situation. Where some money would be better spent on repairs or investment Henry would say "I will accept a bribe. If you bribe me one penny I will ignore your tax of (whatever it might be) if by (some time or date) the money has been spent on (some useful project.)" He insisted that the agreement was put in writing in this form. Minda's bravado, his knowledge that the King would get more revenue in the long run from a successful business, his complete 'honesty' and knowing that there were mysterious forces protecting him in Melbun gave Henry the confidence to carry around a full account of his treasonable bribes.

This was the first Mr Chris knew about this. He was amazed and uplifted. The young people of today what wouldn't they think of next! He approved mightily. "Henry you are as bad as Minda! Cheek the King and get away with it."

"From what I've heard most people could cheek the King."

"You cheek him to his face."

News reached them on Friday morning of Minda's arrival and survival in Lostnock. After the initial shock they had to decide what to do. Since they were on their way back to Lostnock anyway the obvious course was to return with haste to give what support they could. Diagrams inside Henry's head had loose ends! What support could they give in Lostnock? What knowledge did they have outside? Was it personal or to do with the Bishop and his smuggling? Henry was always more comfortable in the country than the town so he said "Mr. Chris. I'd like to listen to how the country takes the news for a day. Is this a spark for violence or celebration or apathy? I can soon find out but inside the town who knows? May I let you get back. I want to see my Sally but do you not detect a feeling in the country that the King doesn't do enough for the amount of tax he takes?"

"Your Minda is change in herself Henry. She will be the day that makes torches look pale. If there is a movement – and I sense what you do – to take power from a weak king then they must snuff-out Minda before the King. Each day she gets more powerful so they need to act now or be 'what might have been'."

Henry thought about this and drew more connecting lines in mind. "Sir. May I have a day's leave of absence for today? My plan is to continue as we have done but aim for Trexton instead of Lostnock. If there's nothing to report then that will be news in itself."

"What is it about being close to the Duchess Henry?"

"I don't know Sir."

"I'll come with you. I have an old friend near Trexton so why don't we stay there tonight and then both our minds will be at rest."

Mr Chris's old friend was Lord Ruswell. They discovered the atrocity about an hour after the Bartonbry attackers had left. It took time to get the facts. At first Henry was very sceptical that this was anything to do with Minda but the precision of the ambush and brazen leadership by girls was a good guide and death by thrown knife made it a certainty. Henry felt guilty. He didn't know what to say to Mr. Chris. He was proud of Bartonbry but this looked indefensible. All they could do was leave feeling uncomfortable in many ways and find out more at Trexton.

They had no trouble finding these mysterious girls. Mr. Chris had met the Black Team at Willows but he had assumed they were being trained as diplomatic spies with the girls as distractions for throat-slitting boys. They decided that Mr. Chris as a known face from Willows would be the

best to meet the Black Team if it was them. If it wasn't they would know to suspect imposters. Henry gave Mr. Chris the 'Gipsy' password and Mr. Chris negotiated his way through difficulties culminating in a three inch gap in the door which he had to put his hands through to show he wasn't carrying a weapon. Soon though they recognised friends and Henry was fetched and introduced. The girls knew of Henry through Minda's stories of their training. He was exactly as described, lanky, straw hair, took a second to respond but never talked fog.

Henry lanced the boil as he'd been trained to do. "Mr. Chris's friend Lord Ruswell was murdered by one of you this afternoon. It is unfortunate. Mr. Chris will you not blame anyone until you have heard their story?"

"I will grieve regardless but reserve blame."

Maggie said. "I killed him and his wife. I didn't have to. I was wrong. I should have arrested them."

Rachel said "I know Maggie is sincere. She has cried a lake in my arms in the last quarter of an hour. My plan was to frighten the other treacherous lords so Lord Ruswell's refusal to pay his men or apologise for sending troops against the Duchess."

Mr Chris said "But who would take orders from a teenage girl?"

Maggie said "Everybody from today. He drew his sword against me. But my training is only half complete. Because I could kill him for contempt so I did. I shouldn't have. I will try not to make that mistake again."

Henry's years of close training came forward. "Do you want a hug Maggie? – Er – Mistakes can't be undone but they can be shared."

Maggie was uncertain then realised that this was the true blood of Avel strength talking. Comrades of ages waiting in hedges. Henry was her own blood!

"Yes – Not yet I must tell you. Then I murdered a defenceless old woman who shot at Rachel with a crossbow. I was mad for killing with my knife. She was punished enough with loss of son and husband – I killed her son earlier – I didn't have to touch her but I violated her from belly to breast."

Having taken the reins Henry was trying to control this runaway. With Mr. Chris behind him and Rachel watching carefully this had to be done right. "When people set light to your anger they must expect what comes."

Rachel intervened "No Henry! I know you mean well. She teaches us that we must not be ruled by anger – not ever. We have all learned but today Maggie had to kill three people for me so the next two came easy.

Mr. Chris you will understand. I ordered Maggie to give our other enemies a lesson. Maggie isn't a soldier and I expect when you've just shot three men killing gets too easy. How many men have you killed Mr. Chris?"

"Er – None."

"Henry?"

"One. I won't tell you who – ask Minda – but ten years of training made it easy for me to kill him and yet until this minute I had my doubts and many sleepless nights. Now I know I did right. Maggie you might have made a small mistake but she would have died of a broken heart or trying to stab you with whatever she had. Just because men go to war doesn't mean the women are innocent. Didn't they discuss it between themselves. I expect she was the one who hated a disgusting wanton witch at Bartonbry and persuaded her husband and son to do something about it."

That made everyone feel better but bloodstains spread easily.

Mr. Chris broke the silence. "I believe you girls acted in good faith and know you have killed when you shouldn't have. I forgive you as I have heard about the heat of battle but not experienced it. You have killed my friends. It is bitter for me and I can't say I am pleased but let us count their debit sacrifice against creditable deeds to come. Henry shot the innocent Humfrey so Minda could inherit. A lot of good has come from that. In our account books we all have some sorry entries."

Of course Henry understood the accounting analogy but thanks to Minda so did the girls.

At the moment when everyone was formulating 'what is in the past is in the past, what do we do now' when Allesandro returned. After being introduced to Henry he reported.

"I've got lots of bad news. Get ready to leave. We must eat quickly then be gone. The Dowager Duchess of Trest who owns this place is a big religious benefactor. She has been persuaded to organise a rescue of the bishop of Lostnock and punish Bartonbry. There are other lords as well, at least three big ones and a dozen smaller. They are due to muster here tomorrow."

"Henry said. Shall I stay? I should be able to look after myself then come to Lostnock when the size of the force is known."

Maggie said "Let me order food for us now." Rachel said "I'll come with you. You men decide. If we leave then where do we go? What damage can we do as we go." The girls left to brief the mercenary on duty then order food for now and to take with them. They also needed their road clothes back.

They went down with arms folded holding their knife up their sleeves. They had practised this but never carried such a burden of nerves and responsibility. Maggie led the way to the private parlour hoping to find the innkeeper but they seemed to have interrupted a private meeting of four men carrying swords. Surprise was mutual but Rachel recovered first.

"So here you are! We wondered when you'd come. What have you got to say for yourselves?"

"You're not at Bartonbry now young woman."

"And neither are you old man! If you were then you'd be disarmed and enjoying a drink at my expense. How old are you?" (They had been taught to ask a harmless question to start with.) The man hesitated.

"Come on. I'm twenty."

"Twenty my arse said another."

Maggie said "The next man that uses bad language better have more armour than Lord Ruswell."

"Ignore her." Said Rachel showing the follow-me hand signal. "She's killed five today with three shots and two blows and we've agreed she must let me have a chance to catch up. She promised to share equally. Bitch!"

Maggie was slower than Rachel but understood they would argue to distract these men and see what they did. "You could have had two at Ruswell's but you left it to me. You're just jealous!"

"You insisted on shooting the riders yourself!"

"You're jealous. And I'm a better shot. Cow!"

"Oh a cow am I!"

"Moo!" At last one of the men was making a move to sneak out of the other door.

"Man by the door. Stop where you are! Say which one of us is going to kill you?"

"You wouldn't dare!"

"Open your mouth man by the door! Wide open." The others looked round at him. For two men it was the last mistake they made as Rachel pulled her knife from her sleeve, made a throat slash motion and pointed at the one nearest Maggie and herself found how peculiar the blade feels when you slash a neck and how much blood there is. Rachel had intended interrogating the other one on her side with fear but instead she lunged at him and stabbed him in the eye then that left the escaper who had an open mouth which was such a tempting target – she threw - his head flew back and he flopped forwards towards her. Three! She had three! And now she too was covered in blood.

Maggie had her knife at the throat of the other very frightened man. "Do I kill him Rachel?"

"Oh you've saved him for me! How sweet. I take it all back. I didn't mean what I said." Rachel asked herself in a blink of time which was all she could spare what would Minda do? "Will you give me your sword old man?"

"Yes!"

"I'll take it. Stay very still." When she had his sword she commanded Maggie "I'll guard this door. You take the other Now old man who are you?"

"David Roberts."

"Bartonbry forgives and forgets errors of the past. Admit now and live. Lie and die. Am I clear?" Horrible noises from the floor distracted him. "Look at me David. You will live. You are now a knight of Bartonbry. How does it feel? In a day you can have your sword back." (They had been told to give prisoners some hope of a future.)

The main door opened an exploratory crack. Rachel shouted "Fetch the innkeeper." and kicked it shut. "David. You are now a knight of Bartonbry. You have seen Bartonbry's power. You have seen how we kill and how we spare. Do you know a better cause?"

"No Your Grace."

"Nor you ever shall Knight David. Now we must keep you safe against these men you've betrayed."

"I never betrayed them."

"But that's what it looks like doesn't it! I expect they have friends. You know you stand some chance with us but none on your own."

Henry burst through the door with the mercenaries. He instantly recognised the trap of the small room. Blood everywhere! The girls

didn't seem to have a plan. 'Run away' was probably best. "Jack! Sam!" Then he whistled the high-low-low 'let's go'. Jack whispered to Henry who nodded then went dragging Alex behind. "Sam. Guard my back!" The innkeeper appeared. "Gods bones!" He said.

Henry had a knife to his chest in as friendly a way as he could think of. "Find their clothes. We need a net of food – anything! We're leaving. Go!"

"Henry!" Said Rachel quietly "Where are we going?"

"We haven't decided."

"Oh no. Well done Henry but we must have somewhere better or more useful to go to."

Maggie said "I can't think of any safer place so what's the best thing to do? Attack this dowager I say."

"Right that's decided. Tell everyone we're making a dash for Lostnock Henry. We'll stay here until you have the escape ready. This man comes with us. Go!"

Rachel turned to David. "We are going to persuade the dowager duchess to give up her revolt. You have seen what happens to the Kings enemies. You are living proof that he can forgive. Breathe in deep! That's the King's air in your lungs. You will come with us to plead for her to surrender. Stand up! Maggie will be your personal body guard.

It was a muddled exit from Trexton. There was some moon but it would set in an hour. As soon as they were out of sight of the village Rachel called a halt. "At the next chance we're dismounting and leaving the road. Follow me." They soon found a coppice and a little clearing. "We wait here half an hour. Sam – you watch the road – the password is Gipsy or Diamond. The rest of us will eat and plan."

Rachel pointed out that as nowhere was safe they might as well hunt themselves as be hunted. "This duchess seems to be the most valuable target and if we can get her to surrender we must do a lot of damage to the enemy. When they see she has fallen they will think again about their allegiances." She introduced David and explained he was on probation as a reformed rebel. "He knows how short his life will be if he tries any tricks." She told them how David had described what to expect

at the dowager duchess' house. A moat surrounding a large house and walled garden with a farm.

Alex said. "Travelling entertainers know her. She is dry and cheerless. I don't think you will win her round."

Mr. Chris said "I don't want to spoil your dreams but even if you get into the house you would never get out. Henry and myself can navigate you to Lostnock by side roads."

Maggie said "I think you're right Mr. Chris. So we must lure her out. If we ambushed her here we could use our night skills but they have the local knowledge."

Jack spoke. "Please why not send her an ultimatum. She doesn't know our force. If Brand was at Lostnock today he could be burning her house tomorrow."

Rachel said "That's a very good idea Jack. Thank you for being brave and speaking up."

Henry followed the idea through. "So we would want to appear as many as we can. That would mean splitting into two or more groups and burning five houses each tonight."

Maggie said "That's horrible. If we find a village should we burn it all?"

David said "You could end up burning the halls of your allies."

"Do we have any?" asked Maggie.

"Yes. Lots really. Tonight us four in the inn were sent to catch you by close friends of the duchess as a favour to her. I could show you those houses."

"What about the duchess' farms? Do you know those?" asked Henry.

"Some."

"How do you set a house on fire?" asked Alex. Nobody knew.

"We'll just have to find out." said Maggie.

"Where do we meet up? What do we demand of the Duchess?" Asked Rachel?

Alex said. "I know! We send her a message as if it came from Minda in Lostnock demanding she surrender there in person, guaranteeing her safe passage if her party show a white flag. That can arrive early tomorrow from the Lostnock direction. David you can go as if released to explain you have been taken to our general's camp in order to be a go-between. Surrender and live by sundown tomorrow at Lostnock or executed at noon in Trexton square on Sunday."

"Diamond." Sam crept into the clearing and whispered. "Horses from Trexton a score perhaps." The girls and Henry vanished without a word. Alex said "Stick this loaf in your tunic Sam we may move in a moment." Mr. Chris you take Henry's horse with yours. Jack and Sam link the girl's horses. David and me will go together. Jack again you're in charge of retreat. Pick a way out of here and go twenty paces ready for us to follow." Now they could hear the rumble of hooves getting closer... then passing on down the road. There was no sign or sound from the girls and Henry yet they could only be forty paces away. David started to say something but was silenced by Alex. For five minutes there was silence except for the animals of the night and shushing of the breeze in the top leaves. More sounds! Tramp, tramp, tramp of marching troops. Maggie came back and indicated silence until the tramp-tramp was getting further away. "Follow me in half a minute unless you hear. Henry has a plan."

Henry's plan was to follow a quarter mile behind the marching troops. They would be going towards Lostnock with the enemy troops as their advanced guard. If they needed they could leave the road at short notice. They were soon organised with Henry and Sam at the front, Maggie and Jack at the rear. The moon was vanishing but Henry was used to using a dark lamp to give two side beams enough to keep them on the road. Although they were doing something, they all realised they still didn't have a plan beyond getting back to the safety of Lostnock. Rachel's pain was a real distraction, she was trying to breath on one side if that was possible! She saw the funny side of that but the dried blood in every crease of her body from ankle to eyes was itching. God knows what a sight she looked. At the back Maggie showed Jack the art of being ambush guard at night. In small bursts they discussed what to do in an emergency. Maggie ordered him to do all the work for a minute or two as she put her mind to their strengths and weaknesses. It was a quarter of an hour before she indicated to him she was back on rear duty. "We are running away Jack. We might do more but there is too much fog and too many traps."

"How long would it take to write a surrender demand anyway? If it is five minutes then I will take it as if I come as a messenger from Lostnock."

"We can do that at dawn. News will travel really fast tomorrow if the Little Army has arrived. And no you won't take it – but you are brave to take the risk Jack. You are too valuable to lose for being recognised from Trexton. We'll find another way. I've just had an idea. Can you watch the back again alone?"

"Yes Miss Maggie"

Maggie went straight to David who was whispering to Alex. "David. I am your bodyguard. I will not be able to protect you on your mission as messenger tomorrow but I am going to help you. You have to trust me. I am going to blindfold you for the next half an hour. You can easily push it off if you must but I want you to know what it is like to ride blindfold as you surely would have been if taken as prisoner to our general's camp. It makes your story more convincing. Alex will you interrogate him as if you were the dowager for practice? You see David we try to practice at Bartonbry. I'm sorry we killed your friends I have killed five today I shouldn't have. That was Rachel's first taste of blood. Now I know how it tastes I know one sip isn't enough."

Rachel, Henry and Mr. Chris had been trying to work out where the troops were going to and when they would rest. Henry's sixth sense that told him to wait to see what else was coming along the road earlier helped him now. When the troops ahead rested they did so as well with an extended rear guard and improvised escape or deception plan. It must be past midnight now. Henry quickly conferred with Mr. Chris and then Rachel. It was either go the last ten miles to Lostnock now cloaked by the dark or camp unobserved in some outpost during the day then resume... No they had nothing to resume. They would find their best way to safety and easy breathing tonight.

A total of four hours by daylight but eight tense hours by night brought them to the gates of Lostnock before dawn. Mr. Chris and Henry were recognised and easily persuaded the gate guards to let them in by the small doors. When they saw Rachel in the torchlight the guards thought she was injured but a word from Mr. Chris soon had the girls by the fire in the gatehouse and a gateman's wife roused to look after them. The girls had the grey pallor, wrinkles and aching movements of old women. Both were awake but asleep inside.

Minda didn't really know if she was asleep or awake. Here were Maggie and Rachel covered in blood and exhausted. They hardly recognised her. She had difficulty stopping her tears. No it was impossible. "Men go to Brand. Go!" "Woman! We want warm water and clothes. Get a big bed warmed at the castle." Minda wasn't the only one who could tell the girls needed simple tender care and there was no shortage of helpers. Some time in the next hour Brand told Minda the girls had done better than any man and he'd done something. Lucky was next. He hugged her. "You can go to bed for a month Minda... Don't worry about anything..." That's all she remembered except for sheets embroidered with gold

enfolding her in a sweet-smelling soft bed in a room with a guard that smiled. Yes they all smiled. The Bartonbry smile. Blood red sheets. Blood covered hands. Blood covered clothes. Bodies lying lurched around her bed with questions on their open mouths but no wind to blow them and nothing behind their eyes.

[Bartonbry Friday morning]

Flor slept soundly until first light Friday when something in a dream seemed odd. A different smell tickled him. His bed wasn't quite level. His hands on his chest didn't seem to belong to him. Brown eyes were looking straight into his. GOD'S TRUTH he was awake! Brown hair three inches away. Awake and dreaming he struggled with trying to coordinate his limbs and thoughts.

"Kiss me Flor" The face swamped him. It was real! Where was he? Was it day or night? Who was she? Mary! His coordination was a bit better now but her fingers on his chest held him down and twisted his hair. "It's alright Flor. Kiss me handsome." She whispered with all her breath working her hands up his chest to his chin. Flor was still uncertain which bits of him were under his control. He was smothered with a kiss that started coyly then grew into a face-hug. "Put your hands on my breasts Flor."

"Mary! Stop it."

"Come on make love to me." He seemed to be entangled in limbs. If only he had time to catch his breath and distance to avoid her hair crossing between their faces. Gradually he gave in to what he didn't quite know. Actually it was quite exciting now!

Flor mustered the castle staff in the main hall. "Derek Driver was found this morning hanging in his cell. I will pray for his soul." He paused and then paused some more. "Now you all know the Little Army has gone to Lostnock. Thank you everyone for helping. If there is anyone who made an error in their haste over the last two days then you are forgiven – We all have. Life is full of mistakes. If you have learned a lesson that others might need then please tell me later." For a second his gaze caught a sparkly-eyed Mary in the crowd. "I have bad news for you all. The Duchess is in danger. We have sent our best to help her. There are evil forces that may appear – we don't know where from or when but we

must be prepared. We must defend the castle and the town. Now listen! We also have to defend the Abbey. Yes! We have to protect the cuckoo's nest as well. Remember we are strong enough if we stand together to deal with a large force and this is just a precaution. We don't know of any large enemy but we won't be caught dreaming." He caught Mary's shining glance again. "I will be relying on you to watch for danger and sharpen your weapons and be ready at a moment if called. I have the whole town to look after so Little Arthur will be your general until the trumpet sounds – Let's hope it never does."

In the office Flor briefed Little Arthur. "I want you to ask people very nicely what they are doing to defend the castle or town. Find out if they would do more if they could."

"I don't understand Mr. Flor."

"Suppose someone hasn't got a sword but would practice and use it if he had one."

"Oh I see. Can I have my gold knife?"

"Not yet but I promise in a day or two. How about that?"

"Yes!"

"You are not to make up stories about lots of horrible enemies. There are probably hardly any at all and as soon as word gets round you're in charge they will know they're beaten before they start and run away."

"Really!"

"Really a bit. Everyone knows that Bartonbry people are very clever and we must have a really clever reason for putting a little boy in charge of the Castle."

"So I have to defend the castle?"

"Yes. That's about it Arthur. You've got the easy job little man. I have the whole town! Tell people that."

"Do I have to ride a horse and march troops like the Little Army?"

"No. Just listen and keep people smiling. Ask Mary to make sure you are properly dressed for a general. You can ride a bit now can't you?"

"Yes Flor."

"Good. Every dawn I want you to get up early and ride gently to the East gate on your own then out for a mile and back."

"Why."

"To show you can. All on your own. Ask Magward to go with you tomorrow then you're on your own."

"Yes Sir."

"And you will have the King's gold knife."

"It's my knife!"

10 Disaster

[Early hours of Friday morning]

When they left Bartonbry the string of boats with only six feet of rope between them were ploughing into a completely dark adventure. The red boat was in the lead finding its way down the river. It often touched the bottom silently or with a jarring scraping. With encouragement of polers the back end of the boat would swing out into the stream and let the following boats drift past and then be jerked free by them if they were lucky or with ten men splashing in the shallows to push them off. They gave up trying to turn the string so sometimes the official lead boat would be behind as in a while the process would be repeated and you could pole if you knew which direction to pole in. Thanks to the lifetime knowledge of the boatmen they didn't become disoriented more than half a dozen times. Jane had immediately made her way to all three boats and spoken to the men. "Rest if you can. If we need volunteers we'll send a whisper round." She was more strict with the cadets. "The blues and blacks will get us there so you must sleep for you may not see your enemy until midnight. We know where you are if you're needed. Just get your heads down. Tomorrow we should have a proper commander and something to fight for." She quizzed Caxton on his last-second appearance.

"I have come to do what I can."

"Can you shoot?"

"I used to." Jane's silence prompted him "No."

"Can you cook?"

"No."

"Have you brought any remedies for sword wounds?"

"No."

"Can you swim?"

"No."

"Hmm Well then it would be rude to throw you off. But no ruder than you jumping aboard eating somebody's rations and getting in our way."

"I thought I might be useful negotiating with the Bishop of Lostnock."

Jane thought about this. "I know you mean well Brother Caxton but if the Bishop won't surrender to force then I can't let you walk into the jaws of certain death. You may have to hide until we know it is safe for you to walk the streets without a guard. I can't spare a guard for you."

"Oh. I'm sorry."

"It's nice for you to volunteer brother. It is nice for the Little Army to have its own man of God. None of us knows what to expect. You are now one of the Blue team. Help them as best you can. The blues look after the rest of us. Once you're a team member you'll get paid as well!" She chuckled and gave him a little squeeze. "Do your best brother."

Brand managed to get to Lostnock just before noon. He estimated the boats would arrive late afternoon. His first call was the Tax Office where Paul should be.

"Where's the army Brand!"

"They're coming by boat. Sometime this afternoon – Five possibly."

"Oho! What's the plan?"

"I was hoping you'd tell me the targets."

"The town is behind Minda but not rising. There was an attempt last night to bring in a rescue squad from Lord Tenning, Lord Wopperint, Lord Devo, and Lord Swelling. We intercepted the messengers but there may have been other messengers. The Dowager Duchess of Trext is a big supporter and she's a dry stick with lots of money and influence."

"What's that mean?"

"The cathedral has some allies. As these are all in one district I expect they have sent messages to other districts by other means. So we must expect anything from two dozen to two hundred armed men. They might arrive today but surely it would take longer? You're the military expert."

"Hmm. Everyone will wait for everyone else. A conference would take a day and everyone wants to be at the back of the army so allow another day. Then they have to travel. Then they can't attack at night – not without preparation or bribery of the gate guards. Let's assume one of

the gates is bribed to let them in. They could come in a day or two. What would the townsfolk do?"

"They are spectators in a war between great lords. They won't get involved unless they have to."

"Tell that to Minda. Get a man on the river bank looking out for the boats. I'll be at Minda's."

"Stop! The assassin Riskin is alive and free. He has already murdered one of our men."

"Who?"

"Xavier's agent – You don't know him."

"So somebody else knew he was an agent? Find out who betrayed him."

"Oh yes I see. It could be here. The tax office shares intelligence and you knew Silks."

"Yes I did. He is one of us – the Trowstead ones from way back. Find out for God's sake."

"What are we going to do?"

"Have a conference at Minda's. Come with me."

"But nobody knows I'm here. I should stay secret."

"Lostnock knows by now. There are few secrets in this town."

"But knowing is different to guessing."

"But there are those enemies that won't have guessed that you might surprise. You'll confuse them."

"I'm afraid."

"So are we all. We have to put our untrained troops to good effect without getting half the sons of the nobility of Melbun killed. I think we have two objectives – Show of friendly force and killing the Bishop."

"Kill him?"

"Yes. Dead men don't complain. Dead men don't pay lawyers. When the Little Army arrives you'll be an important person who can accept apologies from Lords that have realised their mistakes and want to make amends. Just remember to declare all bribes without asking."

"I'm not as afraid as I was. You make it sound easy."

"It is easy. That's why we worked through the night at Bartonbry. So it was easy today. Now are you ready? Remember you're not just a clerk but a spy and a political advisor. Her flag can't fly without your bit of the pole. Let's go we've got hundreds of armed men to sort out."

"Hundreds?"

"Our mob then the force the town volunteers after being reminded about their duty and then the enemy. We have to manage all three."

[Friday 1pm. Lostnock]

Three boats crept in line around the final bend approaching Lostnock. Everyone was cramped sitting armed in the hold. The red boat was in the lead with the yellow right behind. The plan was for the boatmen to tie up the red boat then let the Reds guard while stores were unloaded by the Yellows and Blues and then to head to the town square and sheriff's office, secure the town watch then split up to see if they could find Minda. In short they didn't have much of a plan and they had been preparing to sweep the countryside not stab in alleys. John and James were too tired to be useful in the town so were detailed to keep the quayside friendly and usable however they could. There was only a half a mile to go to the quays and the town's confusion rising out of the dirty river was quite intimidating but soon they were inside the walls and although the quays looked busy there didn't seem to be any military activity.

The town clocks struck two. There was a black and white standard on the quay! Something to aim for. At last something definite to fight for. Brand, Flor and a couple of guards of some sort stood beside it. Jane pointed the standard out to the head boatman. "Nearly there Dick. You've done really well. I'm proud of you and your men. I'm sure the Duchess will be too."

"I'm sure she will be proud of you miss. I never thought I'd see children so grown up as you and your friends. You're welcome on my boat any time."

"Thank you Dick."

"Day or night if you know what I mean?"

Jane was too tired to know what he meant but just nodded. She resisted the temptation to turn round and check everything. It was too late. She had to lead for the next ten minutes then it would be over.

At last the commands to the haulers and activity on the tiny deck indicated docking. Brand and Lucky were poised at the water's edge. Jane showed them the 'stop-stay' hand signal then waited for the nod

from Dick that the boat was secure. A gentle blast on her leader's whistle and the red boat began emptying cramped troops and cadets. She jumped ashore into the arms of Lucky.

"All the Little army at your service. Is she alright?"

"There's no danger Jane. Get them organised gently then we'll move off. Are they rested?"

"Is she alright!"

"Yes. Minda is safe and well."

Jane turned to the boats and blasted her whistle. "The duchess is safe and well!" Cheers came from the boats and soldiers. "Take your time. We're going to show Lostnock how smart the soldiers of Lostnock are. Inspection in five minutes!" To Brand she said "They are a bit rested but most of them had to do some pushing over the shallows or pulling at the rope. They're in good spirit."

When the troops were lined up in ranks Brand and Lucky inspected them. They made the little army feel welcome rather than looking for things to complain about. Jane called them to attention. "Soldiers I want you to give three cheers for the boatmen who brought us here safely. Don't hide boatmen!" Jane took the commander's whistle from her neck as Brother Caxton tried to organise prayers. "Caxton! To me!" He obeyed. "This is a military operation. You ask permission first do you understand?"

"But they/"

"/Understand? I'm here to kill people. You can pray for their souls after."

"I understand."

"Good. Not now thank you Brother we're on the move." She handed the whistle to Brand who immediately gave a gentle 'peep'. As Jane stepped back John and James were beside her ready with their support. "Well done boys." she whispered. "We did it!"

"Do we join the troops?" asked John.

"Ask."

John asked Lucky who gave directions to Minda's house and warning that there was an assassin loose on the streets so not to loiter or let their guard drop.

Using the common sense to be nice to the one who holds your chain, the citizens of Lostnock made the Little Army welcome with food, ale, smiles

and extra black and white ribbons. They looked the part anyway. The show of civic enthusiasm gave Brand and Lucky time to brief the Cadets about objectives and dangers. Worryingly, although good money was offered for Riskin's capture, he had vanished. If he was back inside the cathedral complex he would kill or worse hold cadets hostage. He must be desperate already and now proper troops had come the cathedral was no sanctuary. Cadet Hammond's troop was detailed to protect Delphia and the smiths and find billets for themselves. Cadet Gregori's troop was detailed to protect Mr. Bob and the Tax Office and use the office for billeting. These cadets were told they were tent-pegs, just as important as the poles and canvas and chosen because they had brains which they must use.

The Blue team loitered at the quay without orders. Brother Caxton wanted to wander off but for now they decided they would stick together or at least stay in pairs. Cadet Jenks asked if the boatmen had been paid?

"Yes sir." Came the reply. Then there was a discussion of the economics of carrying stone from Willows to Lostnock and general cargo to Bartonbry. Jenks asked how much Bartonbry trade could increase before there weren't enough boats. "I don't rightly know sir. Our boats to Bartonbry are easily half full when last year they were nearly empty. Luckily down river we can carry a few less stones whenever we like but they're beginning to pile up at Bartonbry. Soon there will be enough for a special trip." Jenks learned that a full stone barge couldn't travel in the dry summer season, but cloth, say, was lighter and didn't sink the boats so much. Jenks and the boatmen learned of the recent events in Lostnock together.

"My father in Melbun has shares in three trading ships. Until now I never gave a thought to those ships – I thought they were like carts but you've shown me different. When I get a chance I must find out more about all boats and ships."

Somebody had remembered the Blue team and hot roast birds in honey arrived with a small cask of ale. This was shared equitably among the cadets and boatmen whether they were captains or labourers – though the labourers knew to take small portions.

Minda dare not show herself in daylight as a single arrow could be fatal. Now there was a definite killer with a personal grudge loose she would have to stay secret. It was annoying, humiliating even, not to be able to mingle with your inferiors on the streets in pleasant frisson of intimate

encouragement. Jane, John and James arrived! She hugged each one. "Rachel and Maggie are going with Allesandro to Trexton." She told them. "It's a day from here towards Melbun. They're safe. Now get some rest."

As soon as the boats had been seen word was sent to the Cathedral complex that it would be taken by force if not surrendered peacefully. Anyone resisting would be aiding a traitor and killed. As penalty for harbouring a traitor the whole place was now deemed forfeit. All foot traffic in and out was stopped by Ken's men. Minda didn't want any of their wealth smuggled out, that would be hers! The under-sheriff was unable to do anything about it but sent a letter to Minda asking that she would be merciful in the circumstances as he was sure many of the churchmen there were honest and godly. She had no interest in wanton destruction but she'd have their gold! She sent a message back assuring him of her clement intentions but warned him that ejected clerics would get jeered and attacked by over-enthusiastic townsfolk unless he made it clear that wasn't to be tolerated. By three o'clock the army had the complex surrounded. Cadet Herik was sent to parley with the gatehouse. The terms of surrender were that servants and innocent clerics could exit by this gate carrying one bundle. Any that remained by four o'clock would be considered traitors. They were let out five at a time to be searched by a troop. Valuables were ruthlessly confiscated. They were told that depending on the Duchesses' whim they may be let back after the cathedral had been properly cleansed. The flow dried up before four o'clock without any sign of the Bishop. He had nothing to lose or was playing for time or hoping to trap Minda. Martyrdom.

At four the head chaplain came to the gate with the keys and spoke with one of the cadets. Herik, smart as always, carrying the King's standard was ready at the gate for this moment.

"I want to speak to the duchess."

"I'm sorry sir you cannot speak with the Duchess nor the commander."

"I protest."

"I'm sure the King will be keen to hear your protest but now do you give me the keys or not."

"I won't give them to a boy."

"Look up at that flag. When you give them to me you are giving them to the King. I didn't get much sleep last night so I could just burn your rats nest and be done with it. Keys or not?"

"There are old and sick in the infirmary. They are not troubling you."

"I understand sir. But you are beginning to trouble me. Can't you see the longer we wait the more cross the men will be? Now come out where everyone can see and hand me the keys. We are not barbarians. Troop! Attention!"

"Well done Herik." Said Brand. Blowing long and hard on his commander's whistle Brand addressed the troops. There weren't enough of them, they had the wrong kit and the wrong training and they would have cornered outlaws to deal with. "The sheriff and the town watch will go first. Here are the keys sheriff." He handed them over. Every man in the Little Army will be paid in gold but any private looter will be executed and the whole troop flogged. Every cupboard may conceal a priest with a knife. There is no hurry. Reds to enter behind the watch then yellows. Good luck."

Lucky was worried. The bishop's only hope was to capture Minda, or Delphia. If Riskin could escape then perhaps he had as well and the army was wasting its time. At Minda's house he gathered everyone together, servants, guards, Mr. Bob and the sleepy Black Team.

"Please Mr. Lucky Alex told us to question everything. What if somebody else killed the agent? Or if it was Riskin why?" Asked James. "What does he gain?"

Lucky had no answer. Minda blossomed. Her servants were thinking! "Good question James. You've made me very happy. Just because we think we're caught in a net doesn't mean we are. Well done. And after all that boating! Let's all think! Who killed the agent and why? There's a secret somewhere in there." There were blank looks all round.

A guard offered a suggestion. "Please Your Grace perhaps someone had just seen Mr. Lucky kill his two mates, followed him to the agent's house and when the agent came out he thought it was Mr. Lucky in the dark and killed him in revenge."

"A shilling for you my man!" said Minda. "You may be completely wrong but you spoke your thoughts when asked and that's the Avel way."

"Thank you Your Grace."

As soon as one alternative was flushed from cover into the open others could be found and chased. Lucky spoiled their fun. "Whoever killed the agent and for whatever reason there are two things. First there is a killer loose and secondly the Bishop's only hope is to escape or capture Minda

or her family as hostage. So for Minda, Delphia and Mr. Bob – the risk is death or capture. For the rest of us it is death."

They were silent until Minda said "There are some very rich people about. Lostnock will kill for sixpence and look the other way for a shilling. I must show myself sometime or people will say I'm skulking."

Another guard said "Your Grace I heard it asked on the street half an hour ago why were you not at the head of your army?"

"Thank you. I have the same flesh as any other person in Lostnock. I'm not a witch or fairy. Arrows and swords will kill me. Why don't the people of Lostnock organise their own army instead of relying on mine? It's your town!"

"Sorry Your Grace."

"No. You did well. You are here and may have an arrow in your throat in defence of your town but where is the rest of Lostnock? They need their bottoms kicking. Hmm. I will do that! Thank you again. Have a shilling while I'm still breathing to give it to you." Minda turned to the others.

"We are the conquerors! Lucky you are right to make sure we are defended but I cannot lead from a rabbit's burrow. Right! Guards to your posts! Black Team to your beds. Mr. Bob – your job is to see the leading townfolk are gathered at seven tonight at the Moot hall where they will be told how they are to defend their town against enemies. According to Father Harris's confession we don't expect an attack for two more days. By seven we may have a result from the cathedral. You must all take extra care against ones and twos of attackers but we started this war so we must be brave."

Jane asked. "What are we doing to find this killer? None will sleep easy until he's found."

"Another shilling's worth Jane" said Minda. "What do you suggest?"

"Either look in the obvious places or tempt him out of his lair with bait. Who were the men Mr. Lucky killed? They must be another key." Lucky admitted he'd forgotten to follow that up. Minda realised that a few shillings and pennies for guards was too little when she was going to win the wealth of the cathedral. She should have more guards and better armour. The cost was nothing compared with the winnings. Oh – and the personal risks.

"You get your sleep Jane and John and James. I'm sure you will be needed later. You've been very helpful. Now leave us to do the worrying."

Cadets used to methodical analysis of accounts in a quiet schoolroom unknowingly used their methodical skills to settle Minda's account with the Bishop. One building at a time was thoroughly investigated. The cadets were now experts at how fraud was hidden in figures so they soon felt confident poking into holes and wondering where the holes were when they couldn't find them and trying some more. By now they knew that everything had fraudulent fringes. Everything. By some instinct these boys guessed amongst themselves who would be good at clearing an area with troops and who should look for frauds. They were more than soldiers of the King, more than the next wave of youth built up to breaking by the Duchess, they were foot-soldiers of light shone into the dark. White against black. Those two hours searching the Cathedral complex made relationships that would last a lifetime between cadets. Ask and adapt, support and suggest. "Richard! This is clear. Lend me your archers and I'll do over there."

"Yes. Mart. Do you want my swordsmen. There's nothing here for them."

"Yes."

"I'll deal with these prisoners. Watch that corner. I'll have two crossbows on it while you run the space."

They smiled at the game. Mart died a minute later with two arrows in his chest.

Suddenly the sense of risk and responsibility was replaced by determination to kill bastards. Two months of pretend games on a leash burst into ten minutes of unrestrained hunting for blood. Soldiers and cadets drove into impulsive action. Even Herik's polite nobility flashed into nothingness at news of Mart's murder. He picked the most senior prisoner, held his head back by his hair and smashed his throat with his Avel blade. His troop followed his lead and a dozen quiet prisoners died in revenge before the span of a couple of breaths. In the Cathedral complex, old soldier, Brand saw for the first time what it was to try to direct a battle. His men were attacking without orders. He could only direct not stop the flow.

A man can die with a thumbnail of blood or a spray counted in heartbeats or a lake joining body to dusty ground. Unfortunately the Little Army had no experience of death or in concentrating force. Every attack on a comrade is a death request by an enemy. The defenders died as the attackers had the will to stab and slash close and deadly. No man could tell what pushed him towards men with arrows and swords but the Little Army found it's purpose in brutal death before all else. For five

minutes Minda's spirit filled the complex with slashing and stabbing slaughter. Every man in the Little Army was driven by duty and rage. Cloisters, dorters, refectory, chapter house, chapels and the many convoluted parts of the cathedral itself saw tiny battles and brutal death.

The Bishop's last hope was to crush with the awe of the cathedral's indisputable authority. His first plan was to kneel at the altar but at the last minute his courage failed and he ran to the undercroft. The futility of trying to deflect the tempest that is Minda was illustrated by the 'official' and 'unofficial' story that he had been hiding half submerged in the dark of a shit-house. He was hauled out to Herik who appeared to be the chief of executions where just the words "Take it off" to a trooper were enough. "Well done Giles. You and you drag his body to the main gate. You take his head Giles, it goes on a pike. You and you go with him and make the pike show in the market square and defend it for now. Go!"

[Friday 7pm Lostnock]

At seven o'clock that evening the moot hall was crowded with the leading citizens and others who had talked their way past the doorwardens. Minda arrived with a close guard. Inside she removed her makeshift breastplate, backplate and borrowed helmet. Ambushing the king with charm and distraction was simple compared with this. All she had was herself and grim anger. Smile as you attack! But she couldn't even use that little habit. She had a full gown in black and white halves made in a day and flowing hair and that was about it. No pretty face. No jewels. Not even her star-iron ring for comfort.

She strode onto the platform. What subdued noise there was ceased. "Blood was spilled today. Good men died for no reason. Brother Caxton! Give us a prayer."

"Dear Lord above watching our life draining away please forgive our stupidity. Please take the souls of the slain to your forgiving heart whatever their sins. Please teach us to manage our affairs without killing. Warn us against revenge and feuding, our days are short enough as it is without brother killing brother. Amen."

"AMEN" from the crowd.

"Thank you Brother. The town has lost six watchmen we hear. I have lost two of my dearest cadets and eighteen soldiers. The cathedral lost twenty six men and the Bishop. The deaths of my men makes me more determined to defend this town against their allies who are on their way.

The cathedral put up a futile defence which caused fifty men their lives. Fifty deaths is what treason brings. That is why I stand against treason. Is there any man in this hall who does not stand with me. – Say now...
 ...Treason is against life, trade and the King. I am for life, trade and the King. Is there any man in this hall who is against? – Say now...
 ...Heilbret the butcher! Are you for life?"

"Yes Your Grace."

"Lord Levendale the Tax Officer! Are you for trade?"

"Yes Your Grace"

"Red Ken, gutter-knight! Are you for the King?"

"Yes Your Grace."

As if rehearsed, Pod Watts shouted "The smiths are for the duchess. See the Avel black? – That is the anvil."

As if rehearsed Smith Thredvald shouted "The white is her mother-star that watches over us."

As if rehearsed several voices shouted "Lead us. Lead us! Shall she lead us?" Repeated in a chant that soon grew. Minda called to the side and the under-sheriff came onto the platform. She held up her arms for quiet

"I am not a general of armies, I am no more than a lantern in the dark hedgerows where outlaws slither. This is your town and you need an army who knows what blood looks like and command sounds like and victory smells like so you may defend your town. Take the under-sheriff or vote for another. Every man here and his servants must sharpen his weapons and sharpen his dedication to protecting Lostnock. Money won't buy peace! First you must be your own leaders. Second the under-sheriff will organise you. Ten o'clock tomorrow on the Upper waste."

"How do we know this threat is real?" Shouted a voice from the crowd.

"Good question. In Bartonbry we question and from that learn to trust. I have personally witnessed the torture of spies to get information. We don't know how strong the forces will be and when they know the cathedral is lost they may give up and go home like a chastened cat."

"What's going to happen to the cathedral?" came a shout from the floor.

"That's for the King to decide. Shall we keep it open for holy worship in the meantime?"

"YES" from the crowd.

"Let you all decide who shall be the Bishop of Lostnock from the holy men you know. – NO! Until the King shall give his decree let us have an Abbess! A woman, to heal the deadly wounds caused today. Let the

brothers rest and reflect and the nuns deal with death, injury and despair. I'm sure they are strong and holy."

The crowd erupted in chatter.

As if rehearsed a woman's voice called out "Please Your Grace Abbess Rodinge lives but ten miles away. Would you have her sweep the cathedral clean?"

"What does the town think?" Her stooges knew when to cheer so that was decided. "Yes. This is still a town of God and our women are strong. Go with Godspeed and fetch them."

Minda continued. "Every man listen! You have been very wise to pretend the feud between the myself, the King and the cathedral had nothing to do with you but now you have to stand up to treason. You may be out of practise. You may be hoping this is a bad dream. You may be afraid. I don't care. Every woman in this town will expect you on the Upper waste tomorrow to do your duty. Be proud! It is for a few days to scare away men who are as scared as you are – But you have walls and they are in the open. We expect serious forces but nothing well-trained or well-paid. I'm sure when they see your numbers lining the town walls they will turn around."

The under-sheriff spoke to the crowd. "I will organise if you acclaim me now." There was a cheer that would have to do as a 'yes'. "But the Duchess will be our leader. I think she's fought this battle in her head already."

Minda thought for a moment. Which way was best? Honesty or bravado? She was in Lostnock not Bartonbry. "Men of Lostnock." so far so good. Now what? "It is my town too." She signalled to the side passage and a cadet brought her Avel sword and shield. Even her strong hands found the brute of a black sword with silver edges hard to hold up steady. She smiled her broken smile, then smiled some more as the cheers rose from the floor.

Outside the moot hall Jane, John and James stayed in a shadow across the square. Then when it got properly dark they chose to sit propped up in an parked cart trusting that the odd shapes of the sides would disguise their hooded heads from becoming faces. They'd decided that an assassin was not to be approached but needed a knife hard in the eye at about four or five paces. They were watching carefully for anything usual or unusual. Alex had taught them to look again. They sat in a

relaxing posture ready for a long wait with Jane the middle and arms tight round each other's waists.

John began tapping his fingers against Jane in a certain way. Slowly she looked at him oddly then realised whatever the signal was it must be something he'd seen in the dark. They didn't have a 'high-low' signal for 'I'm confused' so she gradually drew his head towards hers and whispered into his ear. "What?" he held her hand then forefinger and pointed it without moving his body. Shit! There was a darker shadow in that doorway. Jane used the same finger pointing method to pass the message to James. Cheering could be heard from inside the Moot hall. How would they deal with the assassin in the doorway? Knives thrown then arrows? What was his weapon? Who was in the doorway opposite? Lucky or the assassin? How frustrating they were so close but couldn't talk except by holding hands. Three still bodies, three running minds, thirty three different plans rehearsed separately in their heads. This wasn't their way of doing things, they were being stupid, confusing themselves with worries instead of discovering and acting. Jane was first to realise they were playing children's games in the dark and invented a new strategy. She whispered to James "stay cover me" and to John "follow me ten paces" then very slowly climbed out of the cart. She pulled out her knife and went nearly straight to the doorway where they suspected a shadow and was about to ask in a whisper for the password when "Gipsy" in Lucky's voice preempted her. She was nearly sick. There was nothing for her to do except continue walking. What had happened? Strangled by her imagination. Stop it! Stop it Jane! Stop it! Grow up! She took a big lungfull of Lostnock air. "Riskin! I'm going to carve your ears off and gouge your eyes out and use your balls for marbles – then I'm going to kill you." She strode in the middle of the lanes round the Moot hall shouting. "If I don't get you tonight Riskin I'll chop you up tomorrow!" The Black Team were not used to town warfare but Lucky was. He remembered to look up in time to see a shadow about to fall onto Jane and called "Above you Jane!". A distracted Riskin lost his footing and fell with a horrible 'arghhflut' two paces in front of Jane. This shock didn't make her feel sick. Riskin died intact but in great pain with a broken leg and twenty stab wounds.

Inside the Moot hall Minda still had unfinished business. The castle warden hadn't turned up at the meeting so there was something wrong. Minda addressed the crowd. "Is the castle warden here?" Murmurs but

no answers. "If anyone knows a reason why the warden is not here please speak up."

"He's the Sheriff's brother!" Called a voice from the floor.

"Sulking is he? Can't learn the lesson from his brother? He is too proud to come to the defence of his town! Is there anyone here who knows him?" A couple of grudging hands appeared. "Go now and tell him if he is corrupt and supports the cathedral and their friends he will die within the hour unless he admits it. – To be honest men I expect you to kill him even if he is your friend. Lostnock cannot have a cuckoo castle – can it people?"

"NO!" from the crowd.

"Go now! A committee of defence will follow shortly. Sympathies of the past will be forgotten. We will be one town together. Go!" Three found their way to the exit. "Now I am not defending Lostnock to defend my property or my rents but to look after you who would rather not take a lead. What are you scared of? I want five aldermen to accompany me to the castle. The rest of you must train tomorrow and be ready to fight the day after next on Sunday. The more that train the fewer that die. Have you heard that mister?" She pointed at a random person in the crowd.

"No Your Grace. I'm a baker."

"We need your bread mister baker but which is better for us – Going a bit hungry or dying?" Silence "Go on mister baker. Which is better?"

"Going hungry Your Grace."

"We can be fed bread in the morning and you can take you bow to the butts in the afternoon. Is that clear?"

"Yes Your Grace."

"Now as the King's general-in-chief I ask the under-sheriff to give me his sword..." As rehearsed he did so. "You shall be the sheriff of Lostnock and until the King says yea or nay you shall be the Earl of Lostnock. Do you promise to serve the King?"

"Yes Your Grace."

"Do you promise to serve the people of Lostnock?"

"Yes Your Grace."

"Here is you sword. Use it only if you have to. Your badge shall be the sheathed sword and your motto 'Ready if called.' Does this man get a cheer from the citizens?" The crowd erupted with elation at the incredible events. Only the King could ennoble but Minda had done it before their eyes and with perfect poise that filled them with the greatness of being part of a legend.

Minda and the five aldermen and her six guards were admitted to the castle. The warden greeted them with pleasantries. Anticipating his main objection Minda opened with "I have come to secure the castle for the defence of Lostnock. The King would have the castle well prepared by now if he was here. I am his deputy. How ready is the castle Warden?"

"It's the King's castle. I only obey his orders. The castle will look after itself without your help thank you Your Grace."

"Now I have sent ahead warning to you warden, I am giving you every opportunity to declare the castle ready for the defence of Lostnock, I am not holding a sword to your throat, I want to save my blade for the enemies of the King. Please take council with these gentlemen who you know. I am going for a walk round the castle walls. By the time I return I want the King's standard flying over the arms of Lostnock. Come on guards! Now where's that captain of the castle guard who promised to show me round?" Turning back to the Warden she said "At least your staff know where their duty lies."

Outside the Warden's room she addressed the waiting castle guards.

"There's no time to lose men. We have a day and a half before the storm."

"What about the Warden Your Grace?"

"I'm the castle commander now. You have a warden for peacetime but the King's general-in-chief for war. You! Get the King's standard flying."

"But you're not a general Your Grace." said a guard.

"When the King confirmed me as Duchess of Avel he said he didn't know anyone better to wield this sword. Look at it." She drew the black beast as effortlessly as she could manage. "Is there anyone better to use it in this town? – Hold it. – Go on!" She handed it over smoothly with one hand but its weight surprised him so the point fell to the ground with a clang.

"Sorry Your Grace. You're our best general. Sorry."

"You're a good man. In Bartonbry we question to deal with our doubts first then we trust each other with our lives. You are brave to speak up. Lostnock needs brave men like you who can think. I'm sure you other guards agree." They all agreed. "So now you trust me and I trust you we must see what the castle can do for the King's subjects against his enemies. At ten o'clock tomorrow morning I will inspect every armed man. At eleven o'clock I will inspect the others. Make sure everyone

knows. If there are more arms than men then the castle will give them to the town volunteers and show them how to use them."

"Yes Your Grace."

"Give me my sword back. Get my colours flying over the gatehouse. Get the steward to open the King's private apartments for me and my staff. In a half an hour I will have a conference of all the senior officers of the castle in the King's privy chamber or where the steward says if there is a better place. Now go!"

So much for her survey of the walls! Nevertheless time well spent. She turned and went back into the Warden's office. "Right. I've settled everything. I'm angry and sad and tired so Warden you're either going to call your guards and have me thrown out or not. Which?"

"I don't!"

"/Why is it so difficult. Just because I drowned your brother. Do you think I wanted to? I've only been in command of this castle for ten minutes. Do you really think I want to start it with bloodshed."

"You're not in command!"

"Go outside and see Warden. Then I want your sword presented as fealty to me." She went right up to him. "Am I wasting my time saving your life?"

"Kill me if you must Your Grace, but I can't let you have the castle. Eurghh.!" When Minda stabbed she automatically followed-through to collapse, swivel and unbalance her opponent. Trying to get up off the floor uses severed muscles or shattered joints and incredible pain for which the human spirit wasn't designed. "Why didn't one of you men beat some sense into him?" Groans from the floor were ignored as Minda held their attention with a bloody knife and tunic. "We are at war not dinner. The castle is under my command and will be my headquarters." More groans from the floor kicked into silence by a very angry Minda. "I will guide you will fight. Is that clear?" They agreed. "Tomorrow we prepare. Sunday we may have the enemy at the gates. Now go and get some sleep. I have too much to do to sleep tonight."

The bloody shambles at the Cathedral was a learning experience for the Little Army. Soldiers considered their mates had been unlucky rather than betrayed by incompetence. Cadets weren't so certain but told by

Brand that every surviving soldier had to be congratulated on his bravery against fanatics.

The troops that lost their cadet leaders were taken for plenty of ale by Brand. "Bravery and death know no rank. Tomorrow we will bury our dead. They will never lead us again in person but by the memory of their bravery we keep inside us. Raise your jugs to all our fallen comrades!" Cheers. They drank. "I have bad news for you men. You will have to be broadcast into new furrows. Blue cadet Twosting will be the one that sends you from your broken families to a strange one. Twosting has two ears. I have told him to listen – the rest is up to you. We have to show the castle and the town that we are storm that doesn't give up so tomorrow you will show your Bartonbry smiles to the frightened and lazy. You did well today but the Bishop has lit the straw. It is straw not good wood but to some a straw-flame is the end of the world. Now let us have a toast to the King's peace."

The bloody stupidity in the dark outside the Moot hall was a learning experience for the Black Team and Lucky. They all realised how close they had been to disaster due to incompetence but agreed to forget about it and learn about it later so as to deal with the immediate issue of looking after Minda.

The Little Army camped in the parts of Cathedral complex with fewest horrific memories. Lucky and Brand tossed for who should be their commander this night and it fell to Lucky. He briefed brother Caxton, Jane, John and James on the need for the medicine of ale, spirits and then sleep. He forced the inns to provide food and ale and asked Mr. Bob for seized spirits from his warehouse. Caxton had care of the injured in the infirmary. Lucky debated who should keep him company then settled on Jane.

"Jane dear. You go with Brother Caxton. Your duty is to be there not to be awake all the time or tend the wounded but to be ready for an emergency. Boys – we will be the watchmen for the whole army. You will spend most of the night asleep but in an emergency I know you will wake ready. Tomorrow we will have a holy service but tonight our comrades – including you Jane – may be soaked by pouring doubts. "

[Saturday - Lostnock]

Next day in Lostnock was a dream. Reality was hard to find. Minda was playing the King in his castle. There was some mysterious army on its

way that citizens had to face with unknown leadership. There had been massacre in the cathedral but was it a victory for the Kings law or a murderous travesty of the law? The Duchess of Avel had made the under-sheriff an Earl when only kings could do that... But none could object, he was the man they needed and she was the woman who saw it must be so. On this dream-day the citizens of Lostnock were all together in common by a spell put on them by the duchess. The Bartonbry smile had come to Lostnock. Their common cause was the town of Lostnock. Not a duke, duchess or an earl but pride in their town's character of gathering together when needed was sown everywhere and growing quickly. Their duchess was an independent, clever and money-wise woman just like the spirit of Lostnock itself. These were days worth being alive for!

The castle had layers of office-holders who had mostly assumed they would get warning of anything serious and be able to make do with show rather than substance. Minda had a clever answer to this, she detailed a complete rank to assist the town under the authority of the new Earl of Lostnock. Minda's practical duties allowed no time for catching up with reality beyond the town walls or the next few hours. Her close staff had acted without needing more than a nod from her or a quick conference amongst themselves. Ultimatums had been sent to the Dowager Duchess of Trest and others implicated by Father Harris. A situation report had been encoded and sent first thing by Paul to Xavier by two routes.

The defence of Lostnock began to be taken seriously by the citizens. The first thing that happened was an increase in prices. Eventually some organisation began to emerge. Minda sent messages to surrounding villages and Lords that Lostnock knew it's defensive business and immediate promises of loyalty were required 'or else', and she would see that people who supported Lostnock would in turn be supported. There was a postscript to say that any village, manor or trader who didn't make an effort to help Lostnock would find that all trade would vanish faster than mid-summer mist.

Abess Rodinge arrived at Lostnock with twenty nuns at mid-day. Minda was alerted in time to meet them in the town square.

"Welcome to Lostnock ladies. We live in sad times. Will you help us?" The abbess had no choice but to answer yes. "The brothers in our

cathedral have been corrupt and fought peaceful occupation with deadly violence. Fifty have died. The town says we need God's church more than ever at this time."

"We will help but the rule of our order is private not the provision of public worship. We are not priests."

"Does God not want you to show how the spirit may survive the most awful deaths?" The abbess looked at Minda carefully. How was it the duchess who had ordered the attack on the cathedral got such a fine touch for the junction of physical and spiritual? Was she possessed? Or possibly enraptured by God's spirit?

"Thank you Your Grace. The sooner we set foot inside the cathedral the sooner we may tend to its wounds."

"Let me show you the way Abbess and we will talk about how we might resurrect the cathedral I killed yesterday."

Each half of the Black Team had lived a life since they split up two days ago. Reunited there were double breakfasts and tears as stress and blood was relived.

John said "Our girls are murderers but the boys just filled boats or lurked in the dark."

Maggie said "Boys you must listen to me. I killed and I was proud but then I killed and was disgusted. It seems to be our fate that one minute we may play and the next we may murder. Blood calls for more blood and then more."

Rachel said "I killed one with the plan to frighten two but I was so sprayed with blood I stabbed the second and then the third looked at me as if in a dream asking me to throw my knife into his open mouth so I did."

John had his arm round Maggie and soon Rachel was hugged by James. Jane didn't mind she hadn't got a single arm around her, she didn't mind she was left to look after herself, she didn't mind she was all alone... She hated it! Jealousy and common sense fought a silent battle. Why were Maggie and Rachel getting the credit for deaths while she was being ignored. Her one may have been a duel of wits... Um... Her wits were away in the clouds last night. That made her more testy. She would have to go and write one of those letters you tore up!

"Jane got us here." said James. "She looks after us beautifully."

Jane recognised James compliment but it wasn't a substitute for an embrace.

Maggie and Rachel had the boat trip and events in Lostnock described to them. Bit by bit their adventure became a horrible pit of violence. None of them felt any good could be salvaged from the wreckage.

James asked "What would the duchess do? Wouldn't she be about encouraging people?"

"I'm too tired." Said Maggie.

"Me too." said Rachel.

"She's here herself." Said Jane. "What can we do but get our strength back?"

James said "We must show we are strong even if we aren't."

John said "We don't all have to go. Leave it to James and me."

"I expect killing people gives you bad dreams" said James.

"No it doesn't!" Came from Rachel, echoed by Jane.

Everyone looked at Maggie to complete the denial but there was none. The redness of her eyes answered.

Minda managed to hold a staff meeting after lunch. The muddled but 'getting-there' state of Lostnock's defences were described by the new Earl.

"We use first names in my family Michael. I must thank you for your support since I arrived. Lord Levendale, Bob, Mr. Chris and Henry have a room next door where they are collecting all we know about our enemies. That is open to you but only you. I think if you ask Henry he will help you draw up your order of battle. He's currently scheming siege provisioning with the Mayor."

Brand and Lucky had reorganised the Little Army. It was not fit to meet any other army but if it moved quickly it could attack the bases of rebel lords and cause them a great deal of pain. If the rebels could put say a thousand men in the field then they would hope to attack Lostnock and Bartonbry. Both places should be safe behind walls without stupid mistakes or treachery.

Minda led. "First let's decide what to do with the Little Army. Stay here, help defend Bartonbry, punish rebels or make for Melbun."

Alex said "Are they a real army or cadets on a training exercise? I mean the cadets are school children in your care while the soldiers are paid to march, kill and be killed."

"Oh yes. Um. The cadets are useless without their soldiers. It seems a shame to split them out."

Lucky said "Unless we have a definite use for them I would rather they were at Bartonbry."

Paul said "There are a lot of fathers in Melbun who are regretting letting you have their sons. They say their sons had perfectly good careers planned for them and now from the letters they have received they see them getting independent ideas. Any more deaths would be the end of the school. I've more bad news. Please do not whisper it outside this room. The King has a reputation for putting off decisions and then not doing very much. We can't rely on the King to sweep the countryside clean or break a siege."

Brand said "We can't sit and wait. We should be making our force felt. We have to set the price of revolt high and payable today. Twenty men could cover thirty miles a day. Lucky or Henry or me could burn a dozen houses in a couple of days."

Alex said "Suppose Brand and Lucky were away burning and the Black Team showed themselves in as many places as possible then it would appear we were harrowing the land with a much larger force than we really have."

"What's special about the Black Team?" Asked Mr. Bob.

"They have earned a savage reputation. Rachel killed three armed men in thirty seconds. Maggie shot three in the same time then brutally murdered a harmless old lord and lady. Just a rumour of ruthless and efficient killers like that will keep most people at home behind bolted doors with the sheets over their heads."

Brand said "How do we use that to our advantage? Will that be enough to make people surrender? The Dowager duchess of Trex has until sundown to surrender. If she does then we can expect many others to follow. If she doesn't we must punish her. How can we do that? She will be waiting for us behind barricades with many more men than we can gather. The only way we know to fight is hit and run."

Lucky said "The only thing we can do is hit her this evening before she's expecting us. If we left at four we could be there by ten. Henry knows the back roads."

"Let's take a minute for us all to think about that." Said Minda... .."Right! I know what I would like to do but you must all agree. We send as much of the Little Army as we need to Trexton to blast this bloody duchess then on to Bartonbry. The Black Team should be frightening people and go to Melbun with a few cadets to show how brave they are and shame the King into action."

Brand said "Are we attacking a castle? If so I say no."

Mr. Bob said "Moated hall with ordinary wall, garden and farm."

Alex said "I have been there. It is built for show but has large open grounds you'd have to cross in front of archers to get to the house. Once in the house there would be dozens on dozens of rooms to search and fight through."

"Then no. You have a prisoner. Can he tell you easier targets to burn? If not then they go straight to Bartonbry."

Brand said "Lucky and Henry and me could take real soldiers from the Little Army and leave the cadets safely here or on their way to Bartonbry."

"Yes that's the answer." said Minda. "We know some enemy forces are heading to Bartonbry so they will not be useless. Send them by boat that will be safest."

"What about Melbun?" asked Alex.

"We must show them in Melbun we're alive and fighting. The Black Team are best suited to creeping around and hiding. There ought to be at least two boy cadets with them to show their fathers they are fit and brave. You know your men I'll leave it to you to pick."

"What about yourself Minda?" asked Paul.

"I must stay here as a flag to rally round. At least for now. If the revolt dies out in a few days then I will race to Melbun and be very angry with any who were finding excuses not to defend the Kingdom."

Later Minda addressed all fourteen cadets. "Two dead friends is enough. My job is to see you grow into honest, wealthy and brave men not to be corpses. Some of you may have wondered about the strange antics of the Black Team. Yesterday Maggie, Rachel and Jane killed nine between them. I love you all dearly so I have decided to send you back to help Flor from behind the safety of the walls of Bartonbry. You have all shown you are brave, you have shown strength and command. Also you have all learned horrible lessons. Those lessons are enough for now.

I am going to steal the men you have so brilliantly led to help Lostnock. That's what they get paid for. After Bartonbry you will be going home so your fathers can be proud of you and then when we've put out the fires of revolt you will have a little more training at Bartonbry with the best teachers we can find so when in future you say to people you were a 'Bartonbry Boy' they know you are special, clever and brave. Friendship is our motto. Success is our story. God speed you all."

11 Melbun muddle

[Saturday late afternoon]

Xavier continued Jed's lecture. (p125) "Minda has been attacked by the church and she's accepted the challenge. What she never thought about is that the Bishop has had three months to organise support against her and we think those supporters are going to try their strength against her and all she stands for. There's a little war happening at Lostnock and the Duchess is on the King's side. We have two problems. One we can't bring her military support quickly and two the fire may spread. The King here relies on supporters who – ahem – may not always be reliable. This revolt in Lostnock may be a signal for an attempt to overthrow the King. We don't know."

"Can I go to help her?"

"No. One man is not an army. I'm sure you will be used and I will tell you why – This will cool you down. The King can afford to send you on a dangerous mission and be killed or captured. You are expendable, just another piece on the chess board. Whatever you do for the next month will be deadly for you and your enemies and delicate for your friends. Remember you are under military orders. How do you think armies get to the battlefield? If we can't field an army then we've lost." Xavier rang a bell and a servant came in. "This is Jawden. He is to be your close servant and guard. He can be trusted with all secrets. Go with Jawden now and be fresh and sober for the King."

Brock had been informed about developments in Lostnock and was preparing to leave on Sunday morning. It would be impossible to travel any of the three sections at night so it was futile to make an early start to get ahead. He was also told of Jed's new attachment to the King's

service and capture in the bedrooms of Lanconia and Italy. He asked Xavier if the ambassadors knew their wives had bedded Jed.

"Of course. It's their plan. Devotion to a lady. Loyalty and secrets. Blackmail perhaps. He's not going to betray them will he? Everybody has a good time. To be honest most ambassadors are so dry and cold it was natural that their wives were the opposite."

"I should like to take my leave of the Ambassador of Lanconia and renew my invitation to visit Bartonbry. Is that a good idea if we are poised for civil war?"

"Bartonbry should make all the friends it can. It has plenty of jealous enemies who are being pushed into history of the night by Minda's dawning. She's young. She's a woman. She's successful. She's loved by her people who she's stolen from her enemies. Get both ambassadors, remember they are rivals really, to work together to build friendship, trade and loyalty with Bartonbry."

Even Jed realised that his life was now being manipulated. Jawden was obviously only one example of his laces being tied for him. All his kit had been transferred from Minda's house to a room in the castle without his knowledge. Everyone seemed to know what he did with Donna and Constansia. He wondered if the armourer Whin had been told to warn him about bedrooms. He'd forgotten. He would have to confess to Rachel when he saw her. Rachel! Urhhharghh with the chest of a warrior, fluid Lanconian hips and flashing Italian eyes!

That evening a well groomed Jed was shown into a small room where the King and his own father the Archbishop were seated.

The King said "Dennis. Look. Your son. Earl of Melbun. He's a real man now don't you think?"

"He's not my son."

"He and boys and girls like him are the future of this kingdom. Guess what he did today in the name of international relations."

"Killed twenty Saracens before breakfast I expect."

"Ho ho Dennis. That shows how out of touch you are!"

"He's not my son. It's nothing to do with me."

"At Christmas I commanded you to tell the Bishop of Lostnock to depart the shores of our kingdom within three months. He hasn't. Can you explain that to me?"

"His mission is determined by God."

"His presence in my kingdom is determined by me."

"I can only advise him. If God advises him otherwise then I am helpless."

The King looked at Jed with questioning eyebrows raised.

"Father" said Jed "You know you command bishops."

"I'm not your father!"

"Thank you Jed. Of course the Bishop of Lostnock is acting in cahoots with the archbishop of Melbun. Or is it the other way around Dennis?"

Jed was thrilled by this clever 'any answer is wrong' question. That's the sort of thing the clever ones at Bartonbry used all the time in classes. The duchess taught supporting your colleagues should become instinctive. "Which way father?"

"I'm not your father!"

"Which way archbishop?" Jed had quickly worked out he was the wedge in the crack. "Please your highness I have my Avel knife. Command me and I will use it."

"To kill your own father?" said the King.

"If I'm not his son then he's not my father. Even if he was, my Lord Minda – oh and my lord yourself sir – make him look like mud on a boot to be scraped off."

The king said "Dennis. You have not chosen wisely. Minda has chosen for me and I will side with her against all opposition. Answer yes or no. Will the church swear allegiance to the King's law?"

"It is a matter of conscience."

"The Bishop of Lostnock is a traitor against my direct rule. Do you support the traitor?"

"God's law is more powerful than a King's."

"No it isn't. Get God to give you some land that a king doesn't reign over if you think that."

"Please sir" said Jed to the King "In Bartonbry we ask our enemies to confess and if they don't we kill them for the sake of our friends. We only accept trust."

"We're in Melbun now Jed. Sometimes we have to work with false supporters."

"Sorry sir."

"Kill him Jed!"

"Now?"

"Yes – No!" but it was too late! The King wasn't used to the speed of reaction of Cadets. Knife thrown hard into in the eye, punch in the stomach, knife wrenched out dragging the head down and forward then stabbed with bone shattering force into the back of the neck. A body lay on the floor twitching trying to pretend it wasn't dead.

"I'm sorry sir."

"You have resolved my doubts Jed. We're going to Lostnock."

Something from the teaching in the woods around Bartonbry registered with Jed. When you split a party you must nominate a leader of each.

"Who will you leave in charge here sir?"

"God's truth! You are the best lieutenant Jed."

"What's the answer sir?"

"I don't know."

Again the simple fact they learned at Bartonbry that a stick has two ends came through to Jed. "Who do we ask then?"

"Hmm. Me! I'm supposed to know everything, but really I have advisors who say what they think I want to hear or what they think they can get away with."

"That's bad. Are there some more trusty than others? What about Bob Upton's father? Can he be trusted?"

"Yes but what does he know about war?"

"Ask him sir. He must know something – and you know it may be little but it's true. And you can trust me."

"What do they teach you at Bartonbry?"

"Well sir – On Mondays we start with/"

"/Forget it. I meant the Duchess' school seems to have worked."

"I can't say sir. I've learned lots and my friends too but does that mean it has worked?"

"We are here with the body of you father on the floor Jed. How can you be so calm?"

"Sir – I have done a deed which is for others to judge. We are taught that after you kill someone watch out immediately for their friends who are – as they say – 'generally unfriendly'."

"The archbishop had many allies. They are now my enemies. I shall try to keep it secret that you killed him Jed."

"Thank you sir." Jed didn't register the threat in this last sentence.

[Sunday morning - Melbun]

The King met with his privy council late into the night. There were the strategic questions of what he wanted to do and what forces he'd need. The truth was that the military commanders he could trust were not in Melbun and it would take weeks to collect an army and no actual enemy forces were about. What demands should be made on the church? The King wanted the Church's money and their power reduced, who was he to appoint as the new Archbishop? Jed's blunt brutality was contagious. Perhaps he could learn from Minda and use the people to turn against the church for him? The King's energy drained away.

By Sunday morning the whole of Melbun knew three things. The Duchess of Avel had stumbled over a nest of treachery at Lostnock and survived; the King blamed the church for it and had started to take his revenge; and the Archbishop had been killed by his own son. Many fathers worst fears were confirmed. The Duchess had stolen their children to turn them treacherously against their parents. There were plenty of other rumours. Nothing seemed to happen. The King didn't have a plan, no edicts were issued, no troops ransacked churches. By lunchtime it was beginning to look as if the King was satisfied with making his point as a warning to others. Jed asked to see Xavier.

"I can't stay here doing nothing."

"What did you want to do?"

"Go and help the Duchess."

"If the King decides to send a force to help her I'm sure you will go with it. That will give you experience leading troops."

"By then it could be too late."

"Frustrating isn't it Jed."

"Yes. What can I do?"

"Find the King some money."

"Get it from the Archbishop's palace."

"How? Just walk in and take it? That's stealing."

"A traitor's goods are forfeit to the King."

"But he was just looking after them for the church."

"He's the king. Can't he just take it anyway?"

"I'm going to let you into a secret. There's something you need to know if you're going to be my eyes in Lanconia and Italy. The King will offer the vacancy to someone who will pay a large fine with the Church's money and in return get a bribe for himself and will do as he's told."

"Corruption!"

"You have it Jed! That's how the world works."

"Not in Bartonbry! She insists."

"Well it's how the rest of the world works. Everyone expects something for something."

"That's not corruption. Secrecy and bad faith is."

"Alright. You win. Now how much money do you have in your purse? Show me." Jed emptied it out on the table. "One pound three shillings and fourpence. Have you got anything you could sell?"

"No."

"Is your mother likely to give you any allowance after you killed her husband?"

"Um."

"I'm sure the Duchess will look after you if you look after her. The King is in a bit of a muddle at the moment. In the meantime I have funds."

"I'm not happy taking money from spies. I'd rather walk to Lostnock sleeping under hedges than be paid to spy."

"That's good Jed, because you'd make a poor spy. Just make sure you don't borrow money or accept presents from ambassadors – or their wives. You may be honest but it may not look honest. You had enemies before last night and now you have a lot of scared fathers of cadets. When somebody whispers you slept with your own mother they definitely hate you."

"Good."

"Good?"

"It shows I'm hurting their pride. It shows they're afraid of me. It shows they can only fight me with whispers. If you find out who I'm hurting then I'm happy to challenge them to a fight they can neither win or refuse. Minda tells us to trap our enemies and not get trapped ourselves."

"The Bartonbry view is – ahem – very black and white. In Melbun we are a lot more flexible. If you were with the rest of your Little Army then I'd let you score a few vermin pelts but you can see the trouble last night's murder has caused."

"The king told me to kill him. I obeyed."

"The king can be a little – ahem – enthusiastic when he's with energetic people. I hoped you might be dispatched with your father to see he was exiled under your guard to say Lanconia. That would have got you out of temptation here and been enough to worry others but not upset them to the point of openly saying so."

Jed thought about this. "So had you arranged that with the King beforehand?"

"Ahem – I wish I had, but I only thought of it this morning. That's another reason why you and well-meaning cadets and the Duchess are a worry to us all. You do things before the rest of us have had time to catch our breath."

"That's what she teaches us. Have a plan. Lead from the front. Take your enemies by surprise."

"So what was your plan when you invited me and the Italian ambassador to the Lanconian ambassador's little party?"

"To show that Bartonbry wants to make friends so I should be an ambassador myself. As ambassador I had to be like Bartonbry, confident and hot enough to keep the fire of friendship alight against the rain of jealousy and petty dislikes. That's how we do things in Bartonbry. Enemies shall be friends. Hey! I need a motto as Earl of Melbun. How does that happen Xavier? Enemies shall be friends."

"Ambassador, I shall introduce you to the chief of the court of Heralds who will take months of your precious time if you let him, and charge you a considerable fee for the privilege. If I was you I'd get a shield painted up with some combination of Avel and King's arms and add that motto without letting the chief herald know until it is too late. Who is he going to complain to?"

"You're thinking like we do in Bartonbry now Xavier!"

"Listen Jed. When it comes to enemies I'll let you make them friends on your terms. That's good so long as you don't mind some evil people against you who will never accept your terms. We must get you out and about reassuring fathers that their sons are doing really well at Bartonbry. You can start this afternoon. I've invited five of them to Minda's town house in my name. Your job will be to tell them how their boys are now men and more than that men who will soon be trading

round the world or fixing fraud at home and are not afraid of anything. I'll give you a list of names in a minute."

"Can we invite the fathers of the Black Team? Weston, Whin and Ulex?"

"No. You will dine with them tonight at Lord Weston's. Good idea, but some of us old ones aren't always slow."

"Should their mothers be there too?"

"Why not. I'll see if it can be done."

"I'm sure the mothers will be nervous and thrilled. I will do my best to convince them their daughters are having the time of their lives in safe hands."

"You did really well as Bartonbry ambassador Jed. You earned your Earldom. You made it happen by simply making it happen. I'm sure the duchess will be very proud of you. She's your only family now. Wait until I tell her what the outcome was."

"What outcome?"

"Well you know your bit, but I learned the Bartonbry way of going to my opponents and telling them who I was and asking how I could help. You told me how you dealt with Espice. While you were being seduced the ambassadors were with me being shown our defences and/"

"/That's treachery!"

"No. I'm showing them we're completely unprepared for war. They know we're not stupid but it's a first step to friendliness between nations."

"Are we completely unprepared for war Xavier?"

"Yes. Completely! The King has dithered for two decades. Why do you think the Duchess is so much in our thoughts."

"Why? She's not about to lead an army against the Lanconians."

"But she's the only one who could if the need arose. It would take time and money but if there are invaders she will be the one who – as you said yourself – will lead from the front after trapping the cowards and lords hiding as peasants."

At the meeting of the fathers at Minda's townhouse Xavier introduced Jed and made no bones about the King's reasons for making him an Earl. And yes, he did kill his father when ordered to do so. "He's here to tell you about your sons and answer any questions you have. Any questions. Bartonbry is a different world gentlemen – they stop you stealing by giving you what you want."

Jed had set himself the task of finding something of amazing improvement about each of the cadets and something about how he himself trusted them and respected their potential. That was easy. As he was going through this he realised that Xavier should have told him what the fathers were looking for. He soon found himself giving an honest assessment of each cadet's weaknesses as well but in the context of some interesting testing episode. "She made us kitchen servants for a day. Mart easily fell for tricks like trying to wash a pot with fresh well water rather than waiting for hot but he was the one who knew exactly who was sat at each place for the feast and sorted out who should get served first and with what. I couldn't have done that sir." Then that magic moment when a truth worth repeating appears. "I was confused but he put me right. I'm proud to say I was commanded by Mart – he knows his business. He'll never be washing pots again I guess."

All the fathers had been astonished by 'weekly' letters from their sons so they were aware of the basics but this was the first time they had had anyone from Bartonbry in front of them. Jed was asked about the Duchesses' purpose – "To be honest he didn't know. What he did know was that each cadet was looking forward to growing up with self-confidence. She's given us all enthusiasm for study and making money."

What about this 'Black Team'? Jed should have seen this coming but he was unprepared. "The Black Team is three girls and two boys. The boys are from the streets. The girls – um – are – carry swords and know how to use them – I've practised with all of them. Don't get in their way! Like the Duchess they know what they want and will have it! The boys will disappear and suddenly appear beside you with a smile and a wink so innocent you know they are guilty of something you know not what. If you ask them they just say they are testing you! Let me tell you that if you wake up to any one of the Black Team in your chamber then you should help them. Oh – obviously if you were an enemy you wouldn't wake up. You know how God is everywhere? In Bartonbry the Black Team even penetrated the defences of the Abbey and – it's true! – apologised for interrupting the Brother's meal and left unhurt, unchastened and with a Bartonbry Flag – That's what we call an admission, spoken or otherwise, of guilt."

"What's this about whipping?" Asked one father.

"One day she gathered the four teams of cadets together and said that of the four teams, Black, Red, Blue and Yellow, that one of each team would have to have a whipping and it was up to us to decide which one. I admit sirs I was slow but being a tough guy with some not so strong I

thought it would be best for me to take the punishment. Before I could volunteer for the Yellows, Jane of the Black Team didn't just speak up sirs she took off her shirt and demanded that she be whipped first. By God those girls are something sirs. When there was nobody ready to whip her she complained. You know what it's like when a woman complains sirs, they go on and on. I was sweating sirs! A bare breasted girl demanding to be whipped! She swore to scorch the snow sirs!"

"But why were you being whipped young man?" Said one of the fathers in a completely stone cold voice.

"Because Minda said so."

Another father said "Do you not understand Relland?"

"No I don't!"

"The duchess was teaching them the cost of leadership. Now do you understand?"

"No."

"Oh. Look! She wanted to find the ones with guts. Guts? Understand that?"

"No need to be rude Barvery!"

"Please sirs. The Duchess teaches us to decide quickly but know the difference between discomfort and disaster."

"Did you really get whipped?"

"Oh yes. It hurt like wasps for a few days but I know who the bravest are. Robin Relland was one. He wasn't keen but took his lead from Jane Weston and me. He went white with the pain at first but bore it well. Robin will make a good administrator, and will put every effort into fighting if he has a good general to follow but will never be a great general himself."

Relland said "Robin will be a lawyer. He has no need to be a general or being whipped! I will go to Bartonbry and fetch him back tomorrow."

"With respect sir it is the King's school and you might want to ask his permission first. All us cadets learn how the law can ensnare us and how we can use it to ensnare others. We've only just started but it appeals to all in a horrible way. The duchess has given us some secrets to use – the best one is that if a lawyer is on your scent then ignore him and go straight to his client. I think Robin will become an accountant."

"He'll do as I say."

"No sir. You and he will profit by his skill with figures. He's a man now. That's what you wanted wasn't it when you sent us away at Christmas?"

To grow from boys into men. Well now we have and in a year or two we will be starting in commerce and if we can't do it in Melbun we'll do it elsewhere. I'll be in Lanconia or Italy perhaps."

Barvery asked "Is it true. Erm' there's a rumour that you are – um – very friendly with the Lanconian ambassador's wife."

"She is a very friendly person, so is the ambassador himself. As an ambassador for Bartonbry myself I am friendly. If any of you trade with Lanconia why not make them welcome? They are far from their warm country with not many friends."

Relland said "But they are Lanconians."

"So what sir?" said Jed. "They're not here to murder us in our beds."

"I don't trust them." Said Relland.

"Me neither. Nor the Italians. Droons the lot of them." said another.

Barvery said "I will be friendly Jed. Can you arrange it?"

"I will try sir. May we talk in private later?"

[Sunday evening - Melbun]

The evening at Lord Weston's had a very calm outside but a business-like centre. Xavier was occupied so Jed was on his own. In the three months at Bartonbry Jed had come to cherish the cooler way all women had of listening but looking harder to get at the truth. He told them about their strengths, the way the orphan boys were knitting-in and how they just didn't accept authority unless they chose to. I could easily beat each one of them in hand to hand fighting but that's what I spend two hours each day doing. But they could beat me in all other ways." He told them about how Jane volunteered for the whipping.

Lord and lady Weston hadn't heard of this. "She never wrote about that!"

"It's true!" Then he told them about the stripping and swearing when nobody was ready to whip her. "She could beat me at a swearing competition easily!"

Lady Weston said to her husband "I was afraid of that. Look what's happened."

Jed answered "Please do not worry Lady Weston, your Jane is going to be a very powerful lady with hidden talents that nobody, not even you will know about but which will protect the Kingdom. Most of all she will never be afraid of anything and will crush obstacles. Maggie and Rachel also. Those two scare me – I have seen them practising their daggers together – they've even used me again and again as a practice target to

deceive and then kill. Even though I know they are trying to stab me in the street they do it differently each time."

Lady Weston said "Jane would never be a killer."

Lord Weston said "I don't know dear. She's got a boy's heart for fighting and why shouldn't she prove herself in battle. I am guessing that Jane won't be leading an army but sneaking into an enemy camp, making eyes at the general then killing him. One girl doing the work of a thousand troops. Am I right Jed?"

"Yes sir. I have been told to tell you not to talk to anyone about the details of the Black Team. The safety of your girls depends on secrecy."

"What about your safety?" asked Mrs. Ulex.

Jed was about to reply but caught something from the sudden interest of the parents. He shrugged.

Lord Weston said "I can see the Duchess of Avel has taught you cadets well now comes the first test. My daughter Jane makes me proud. You in your happy bed-hopping hopefulfulness make me proud. Proud enough to make me open my purse. Barefaced cheek of runt boys and sulking maids is irritating but the duchess has turned the boys into men and the maids into witches who know how to use the gifts of youth."

"Witches!" cried Lady Weston. "Jane isn't a witch."

"Yes she is dear. A woman that leads men will always be called a witch. It's a compliment. A marvellous compliment."

"I won't have her being called a witch. She's a good Christian."

Jed intervened. "Please Lady Weston. Jane is the most wicked girl I know only equalled by Maggie and Rachel. They play with the boys like a cat with a mouse but now they are no longer girls and we are no longer boys. We know they will never betray us and we likewise them. If I get a chance I will stand as a shield in front of them with my sword and take a wave of attackers. They too will scheme to let me sleep or pull my enemy to easy reach of my blade. My blood is their blood."

Mrs Whin said "Jed – Can't you see that we hoped our girls would enjoy a bit of what they wanted but then come home older and ready for marriage?"

"Why shouldn't they be generals? I am not a general, I'm just good at sword practice and bullying soldiers. I can protect the girls on a battlefield but I couldn't say where to go or why or what we should do next. They know where to strike."

Mr. Ulex said "If we were talking like this a day ago I would worry about all this fighting in the way you talk. Now I worry differently but I too feel pride."

Mr. Whin said "You know what's going to happen don't you?"

"No sir." There was general looking at each other amongst the parents.

"No sir. Tell me."

There was more looking between themselves until Lord Weston took the lead. "Do you really not know what fire has been lit by the Duchess and the King and you?"

"No sir. Tell me."

"At Christmas she came and won the King's heart. That witchcraft of maids-of-iron you spoke of caught him and he thought to have a loyal servant untainted by Melbun politics as a general he could rely upon. When Scamson was sent home in disgrace Melbun sat up! Had Bartonbry rebelled by sending the King's commander home? Some of us knew from our letters that he was a straw pail but he and others tried to claim she was treacherous. When you and the Sheriff arrived everyone wanted to get another opinion. When you upset your father then met with the Lanconians and Italians it was pretty clear you were evil. The King making the Sheriff a Baron was a bit steep but when he made you an Earl! That was clear the King was bewitched. 'Bewitched' I say."

"Witchcraft!" said Lady Weston.

"Good sense Dear. Your daughter is learning from a master – or mistress – waking people up. It's alright Jed I see it all thanks to letters from Jane."

"You may see it sir. Jane may see it but I don't."

"At least you're honest." said Lady Weston.

"What's going to happen? Tell me." Silence. "What's wrong? I've been honest with you but what have I asked? Tell me."

Mrs Whin said "Jed. Mister Whin has had very good business lately. Are you ready to fight in the next two weeks?"

"I'll be somewhere else Mrs Whin. Oh – er I'm always ready to fight."

"But what are you always ready to fight for?" Asked Mr Whin.

"The Duchess first. Then my family."

"Who is your family?" asked Mrs Ulex.

"You sound like your daughter Mrs Whin – She is my best sister – You are my family. You at this table. My father disowned me. My aunt is the duchess. My sisters are your daughters and my brothers are the other

cadets. Lord Weston? I would never be an equal for your daughter but I could be your nephew with all the pride you have in the cadets of Bartonbry."

There were important confusions in this created a silence.

"Jed. I will look after you. Have you met my other daughter Helen?"

"Jack!" Said Lady Weston.

The men laughed together at the consternation of the women. Jed was lost.

"It's alright dear. Jed has a prick. Jed has a royal future/"

"/TELL ME WHAT'S going to happen!"

Mr Whin said "Jed. Listen to me. You have the brains of an arrow – but we love you – What's going to happen is that the enemies of the King are going to puff themselves up to see if they can get enough support to overthrow him or at least gain concessions."

"Sorry sir you have lost me."

"Treason. Do you understand that?"

"Yes sir."

"At this stage it is thunder without lightning but there are some lords who are probing for weaknesses they might use to depose the King."

"Which lords? Tell me."

"Nobody knows for certain but that's the problem. Everybody is looking at everybody else to guess which will be the winning side."

With the logic of youth Jed said "Let's find out! I'm on the King's side. Anyone here not on my side?"

Silence. "Can he win?" Said Mrs Ulex.

Jed said. "If you support him or not I shall!"

Lord Weston said "You have caught the witchcraft of the duchess. All of us will support you and the King. We know you will win for us."

"Winning is what I do. Your daughters are who I do it for. I need them now. Tomorrow morning in the square I will be brave enough to call the sheep and the goats to show themselves but I need – I don't know – a plan. I must go."

"Must you go?" Asked Lady Weston. "Two thirds of my friends are your enemies."

"I've found my life as a fighter. What good is a fighter without enemies?"

Mrs Ulex said. "You've found your life as an ambassador Jed. I've read and re-read Maggie's letters and every time there's something in them which is about hitting the target if you know what I mean but only if needed."

"How can you fight fog? At Bartonbry we ask straight out 'are you against us?' so we know our sworn enemies and guess our suspect supporters. I'll draw the poison even if it means my death."

Lord Weston said "Brave words Jed. You have earned the rank Earl without doubt. I for one will work to see if your bravery can be put into practice."

"Thank you sir. I'll consult with Xavier and the King tonight and you should come with me. Will you excuse me? It has been a lovely evening amongst – what can I say but my new family. You still haven't really told me what will happen but perhaps I will change things."

Accompanied by five guards Jed and Lord Weston arrived at the castle and were soon escorted to Xavier's office. Jed said to Lord Weston "Xavier is like our sheriff of Bartonbry – good at listening and only interfering when he can see we'll cause trouble.

Xavier was obviously busy. "Jed? Lord Weston?"

"Sir. We agreed today that the Bartonbry way is to act as soon as we have a plan so as to catch our opponents unready. I have a plan."

"Go on Jed."

"My first plan was to demand immediate pledges of loyalty to the King in public from all the nobles. My second is for you to tell me who has some armed men and I or someone will force those Lords to hand them over for the King's campaign."

"How will you do that?"

"I thought to get them marched to the main square by the Lord as if they would be simply showing their force and remaining in command, then getting them to swear public allegiance whatever their real allegiance then simply take the troops under a king's commander."

"They will object."

"Flies in a web Xavier! We have their men for our use, they have to start their plans all over again. We gain time we need. They lose."

Lord Weston said "I think what Xavier is saying is that there will be outrage at the King's actions. They will be very angry."

"The King's friends will be heartened by bold action and come to his aid. The King's enemies, already weakened will have to defy the King openly or keep quiet and spend their time plotting in ways Xavier will hear about."

Lord Weston said "You've got to admit Jed's plan would catch those who are hoping for change unprepared. I think it will take say two weeks for them to get organised. We could force their hand in a few days when they have some men gathering but not a solid plan."

Xavier said "Thank you Jed. Thank you Lord Weston. There are many flaws in your plan but a lot of good. We don't need to act tonight. I will inform you how we intend to proceed in due course. Thank you again. Good night."

Outside Xavier's office Jed was disappointed but Lord Weston cheered him up. "I have a little plan of my own Jed. The Earl of Melbun ought to have a Little Army of his own don't you think? You might lead it but you couldn't organise it. See if you can use the duchess' country estate as a base and I will talk to good men about money and men and weapons and cooks and tents and sergeants and generals. You will be their Little Arthur."

Jed's knowledge of going to war was no more than man-to-man combat and bullying lazy insubordinate soldiers. For some people ignorance breeds fear but Jed was a teenager with the teenager's life-force of doing everything he wanted immediately. It pushed him through the shadowy undergrowth of worry into the open arena of thrilling adventure. Being a father-killer, being brash, being a church attacker, being friendly with foreigners, being promoted above courtiers, and most of all being the only bit of Bartonbry within reach should have made him worry. Even if these good reasons for running away had occurred to him he would have stayed to ride the storm.

Lord Weston realised that an energetic force could be gathered without worrying about the King's dithering. They could spend a week preparing themselves as disloyal forces must take longer to organise. Then Jed's madness of picking-off those who were not really supporting the King might work. Presumably Jed would then go with the King to put out fires of revolt around Lostnock. If the King was heroic it would boost his

confidence and ability to finish-off dissent at Melbun and if he failed or, and this was a thought he kept to himself, if the King was useless then he might suffer an accident and they could have someone stronger. Who that should be was a problem for another day!

[Monday onwards - Melbun]

Now the rays of loyalty and money and influence were focussed on the Earl of Melbun's little army, the political situation began to settle out into camps where those who refused to help were suspect but not definitely disloyal. News of the bloodbath at Lostnock shocked the town and made everyone realise the urgency of firm action. Jed did a good job of being an ambassador for Bartonbry with some fathers. He was given three old generals who were hardly fit for battle but soon found enthusiasm and impatience catching. It turned out that the Duchess of Avel could easily call on funds from bankers. She was days away knowing nothing of it but quiet words between Xavier, Lord Weston, the Italian Ambassador and the bankers sorted out matters. Jed had sat down and asked what the Duchess would do and decided she would draw up an investment account which raised a few eyebrows and guaranteed him a job amongst the bankers if he should survive. He got Jawden to recruit three clerks. He went to beg help from Bob Upton's father as a way of getting the King to contribute without having to make a decision. His training at Bartonbry was perfect for putting over two hundred people to work. He recognised the uncertainty about what the purpose of his little army was and resolved it by making it clear that it was to leave Melbun as soon as possible to deal with whatever disloyalty it could find on the way to Lostnock. As soon as he had fifty men who could march with pikes he paraded them through the streets of Melbun to show people he was doing something even if the King was still dithering. The three generals started uncertainly and then began to fret at the time it would take to train the men as an army.

Jed checked with Mr. Whin, Black armour might get hot but any cheap metal could be varnished black. He was realising that armour was for display not fighting. The Chief Herald came to see Jed about 'his armorial bearings'.

"Tell me herald does anyone have black with splashes of white for Avel and red for the King?"

"It's not as simple as that Earl of Melbun."

"Yes it is. Answer."

"You cannot have the tincture sable. Sable is reserved."

"I'm having black not sable."

"Tincture sable is black."

"I will have black. And I shall have the motto 'Pleased to see my enemy'. My pikemen are already decorating their pikes with black - white - black - red ribbons. Helms and horses will be likewise. I have also taken the precaution of securing supplies of these ribbons in Melbun ahead of demand. Is there anything else I can't do?"

"Thaddeus Poolens you mock me at your peril."

Jed was so happy. He recalled and followed the Duchess' cheek with delight. "I do don't I! I will have black with sable tincture."

"Sable tincture is Black! Didn't you listen?"

"Yes I did. She teaches us to do that. This is fun."

"You are a degenerate patricide Thaddeus Poolens. I shall recommend to the college some arms more suitable for your. A noose! Good day!"

"Great idea! It shows how I will treat every King's enemy I meet. Thank you for bringing such entertainment to my day herald. Oh! That reminds me now I am an Earl I must appoint a fool. Good day to you sir."

12 Mission to Melbun

[Saturday evening - Lostnock]

No message of surrender came by sundown. The Black Team had their mission to get to Melbun explained to them. This was the best training. The moon was getting friendlier and they had some useful things to do. First to see two cadets safely to Melbun. Second to collect what support they could from Melbun and bring it with trumpets blaring and blades blazing to Lostnock or Bartonbry. Third to show the countryside that Avel was ruthless or forgiving.

Mr. Chris went to Minda with a suggestion. "When the Black Team get to Melbun will they not want a grown-up with some standing to

negotiate with courtiers and the King? I am a high official in the tax service. Also I know roads like your Henry. I would take them over a little-used devious route with scarce population."

This made sense to Minda. Alex was just a temporary teacher in deceit not a military leader. "Are you fit for the Journey?"

"Yes Your Grace. I'm on the road five days every fortnight."

"Doreen said good things about you Mr. Chris. Henry says good things about you. It is dangerous of course and when you get to Melbun you will need to be fierce. Can you be fierce?"

"I will have to be. I expect if there really is a muddle in Melbun then my role will be to make things clear."

Minda hadn't really thought about what might be happening at Melbun so this was a revelation. "Well said. You have the job. Go and find Jane and ask her how you should prepare. You might ask them to eat at your house this evening and then make a start. See what she says. When you have agreed a plan let me know so I can give you messages to take. I'll tell Alex he's not going. Good luck – And thank you Mr. Chris. You have learned our Bartonbry ways very quickly."

This was Minda's first opportunity to talk to Allesandro alone. She was straight with him about the Black Team going ahead without him, but she'd gathered from the cadets what a wonderful and challenging influence he had been and wanted a full description of each one.

"This isn't the end of your work with them Alex and I'm going to ask you something difficult. I don't want you scheming deceit with other cadets. I hear you have been teaching them Italian. That will do. Our cadets should spend some time abroad if they are to trade."

"Yes Your Grace. May I ask why the prohibition on deceit?"

"I don't want them all to be devious."

"That's a good reason. May I suggest that I show them how honest men can be deceived by trickery. Many times they will come against devious persons and they should be prepared."

"Yes I see. I'm glad you spoke up Alex. Will you now go back to Bartonbry as a lowly schoolmaster. You and I know you are rising in the world of spying so being humble is part of not being noticed."

"You knew Silks well didn't you?"

"Has he died!"

"Not to my knowledge miss. Still paralysed below the waist as far as I know."

"That was my fault."

"You taught him and other like him – er me – to be careful not to promise marriage on our travels."

"Doreen said to be careful!"

"When we travel a lot we only have the love we can make in a night."

"Are you married Alex? You are thirty five?"

"Not married but I do have a family. A bit like you have a family miss but mine is exiles of Italy. I am thirty."

"Think carefully but remember that some ancient law beyond time immemorial says I have to find marriage partners for anyone who might need one. Even when I'm poorly Doreen does the job for me."

"Women want everything in writing."

"Of course we do. You men skip off at the first smell of excitement while the women have to stay at home and deal with whatever comes – however grim."

Minda's clever suggestion that they should eat together at Mr. Chris' house before setting-off was happy and practical. Everyone got to know each other. Mr. Chris's wife had heard of these bloodthirsty girls so was relieved to see they were ladies who spoke nicely. John and James were now 'civilised' also but rather shy in formal company. The two cadets were originally both Simon but were now known as 'Im' and 'U' as in 'him' and 'you' originating from some confusion in the early days of cadet school. Im had been very clever or lucky in the cathedral and visualised the situation from the enemy's point of view to trap them with no losses. He probably saved half a dozen lives by his insight but in the world of the cadets doing your best, no matter how exceptionally brilliant, was what was expected as a matter of course. He had no complaints as he didn't realise how unusual that skill was. U was less fortunate. Four of his men died within feet of him while keeping the attention of the enemy so that Im's men could corner them. U knew not to attack in the open and knew that if you have support you should try to keep the enemy occupied. Next time he would do it better.

It is a myth that the wives of boring civil servants are grudging and grey.

Mr. Chris's wife said "I know a bit about you and your mission. Is there anything I can give you to help you on your way."

Maggie said straight away "A kiss" then burst into tears. The table was silent and shocked. John stood up as if to take Maggie away but Jane addressed them. "Men!. Get the horses ready. We leave in ten minutes!" They vanished. Maggie was crying uncontrollably. Hugs didn't work.

Jane said "Maggie can't come with us like this. But we have to go. Elizabeth, can you look after our comrade for us?"

"Of course."

"No I'll be – alright I – promise." Pleaded Maggie still crying a river.

"We all get sick Maggie." said Rachel.

"You look after Minda for us." Said Jane.

"She will be lonely and soon following us to Melbun. Help her." Said Rachel.

"Give me a kiss Elizabeth and we will go. Maggie killed four men and one woman yesterday." Said Jane. They kissed and hugged. "I'll tell my mum and Maggie's mum you were a mother to us when we needed a mother."

"Give me a kiss Elizabeth." They kissed and though Rachel was brutally tough and fighting fit and Elizabeth a mere gentlewoman, Rachel was as soft as a baby in a mother's arms."

Minda, Brand, Lucky and Henry had intended riding with the Black Team for the first half an hour just for practice and camaraderie. Since last night Henry was beginning to enjoy the excitement of taking risks in the dark again. The others felt the risks of ambush in the night were a pleasant spice. The hasty departure of the Black Team meant Minda was with Elizabeth and Minda while the men raced after the Black Team because they couldn't think of anything else better to do but had to be doing something.

Maggie had stopped crying for now. Elizabeth still held her.

Minda had never met Mrs. Chris before. As a matter of course she started with some compliments "Everyone speaks highly of Mr. ..." but realised how stupid she was. "Thank you Mrs. Chris, I don't know your name?"

"Elizabeth."

"Thank you Elizabeth. Our nation depends on mothers not crying with others in their arms. Tears are part of life. Men say not but what do they know?"

"Men have their uses."

"What's the matter Maggie?" Maggie didn't answer but started crying again.

"GOD STREWTH!" Shouted Minda. Then "Oh no! I'm sorry I shouted. I have remembered. Oh no! Oh no! Give her to me! I must hold her Elizabeth. Let me hold her!" Eventually Maggie was handed over like a rag doll. "Two weeks ago I was crying uncontrollably in bed. Can you believe it Elizabeth! Maggie! Listen to me. You will be alright in a week. You will be – er – stronger!"

Elizabeth intervened. "Minda. Listen to me. I will look after Maggie or you or both of you but I would rather you were puffing importance into the men who are defending our town than weeping more tears than ever existed. Will you go?"

This tumbling out of a bed of pity woke Minda up. "Mistress Elizabeth! You shall be my mother. I shall obey. You are my mother. May I go and do – er – whatever you said to the defenders of Lostnock?"

"Not until you have kissed me fairly."

Afterwards Minda wondered how she could acquire a mother in five minutes. But she never regretted it.

Minda's sprinting men soon caught up with the steady-paced Blacks. There was a moment when knives and bows were drawn but a whistle and 'Gipsy' followed by Brand's admonition "Why did you leave without us" began the long process of calming nerves. Despite what they said the Black Team were desperately concerned for Maggie. The edgy atmosphere held no warmth for Brand, Henry or Flor so they soon rode ahead to show the road was clear, said a mechanical goodbye then parted. The moon had two hours to guide them through the silent countryside but everyone was full of splinters.

Mr. Chris could navigate through a fog at midnight. They would take strange turns to mount the curved sides of downs or dismount and lead their horses into a gorge. A gorge is a trap but a good place to hide if you gamble on nobody else wanting your hole for the day. When they woke this was quite lovely, ferns, a waterfall, clear water pools, all made from chunky bands of horizontally gouged sandy rock.

Mr. Chris and Jane soon became father and grown-up daughter. The titanic teen years were past them and they could conspire together as mature adults. It was so natural! Rachel was admitted as the grown-up daughter's friend. When they had prayers Mr. Chris mentioned Maggie while Jane and Rachel mentioned Elizabeth. There was a gentle flow of family emotions across the ages which drew them together. The boys didn't quite understand.

The four boys couldn't be four brothers. The Simons came from rich and privileged families and even when John and James took time to teach them rough living there was an invisible servant and master feeling. All of them wanted to play a full part in the team but somehow low birth and honest practicality stained the ideals of the nobles. When you eat juicy lamb it makes a big difference whether you stole it or somebody else stole it for you. Nevertheless the Simons volunteered whenever there was volunteering to be done, did their fair share of lookout and guard duty and kept smiling. Despite Mr. Chris's physical fitness the responsibility for looking after the six children round the clock began to wear him down. Jane was supposedly in charge but his guiding powers were what they relied on. He showed them how features of the land went together and how humans lived in it. Always near water, always with some soil to grow food, often near river crossings; and how they created their own marks on the landscape for keeping livestock, travel and quarrying. He explained the different types of rocks as the same and as different as men and women. They were different strengths and wore different clothes but underneath they were all worn away in the end. With this prompting Im began to notice the different plants. James took an interest in Im's interest, having lived all his life in the town until now he'd never thought about plants. Now he looked there were so many different ones all around. Even in Bartonbry plants existed much as people in a crowded market; all much the same. Mr. Chris didn't know all the names of plants but there were some which told special things. Some grew on disturbed ground. Some where there were animals kept. Some by springs that would come and go so in summer you knew there

was water just underground or a bit further down the hill and some on boggy ground as warning to find another way.

[Wednesday - Melbun]

They entered Melbun at dawn on Wednesday. Before the gates Jane stopped them and thanked Mr. Chris for his navigation. "When there's time I hope you can spare a few days to teach us properly in daylight." Everyone agreed. "Now we don't really know how safe we are. I'll look after you Mr. Chris. We can use Minda's town house as a base. Let's go there and invite parents to a meal tonight and rest until then."

This peaceful plan was in tatters within minutes of their arrival as news spread. All the parents including the Ulexes had arrived within half an hour. Myddle the steward assigned servants to help the cadets settle into apartments upstairs to get washed and called a barber. Myddle assured the waiting parents that he saw six cheerful and healthy faces but they'd asked to be given a few minutes to brush their hair and shave. As instructed by Minda, Jane had sent a messenger to 'X' at the castle with the bare message 'soot and leaves'. Lord Weston introduced lord and lady Gough and lord and lady Susiks to the Ulexes and Whins. The Goughs and Susiks were on Lord Weston's 'suspect' list.

Rachel appeared first and came down the stairs in a freshly unrolled and creased gown but smiling and confident. There was no doubt she was fit and happy. "The others will be down in a moment. Before allowing herself to be swamped by the emotion of her homecoming she went to Mrs. Ulex. "Maggie couldn't come. But she'll be alright. She sends all her love and asks you look after John and James. We'll tell our adventures later. She's the bravest and best. She's alright I promise."

The others followed and there were many tears of joy. The Ulexes followed Rachel's cue and gave the Taylors something to come home to. Maggie had written about them to her parents. They were quizzed about stealing and slight-of-hand and learning Italian which they answered truthfully. There was a discussion of who looked after who. The cadets had agreed not to say anything about the last ten days until everyone was seated and settled so they could share their stories together. Myddle served refreshments and Jane introduced Mr. Chris to everyone. There was no part of the next hour where one cadet's story wasn't interrupted by a compliment or supporting comment from

another. The organisation of the river trip was described by all four boys. Jane as the general with her whistle was praised by the Simons.

Im said "She knew what she was doing and gave clear orders."

Jane said "I only had to stay awake long enough to get you there safely. After that my job was done. You were the ones going to war I was just getting you killed more quickly."

U said "I hadn't thought of it like that. You did a good job anyway. And you did a good job of leading us here."

The bloodbath at the cathedral was described by the Simons. The aftermath described by the Taylors. Then Jane told about the stalking and killing of Riskin without the important details.

"Then I killed him. Do you want me to tell you how?"

Her father said. "I'm proud of you Jane but please save the details."

"It wasn't nice but that's what I wanted to do and I did it."

Rachel told her story. Soon she came to Maggie's three head-shots. "One girl against more than a score of men. She made it so easy for me to round them up. They thought I must have at least a handful of archers. She was so steady and silent, our Maggie who we all thought was best at keeping kitchen for us showed her true fighting spirit." She went on to tell of the death of lord and lady Ruswell but changed the details so Maggie was acting in self defence and made up her skill and determination. "That's why she's not here today. I won't lie to you. Killing five in the space of three hours was too much of a shock. She cried an ocean later but only much later and she was already smiling when we left but a bit weak. It wouldn't have been fair to drag her through the night to come here. That evening I stabbed three men to death in the private parlour of an inn in Trexton while Maggie held a knife to a fourth's throat. We were both covered in blood. I mean covered. Like Jane says it is not nice. Then we spent most of that night being hunted before being guided back to the safety of Lostnock by Mr. Chris."

Mr. Chris added "I was with them then by chance. As we planned our escape through the woods both girls talked sense and never once faltered even though I could see they were both disgusted with looking like butchers."

"It was so sticky to begin with then prickly as it dried. You have no idea!" said Rachel. "Never get blood inside your boots!"

Mr. Chris continued. "Your girls are here today because they quietly practised and practised and practised. They have chosen to be soldiers and one day fate chose to give them a reminder of what being a soldier means. They are nice girls to be with. Your boys are nice also. I can tell you that Im and James will make good surveyors if they chose to do so. John is the best thief of things. I'm afraid we were well fed on our way here thanks to him."

"Thieving! How can that be good!" Asked Lord Gough.

John spoke for himself. "I haven't stolen anybody's life. There's no blood on my hands."

Lord Weston saw the point and raced to support him. "John I agree with you. Jane killed a man but nobody censured her."

Lord Gough had come out of his cave. "This is not what I sent my boy away for. Murdering men in inns. Stealing. Mixing with street urchins."

Im, Simon Gough, said "What is the matter father?"

"She's corrupted you to be her evil helpers."

"I don't think so father. What makes you say she's evil."

"Attacking the cathedral."

"The bishop was a criminal. We went to fetch him but some stupids put up a fight. They killed two of us cadets."

"She sent you to be killed like chickens."

"What would you do if people were trying to kill you father? Would you fight back?"

"I won't be argued with by my son. Come on Simon we're going."

"Goodbye father. I was warned that half of Melbun is treacherous. I knew you wouldn't be a keen supporter of the King but I had hoped you would be loyal. Good bye. What they do in Lostnock is put black and white ribbons over gates and doors to show loyalty to our Duchess."

"Loyalty to the duchess is nothing to do with loyalty to the King. And what about loyalty to the church?"

"You remember Samson your mastiff that got the cancer. You killed it to save it more pain. She is doing the same with the church."

"It's a plot son. Just like Thaddeus Poolens killed his father."

All the cadets knew Jed and this was shocking news. Jed had arrived at the house five minutes before but had kept out of sight listening. He entered the main parlour. "Yes I killed him. The King ordered me to. I think my father deserved to die but I was not the judge."

The girls were fascinated from a professional killer's point of view. They were desperate to get the details but obviously would have to wait. Jane said "Lord Gough. Do you want to stay or go?" It seemed like fifty years of Minda's blunt 'make your mind up' logic had crystallised in Jane. Lord Weston was thrilled. Jed was oblivious to the sword's edge behind the question. The Simons were interested in this unusual confrontation. The Taylors were preparing for a backlash and checking the exits and how to protect the girls. The adults were chillingly aghast.

After a dreadful silence Lord Gough said. "I'm not welcome here. Simon you're not welcome at my house."

Lady Gough said "Yes he is. I'm proud of my son. She hugged him. You're a man now boy. The kingdom needs fresh strong boys like you to cut through its knotted loyalties."

"Come on Mary! We're going."

"Go away then you silly man. Far away. Stop causing us pain by your stupidity. Can't you see the Duchess of Avel and her cadets are digging out the weeds in your garden?"

"As you will dear." Lord Gough left.

Simon Gough said "I have learned how to command men and wield a weapon but that's just a step on the road. She has told us we should all learn a foreign language and see what lies over the water so we may trade and be examples of our kingdom to the rest of the world."

U said "I want to do everything. Law, accounts, estate management, trade and I want to keep the King's peace. Father and mother – my patron she will support me to do all these things but your blessing would be worth a lot."

Lord Susiks said "From what I've heard about your part in the capture of the cathedral I wish I was your age and half as good as you are now. The other Simon is right. Our generation is tangled-up. Yours is tangled too but the Duchess of Avel seems to be doing a good job of combing your threads straight."

At this Mr. Chris desperately wanted to draw the girls combing their hair. How about combing each other's hair? How about the boys combing the girl's hair. How about him combing their hair? Oh no! This was getting complicated.

Xavier hurried in and looked at everyone from his neckless cat-face. Everyone looked at him. Jane Weston broke the silence. "Our first plan

was to invite you all for dinner tonight. Will you let us get on with business now and we will welcome you as our big Melbun family over nice food and wine."

When the parents except for Lord Weston had clasped their children and reluctantly departed Jane addressed them. "Im you are now half an orphan. John and James are full orphans but my brothers and so I say father they are your sons."

"No they're not Jane." Said lord Weston.

There was a horrible sinkhole of silence.

"They are my brothers."

"Jane daughter. Men don't make their bonds like women. We come to accept shared responsibilities – Women mostly."

"A daughter picks up a son-in-law like a flower collects bees" said Im.

"You are right there Simon. Now let this happiness stop. We must talk about war."

During the next hour Mr. Chris saw what a shambles the centre of government was. The cadets were amazed at Jed's progress. The Simons now belonged in a way they hadn't before. The Taylors wanted to get away to use somebody else's money to buy expensively fashionable suits. The girls took all the responsibility for getting things done. That's why they had come and now they had to stick to their task. Mr. Chris kept getting flashbacks to teenage girls combing their hair and asked leave to visit his superior the Chief tax collector.

To the girls everything was so confused they made an excuse to leave and rode – even if at walking pace due to the traffic – to the castle and simply asked to see the King. "We're messengers from the duchess. Do we have to tell yo which one?"

"No. But tell me to be sure what she makes me do?"

"Smile!" They said in unison.

The chief of castle guards tried to make a long face but failed. "It's true. After years of faithful scowling service she made me smile."

"And what does your wife say to that?" asked Rachel.

"She says I should tickle visitors. The ones that are tickled are likely harmless and those that won't be are some sort of trouble."

"Jane held her arms out. Tickle me!"

The chief of guards laughed. "Not like that silly. Just a jest and a quip."

"No I'm sure she meant really tickle. Trust me I'm a woman."

"You don't catch me like that miss. I know I'd say hello to mister broom tonight if I so much as touched you."

Everyone beamed.

Inside they were interrogated by a businesslike chamberlain and within two minutes shown into the King's private apartment.

"Welcome to Melbun. Where is Minda?"

"She's at Lostnock. It's just us two cadets."

"I was told the guards had been cheeked so much they thought it could only be the Duchess herself."

"We learned from her. She is at Lostnock. She sent us here to calm you, your courtiers and your supporters. I am Cadet Jane Weston and this is Cadet Rachel Whin. We met you at the selection day your Highness."

"Ah. Yes I remember. Put the tent up first didn't you. Impressed everybody. Do you have a message for me?"

"Yes" said Jane. "The Duchess is well, she has organised the defence of Lostnock, and is strangling the revolt slowly. Her forces are limited so she asks can she rely on your immediate support to puncture the lungs of the rebels. Or she will do it herself more slowly but it would look like she is taking the country for herself rather than for the King."

"She has usurped my power already. Taken Lostnock castle by murdering the warden and ennobled the sheriff. I am the only one who can make Earls."

Jane said quietly. "It appears not sir. Lostnock feels abandoned. Minda has come upon it as a house neglected by an absent landlord and is repairing it."

Rachel added. "She told us to particularly tell you, to your face in private sir, that at Bartonbry we are truthful with our friends. She also said she knows you have a reputation for dithering. She also asked us to give you her sincere regrets about any hurt she has caused by acting without specific instructions as a general in the field."

"I have been receiving many complaints about her. She personally murdered three innocent men enjoying a drink in Trexton."

"No sir. I murdered them." Rachel held out her hands. "With these hands. They were not innocent. The fourth was unharmed and taken prisoner and treated well. That made eight deaths that afternoon. Jane here took the other five – Three armed soldiers then Lord and lady Ruswell." Jane held out her hands like Rachel had done. "I myself told the household to write to you and ask for a new and this time loyal lord."

"I was told the duchess bewitched a company of troops so completely she walked amongst them unharmed then and marched them to Lord Ruswell's. What have you got to say about that?"

Rachel answered "Everyone thinks that cheeky girls must be the duchess herself – Your castle guards made the same mistake. Did they forget the duchess wears an eye-patch and is twice my size? Jane shot three soldiers one after another in an ambush. I then ordered them to surrender and they did. We took their weapons off them then marched them home singing. They were happy to be going home. Jane said we should take them to Lord Ruswell's to demand he pay his men as he'd promised to but hadn't. Is that magic or common sense? 'If you come with me you can sleep in your own beds tonight and get your wages' is that bewitching?"

"Hmm. Sounds like a fairy story to me. How many troops does she want?"

Jane said "That's for you to decide sir. She has told us to wait a few days but not to waste our time waiting for decisions that never come. Jed says he has another Little Army nearly ready so we will probably head towards Bartonbry with him."

"Bartonbry?" asked the King. "Not Lostnock?"

"Two reasons sir" answered Jane. "First to harden the troops to discipline on the road. Second the duchess has to look after her own interests as well as yours. After the easier job of relieving the siege of Bartonbry they will have more experience to deal with the bigger problem of Lostnock."

It was beginning to dawn on the King that he should have taken more control of Jed's Little Army.

Outside the King's privy chamber a chamberlain asked the girls to wait then after five minutes they were shown into the queen's day parlour where she was seated being serenaded by four musicians. The girls curtsied and cursed their creased gowns.

"Cadet Jane Weston your highness."

"Cadet Rachel Whin your highness."

The musicians stopped and departed.

"Welcome to my castle girls. Um. Yes I think it's still mine and not Minda's. She's a bit of a tyrant so I hear."

Rachel said "Please your highness she is putting the neglected castle back into use. She needs it now to defend your kingdom. She has no thought of owning it."

Jane supported Rachel just as if they were fighting or deceiving. "But I think she might be cross if it stays neglected in future."

Rachel saw Jane's 'I am supporting you' hand signal and recognised this situation as a fluster. "She says 'everyone must learn'."

"She keeps everyone on their toes."

"And is merciless pointing out our faults."

"And keen to help us put them right."

"And keen to let us make mistakes"

"And praise us when we succeed."

"And praise us for trying if we fail."

"But mostly she know she can trust us to do all that trying and finding our faults for ourselves."

"She said if we saw you to give you her love."

"And say sorry if she's offended you by taking your castle."

There was a silence as the waves of the girl's barrage subsided. The queen said "Thank you. Are all the cadets like you?"

"No your highness" said Rachel. "Some of them haven't killed anyone."

"Perhaps we're more advanced?" said Jane half to Rachel.

Rachel finished off another manoeuvre with a shrug. "Or lucky? Who knows?"

Another silence as the queen sorted out this last salvo. "Is all you do killing?"

Rachel led again "Goodness no your highness. We do thieving, kidnapping, how to take money from men by gambling and picking pockets."

"And false accounting, forging letters, disguise and spreading rumours."

"We're learning Italian and how to creep through the country on moonless nights."

"But not setting fire to houses yet. That's something we need to learn before we return to Lostnock isn't it Rachel."

"But it's not all fun. She makes us dance and tidy our hair and play the viol or lute."

"And we have to sit still and smile coyly while boys recite poetry to us."

"Nauseating!"

"Nauseating."

On their way to the gatehouse all the guards smiling together couldn't out-grin Rachel and Jane. They didn't know if they'd done the right thing but it was a relief after the brutalities and tension of the last few days. Later Rachel asked Jane about the route of Jed's army. Jane explained she'd made it up to deceive.

"Isn't it treason to lie to the King?" asked Rachel.

"Probably. What's the old man going to do about it?"

"Tell the queen."

"Then everyone will know."

"So which way do we go?"

"Now you ask me Rachel I wonder if we could go by boat again. Down river from here to Ravengap will be half the trip. It would confuse and get us there more quickly perhaps." Jane explained that as boats could keep going through the night and went at about marching pace without having to stop that meant about twice as fast overall.

Back at Minda's house the girls reported their royal meetings. After a short council of war the Taylors agreed to find out everything about the bigger boats and the Simons went to make notes of how much of what was in Jed's little army. The girls went to reassure Maggie's parents.

It took a while for John and James to be recognised at the quays where they had been labouring and living on their wits before Lucky took them to the cadet selection day. A healthy diet, well made clothes, Avel

boots, a fresh shave and haircut showed they had prospered. Unfortunately a pick-pocket took John's unguarded pocket as an invitation and James' carelessly dangling purse was cut from his belt. The thieves got away with a handful of pebbles and a message written by the boys themselves. 'Luke at hour butes for the nife. Last worning. Death!!' They said they'd been to Italy and were going back there any day now if they could find a suitable ship. Saturday afternoon at the Lostnock quays had been well spent finding out about ships, trade, how cargoes were found for ships, ships found for cargo and paid for. They had agreed then that this was exciting and something to ask the Duchess if they could do more of. Now they were no-longer labourers but potential customers worth buying a drink for, but they knew better than to accept an invitation to do business over spirits. Soon they had a list of four potential ships and half a dozen barges that might consider a short charter to Ravengap. A far-away girls voice was calling them. Two voices. Then a big man's bellow. It was a ship taking in the last of its sail and positioning itself to come alongside the next quay. It was Doreen and Agnes! Amazing! They waved back and went to meet it. After the usual hesitations, turns and rope throwing the ship finally closed the last of the watery gap. Both boys were amazed but by now they associated 'too good to be true' with roguery and watched everywhere. It looked like the captain would soon have another freight but they would check with Doreen first.

From the ship Doreen said "You came to meet us boys. How thoughtful."

"Just here to carry your baggage mistress." said James.

"Oh don't you know all the best people travel without bags."

"James was being his silly self mistress. I hope you had a pleasant voyage."

"Delightfully exciting" said Doreen.

"Really horrible." said Tom who had managed the river part of the voyage without being sick.

The blank looks on the boy's faces was the cue for Doreen to introduce Tom. "Never take a blacksmith on a boat. He belongs under a tree."

"Yes. Show me a tree! I must sit under a tree. I must feel the grass with my feet." As soon as the ropes had been tied and a plank put down to the quay Tom went first and knelt on all fours on the quay feeling it with his hands. "Never again." he got up and faced the boat. "Thank you captain for bringing Doreen and Agnes here safe but for me I wish you had wrecked us on the first rock."

Agnes took possession of Tom. Doreen had vanished without coming down the plank. Now she reappeared arguing with the captain. They parted and she came down to the quay. "Hello John. Hello James. This is a nice surprise. How is everyone?"

James said "Minda is safe in Lostnock. The Black Team is here. You are safe with us but we mustn't talk on the quay. Will you come with us?"

"I must wait for the captain but he's busy putting his boat to bed."

James said "You go with John and I'll bring the captain in a while."

James explained immediately to the captain that he was a lucky man who was about to get another full cargo if only a little way, but Bartonbry knew when to see friends were well looked after. On the walk to Minda's house James said he and John were special guards of the Duchess and Doreen would tell him more. He already knew about the Black Team. He said he'd called them 'imps' and Doreen had laughed so loud he thought the sails had split. James wondered what Derek Driver would think.

The servants at Minda's house were used to unexpected guests and feasts to be provided at short notice. They had already sent out for extra food and hired servants. When Jed found out about Doreen's arrival he couldn't resist inviting the Lanconian and Italian ambassadors to the evening meal, obviously now he couldn't invite one without the other and obviously they'd have to bring their wives. When Xavier heard about this he was appalled at this gift to the opposition. He sent a message that he and two other very important guests would be attending and told Lord Gough who the important guests were so he might change his mind and attend too. At the news of unnamed very important guests Doreen's experience turned a neglected house into one with flowers and scents and borrowed wall hangings. She knew the importance of appearances and being seen to spend money like chaff. Myddle made it happen but Doreen gave it the character of overflowing Bartonbry. She insisted there should be an official lord or host. Not Mr. Chris he was nice but too peripheral. Jane? She might be too fast and facetious for the adults – She hadn't got Minda's maturity yet. Jed? A few questions ruled him out. Lord Weston and herself would have to do then. He would represent the willing spirit of Melbun and she would be the calming spirit of Bartonbry. She really wanted to be with Brian but he seemed to be happy enough with the imp-boys. Now their roles were reversed. She was the captain of this feast with very important guests and he was a passenger so he kept out of the way except to kiss her in a corridor. He

could see she knew what she was doing and admired her for being so economical in orders when there were so many things to consider. He drew James' attention to this. James thought he might not know Doreen was happily married. He'd heard about sailors!

"Please Mr. Brian –" but then thought it wasn't nice to spoil his happiness. "Er. I want to go to Italy and be a cargo broker."

"Do you get seasick?"

"I don't know sir."

"Can you do sums and read manifests?"

"Is a manifest a list of cargoes"

"Yes."

"Then not yet but I am learning. And I know lots about frauds and thievery and I'm learning Italian."

"Lei si sposerà con me"

"I think *you* will marry *her*. Vera sposarler? La navy è an castello. Her ship is a castle."

"Your Italian is very good."

"I have/ / Avere un buon insegnante."

"You may have a good teacher but you must be a good pupil."

"I am bad because I twist everything. Alex says 'My wife is going to market' and I say 'My wife is going to moan'."

"I am from where you call Genoa we say Genova"

"Are you an exile like Alex?"

"Um. I like trading in the northern waters. The cargoes are more profitable and the competition less. Fewer pirates and/"

"/Pirates? People who attack ships at sea?"

"Yes."

"Don't tell the Duchess! She will swim out to fight them just by rage. She hates outlaws and will make the sea calm so she can walk the water and spear them. She will be very cross and then really angry when she can't get on her horse and hunt them."

"There are other ways."

"She's got plenty to do just now but I will not forget what you have told me. The imps might just teach some pick-pockets of the sea a lesson captain."

What was to have been a family gathering turned into a confusion of questions and loyalties being dissolved then remade as trust and determination. It took Doreen less than ten minutes after her arrival to understand the shocking impact of the girls on the King and Queen. She called them all together and insisted the Black Team present themselves as dutiful and well groomed children. They could all play instruments. Jane would call a hundred hairdressers and clothiers and jewellers if necessary to get the Black Team perfectly presented. "We are putting an army into the field. You are that army! This is the field! Jane and Rachel were the scouts and now the battle. Money is no object!" What instruments did they play? She would get some and musicians to remind them how to play.

"Please Mistress. There is Tom and Brian. Two more. What can they do?"

"Good question. Leave Brian to me. Tom? – He's Minda's must-have-man who she can never marry – I'll see if he can get the smiths of Melbun to knock on the door at say half past nine tonight with gift or song."

Rachel caught the trend. "Can we get the dock-men to do likewise if John and James prompt them?"

"Um. It would be better if it was merchants and ship owners. John, James. Can you see what can be done with Brian? But be quick! Your first duty is to be faceless musicians. Your second duty is to protect us all if there is an attack. Your third duty is to gently sway people to the Bartonbry way of doing things. You are the army. You know that Bartonbry does what it wants in its own way. Remember that strength and patience are brothers."

"Please mistress" said John "You are a right fine general for this army."

"Come here son... You're not too old to give your mum a kiss are you? Now you James. Are we a family?"

"Yes" said everyone.

The guests were greeted in the hallway by the music of two viols two flutes and a gittern played by Mr. Chris. They only knew five tunes between them but Mr. Chris added more by saying "join in" and giving hints as they went along. The Simons were richly dressed by the invisible magic of servants of rich houses who were used to all emergencies and were to be servant-pages to the adults. They had done the 'be a servant' bit at Bartonbry and now one important reason for that

suddenly came home to them. They had naturally assumed that the Taylors were going to turn from musicians to servants like them but tonight the Black Team were paired-off as Rachel with James and Jane with John. John wished it was Maggie but Jane was lovely and poised. Just as lovely and holding his hand softly now as they promenaded to their places with courtly smiles and bows. John wondered if Jane would be in his bed tonight. His smile to the man next to her, the Lanconian ambassador was a simple friendly smile. His impassive smile gave way when he met the gaze of the lady sitting next to Jane. Jed could give him a few lessons but no lessons would be proof against that face!

Doreen had spent ten minutes deciding then three hours worrying about where to put the King and Queen. She had guessed who the important guests were but not been told. If they wanted to be anonymous then that was their choice. She split them up almost at random. On Lord Weston's advice she put the King at the 'bottom' of the table which made it the top if you looked at it that way with Lord Weston next to him on one side and Lady Gough on the other. The queen ought to have Brian and Tom – Hey yes! Why not. This was a bit of Bartonbry magic! Doreen was sure that Minda wouldn't have it any other way.

The queen was pleasantly entertained knowing that even if she didn't understand a word of the answers to her questions she was being given honest answers. With simple curiosity the queen asked Tom why he was associated with Minda and he told her. Suddenly she felt a solidarity with Minda. There were invisible fetters stopping Minda too! Now she understood. Now she wanted to hug Minda! She knew all women could never do what they wanted but royalty, yes, Minda must have royal blood somewhere, were specially burdened with things they couldn't do.

The King was confused at first by being at the bottom of the table but as he was served first he understood there was no slight meant. Those funny people from Bartonbry Huh!. He saluted Doreen at the other end. "I'm spoken for." she called back. No feast could ever fall under an evil spell after that. Lord Gough and the reserved Lord Susiks and their wives realised this was pleasant because the people and their purpose was pleasant. Lord Gough has been given a 'talking-to' by his wife and was slightly, a bit, almost, nearly going to support the King. To begin with, seeing his son being used as a servant was very aggravating but with his missus next to the King he waited. "Cheer up dad" from behind him as Simon passed by with more wine and an earnest smile twisted him. His wife was smiling with the king, he could hardly demand a new

king when the new generation like Simon and these others was coming soon. Girls taking weapons as well. Whatever next! There was nothing for it he'd just have to go with the changing times. Suddenly the sun came out for him.

Jed had been placed between the queen and Rachel. He had his trumpet of taking an army to war and kept blowing it. Rachel and the queen spoke across him as they took it in turns to try to turn his military importance into something useful.

"Jed, didn't you have the rubbish from the little army? Tell her highness how you dealt with them."

"Jed, you have been learning Lanconian I hear, why not tell her highness about that?"

"Jed, why not tell her highness about how we do things differently in Bartonbry?"

He was confused but the silent contact between Rachel and the queen gave the queen enough to follow through. Bit by bit the character of the new Bartonbry was exposed by an unwitting Jed."

"My lady, I should tell you that Jed has been made to attend dancing lessons. He likes to fight swords with me but there may be a dance later and he needs some encouragement."

The Italian ambassador's wife was placed next to Brian. Both exile and ambassador are foreigners in a strange country where things have to be expressed differently. If the home country tears itself apart it looks like children's games from a distance. Exile Brian and ambassadress Donna knew they were each a hated enemy but for this evening they chose to be friendly. Their professions demanded friendliness with compromise and their shared exile soon had them both wishing to be home and smelling the scents of olives and the accents and insults in the background. There was no animosity between them, in another situation they would be in each other's arms and the same bed that night. Tonight was different, the king and queen were present but tomorrow...

On a signal from Doreen the Taylors got up and changed places with the Simons. The girls knew their turn would come later. At every opportunity the boys made conversation with their guests, whoever they were. A line James used a couple of times was a hushed and confidential "I shouldn't listen to gossip sir." The response 'what gossip'

got the reply 'Oh! Er! Nothing to worry about if you haven't heard. Sorry I spoke sir. I thought everyone knew.'" And then moved on. Obviously this was meant to be overheard and they winked to the nearby males but winking apparently didn't do the trick. Doreen had to call order and the boys to her then say "John and James are imps. They have the very devil inside them. They make things up so you will confess your sins. Do not listen. I love them both dearly. She gave each a squeeze. They are the spirit of the girl that can't be with us tonight. Shall we have a toast to the queen of mischief Minda?"

Lord Weston was ready and said "I look round this table and what do I see? I see happiness. That's what she'd brought here. Let us drink to her health."

Unscripted the King stood up at the end of the table. Silence. "I have been bewitched by Minda. I am not sorry. I have been bewitched three – no four times. I have said in public she should be the next ruler of this Kingdom. I am bewitched tonight by her even though she isn't here. How can that be?"

James understood the king to be drunk and moved in for the kill. He went straight to the King and said "Sir." Then clasped him in a half-embrace. "Sir. The affairs of women are beyond us men." This jest. Was it a jest? By a dockside criminal – claspings the King. Where was it leading? Where would it end? The combination of the expression of half understanding on the Kings' face and James' innocently helpful encouragement (How could he give such rustic advice to the King in public?) flooded the table with more than enough confidence in simple camaraderie for the whole town.

The women and men gathered in separate parlours while the hall was cleared for dancing. Rachel and Jane were complimented on their playing. They had reminded themselves of a little Italian and used it on Donna, deliberately showing they were at an early stage. 'I learn to speak Italian', 'How much for five breads', 'Too little expensive!', 'The raining is sunny but it will weather later'. One of their lessons had been that it makes people feel good if they can correct you, whether to be helpful or for their own esteem.

Constansia said how lovely it was that the children of Bartonbry should learn languages. "Your Jed 'e is learning Lanconian. E says to me 'My ship es rocking on your wreck of beauty.' Ha ha!" Donna and Constansia might both be lonely and homesick but they were bitter rivals. Seducing Jed was just one of their battles and lending Eve

valuable jewels was another. Tonight the ambassadors would be instructed by their wives to make sure they had a luxury residence in or near Bartonbry. When the dance was announced Doreen told them that Tom was a lovely boy but had never danced in his life. Please be nice to him and tell him you don't expect him to dance. He is only a pea in a basket but very precious to Minda.

The King was keen to talk to the cadets. Jed was detained by Xavier. "The girls have been killing people. Have you also?"

"No sir" said Im. "In the cathedral my men killed seven but none myself."

"Me neither sir" said U. "I worked with Simon to distract the enemy while his men attacked. I lost four of my men."

James said "John and myself have not killed but we have helped in the hunt. To speak for myself sir I would wish to kill in self-defence only. We are being trained in trickery to gain what we want. Why kill somebody?"

John added "Sir. Do you see how we are bold? We also vanish, travel by night, steal sheep to eat – I stole a sheep only last night sir. I left payment but it was still stealing."

The king said "I don't want my kingdom full of stealing youths who sneak in the dark and trick people."

John said. "That's why we do it sir. So we can stop it."

James was in close support. "She tells us when the outlaws sleep at night then we can also."

John said "She tells us that only a thief knows enough to catch a thief."

James said "She tells us it takes one scoundrel to know another."

John said "Today sir we went to the quays. James had his pocket picked and I had my purse cut from my belt. We let them do it and they were rewarded with pebbles and a warning we will kill anyone that tries it again."

U interrupted the fluster. "Sir. All the cadets including John and James are going to be important men. We are starting to learn business, trade, law, estate management and leading men in difficult times. She has shown us the map of our futures."

Im continued "We haven't hunted once at Bartonbry sir. Only men in ambushes and she's hinted we hunt them through their frauds."

U added "And we are soon to be allowed to hunt women."

"Hunt women!" said the King.

"She tells us that girls hunt the boys and boys hunt the girls and we are not to be caught and we are not to give up chasing ourselves. We have been too busy and tired to chase girls much yet."

Tom had recovered marvellously. His father, Pod, would have been mightily envious if he could have seen him in a borrowed suit of the latest fashion with his side whiskers trimmed and powdered and the rest of his face shaved perfectly smooth. He couldn't wait to get home and tell his father and mother that he was dressed up and sitting at a feast not five paces from the King and right next to the Queen! He had been as polite as he knew to the Queen and amazed that she was such a normal person asking such normal questions. For a moment he'd wondered if he should represent all the smiths of the kingdom to her highness but quickly realised he couldn't represent anyone and she wouldn't be interested. He nearly let out the secret that the star-iron girl song was to be sung later.

The hall had been transformed into a small arena with musicians on a platform at one end, well lit seating on one side and a bower of little trees in tubs at the other end in shadow. Myddle and his staff had done this many times for the old Duke. Tonight the dancers were smiling from bravado and enjoyment of the novelty rather than custom and manipulation. There was a master of ceremony who cleverly mixed the dancers and dances so that everyone was at ease. Doreen had impressed on him the evening was complicated and going to be managed the Bartonbry way. The first dance was for cadets. The Black Team naturally paired but Doreen had foreseen the difficulty, took Jed for herself and asked Donna and Constansia to partner the Simons. There were layers of frisson as thoughts of the following dances and intervals surfaced.

The next, slower, dance was for 'husbands, wives and lovers'. Jed began to 'roast'. Doreen took Brian.

Mr. Chris, also in a borrowed suit but with nobility of age compared with Tom's exciting youth was a big hit with the ladies in the next three dances. He knew how to fill out a role without overflowing. He bowed with a flourish but also grace. He led with confidence and not a hint of bullying. He acknowledged his partner with complete good manners

without becoming comic. Here he was enjoying himself in perfect symmetry with a partner who was riding with him on their shared enjoyment as if proving a geometrical theorem. His eye for detail picked out each woman's hard work on face or clothes and complimented her with calm honesty that he'd just learned.

The master of ceremony announced a halt in the dancing to allow the Blacksmiths of Melbun to give a song. Four musicians and four singers climbed onto the platform. Nervously to begin with, they gave the star-iron girl song. Minda's legend. Only Tom had heard it before and that was another version, the first and second performances of the original before Christmas. Even though Minda had told him the song had taken a life of its own Tom felt this was a bastardised version. That was until it came to the bit where she went down the river from Lostnock but came back as a spirit to defend Lostnock. It was untrue but it was true. The carol at the end had him and many of the performers in tears. Nobody except Jed was in any doubt that Minda was more than human, more than one person, more than a forceful person, simply a force. Jed liked stories and this was a good one. The important thing was getting his army on the road to help her.

A delegation of ship captains had their audience. "We would ask the king if there is some flag we may fly when in his waters to show we are obedient and loyal to his rule. Tell us sir and we will salute you in perpetuity." The King consulted with Xavier who, much to his irritation, hadn't known anything about it. The King realised he had been trapped, but being a 'Bartonbry trap' recognised that this was medicine for his own good, and the medicine tasted nice when he thought about it.

"Captains all. It is our will that ships that wish to do so may fly my flag."

Brian had a whispered conference with the King. He was given permission to speak. "When the King said 'fly his flag' he meant 'fly bunting or ribbons or a banner to show the same. The King understands that only a ship on which he is sailing may fly the King's arms from the mast. Details may be settled another day."

The dances continued. Myddle was surprised that the little grove of trees designed for secret liaisons was unused. Before the last dance Lord Weston thanked all the guests for coming and their hostess for arranging such a lovely family evening at such short notice. Doreen made a little curtsey to acknowledge their applause. The last dance was

announced as parents and children. Mrs Ulex and Mrs Whin stepped-in for the Taylors and the Queen took Jed.

Cadets with homes had gone to them. Jed had gone back to his little army. The Taylors, changed into normal clothes in moments and went with Brian to sleep aboard a real ship. It might be tied to the quay but it was a foothold to adventure. With the bustle of decorations being dismantled coming from below Doreen couldn't let the last of the evening drain away into silent solitude without reliving it with Mr. Chris and Tom who were all she had.

"It's good to see the colour back in your cheeks Tom. Thank you for arranging the smiths they brought Minda to us."

"My dad will never believe I was dressed in this suit."

"I will draw it and present it to him when I return to Lostnock." said Mr. Chris.

"What are our travels to be Chris?"

"My best guess is we will be here a few days to see all thoughts of rebellion are gone. Tonight we showed Melbun and the King in particular the cement of confidence and how easy it is to lay bricks with it. How many other houses does the King visit for dancing at a few hours notice? All the leading families will be envious and wonder what magic we used. It's strong magic isn't it."

"Then what?"

"Jed's Little Army might then take the good news that the kingdom had a little fright but is now recovered to Lostnock showing ourselves as much as possible and giving lingering doubters time to run away. Then we can all go back to smithing or stewarding or tax collecting."

13 Minda succeeds

[Trowstead - Friday...]

At Minda's home village of Trowstead, Mr. Trentchard had been on the alert since late on Thursday when he heard of her calamitous arrival in Lostnock the day before. He didn't know where Brand and Flor were until the next day a short rough letter came from Flor at Bartonbry with

hints. Mr. Trentchard showed it with great pride to Marline, now after all these years his wife. They embraced happy at their luck while thinking of their children and Minda climbing in the world.

Marline asked "Is he yours Harry?"

"Yes dear. It's very complicated."

"Flor has your eyes and Henry's hair. You're a funny man! Does he know?"

"I shouldn't think so."

News of Friday's bloodbath reached Trowstead at dusk on Saturday. The situation was obviously serious. He went to see neighbouring Lord Risket, now father-in-law to Marline's daughter Raysell. Lord Risket admitted to having conversations with various people who wanted Lostnock to have more say over its affairs rather than being neglected by Melbun. It had been suggested to him that the new Duchess was the shadow behind this plotting and it was more about standing up for the right of the town to grow rather than seize power. It was a revelation to him when Mr. Trentchard explained that Minda didn't have any need to plot with whispers when she could go straight to the King as his son in Melbun had surely told him.

"I am told she has the full confidence of the king."

"What about making the under-sheriff an Earl? Only the King can do that. He can't let her get away with it! That's a slap in his face."

"You've met her a couple of times James. You know she will say sorry if she has to. Did you know she's taken over the King's castle as well? – Murdered the warden even. It makes sense if she has to defend the town."

"But it looks like she's taking it for herself."

"I've just had a thought James. Perhaps she's worried that the King is going to lurk in Melbun and a little provocation that can be explained later will be good."

"She is provocative, but I take your point. We know one thing for certain Harry."

"What's that?"

"She's her own master. Others might be a cat's paw but never Minda."

"You're right there James. I'm going to Lostnock tomorrow to see for myself. I trained her for two years to lead against outlawry but expected

it to be stamping on small sparks of ruffians in the undefended countryside not holding the King's castle against rebel lords."

"I think opposition will melt away when people realise their chance of extorting concessions from a weak king with a few threats has vanished. The big players might have taken power but the minor players would only get left-overs so they will know it isn't worth it."

"Yes. The stronger and more ruthless she is the less doubt in their minds that she will take a breath before destroying them."

"If you're going to Lostnock Harry what about here? Are we going to have civil war? Should we arm?"

"Good question James. I think lords should tell their people that there is fire to the south and to be ready just in case it spreads. There are no armies on the move as far as we know."

"Yes. Let's not frighten people. There's too much work to be done in the fields to waste men on fighting armies of fear."

[Monday - Lostnock]

By Monday Henry was starting to shade his map to show lords who were friendly and those who would provide definite help if asked. To the south, towards Trexton there were a lot of blanks where Minda's ultimatum to declare loyalty must be known but no answer had come. Paul instigated a propaganda campaign using Red Ken's men and the watch to spread the word that the danger was receding but the duchess thought the town should keep at its military practise for a week. The episode at Selenden as a child where she took on the whole village at archery in order that they should take defence seriously was spread with energy and even a songster encouraged to make something of it. The civic pride of the Bartonbry archer volunteers supported by her was also mentioned. Minda hated being shut inside the town so made the most of her time by challenging citizens to Archery. She was out of practice but soon recovered her poise. Truthfully, any bare-armed fit young woman who smiled and cheeked would warm the blood of most men. Her presence commanded more than loyalty. The town of Lostnock knew it was 'forward' and here was the confident embodiment of that spirit. Paul saw her real desperate helplessness being caged and being expected to lead an army by hope alone. Brand and Lucky were out in the country doing bad things so he asked Mr. Bob and Henry what could be done. A dance! Obvious! Mr. Bob would get the leading citizens to arrange one the next day at the moot hall with Minda as guest of honour. It would show the town was not worried, or even if it was, that it still knew how to enjoy itself. When he thought about it Mr. Bob realised that

the one thing that Lostnock was missing now was a sense of fun. Lostnock could do trade, profit, crime and now civic leadership that wasn't about bribes, but it was too busy making money race around to enjoy itself.

Minda knew she had no alternative than to be strong. She was desperate not lose Maggie to misery. She thought of all the things that might make Maggie perk up. Clothiers were commanded to work round the clock to make Maggie new road clothes and gown. When Minda went to a silversmith to order matching bracelets with black and silver enamel for Maggie she made a mistake. Instead of simply saying she'd pay for them whatever the price she explained why Maggie needed them quickly. She knew the smith and his wife and so lulled by a moment where she might gossip easily told them about Maggie's five deaths as if to add to the importance of doing a good job quickly.

"Maggie has just turned sixteen. The blood lust caught her and she's distraught."

"I heard she killed a rebel Lord and lady and five of their soldiers." Said the smith.

"It's worse than that. The Lord and Lady were a little treacherous but didn't need to be killed. I've never killed a harmless old man or – never a harmless old woman."

The silversmith's wife said "It's a crime. Who is to blame?"

"Me. Me. Me! Thank you. The King gave me twenty Melbun children to give a bit of my confidence to. I've brought death and pain. That's what I've done."

The smith said "Your Grace I remember before Christmas when you were being wooed by your brother and you took those earrings yourself to him. I knew then he would have to submit to you one way or the other and my wife said he was a tower of grey stone and you were the wind playing with him to blow him down – and you did. That was a death that worked out well."

Minda went into herself for a second then expanded to blast the smith "I am going to hell but every death is another deeper hell. The Sheriff! The Warden! Killed like dogs maybe but I'm not God. When you stab someone blood goes everywhere. Over you. Splurts of warm sticky red blood that dries before you can pretend it isn't there. Under your nails, on your skin, itching dried between your fingers, in your hair, soaking your clothes. Oh waiting Hell! You've got a castle to protect you not a

cuckoo! But remember it was me that stabbed the warden in the vital organs."

"As you have saved the castle for Lostnock you may have the bracelets for no charge Your Grace." The smith's generosity was rewarded by being picked up by his shoulder and crutch and thudded against the wall. Minda's broken face snarled in all directions at once "You will charge me the full amount! What you do with the money is your affair."

Later she signed a note written by Paul apologising to the smith and his wife.

"You are the quiet man in my life Paul. I've heard that Doreen has as good as betrothed you to a nice widow at Bartonbry."

"Yes miss."

"Well as you cannot be in the arms of your betrothed I must hug you for her. Come here." Paul submitted as a man to execution. Suddenly, although he'd forgotten about that afternoon on Bartonbry so long ago, he wished he was back there now.

"From the moment I met you at the sheriff's at Mid-winter I've loved you Paul. I'm sure you will make a perfect husband though you may not know it. Let me kiss you to wish you many happy years in harness."

[Monday evening - Lostnock]

Mr. Trentchard's arrival was rather sad for him and Minda. Their relationship at Trowstead had been master and servant rather than father and daughter. Now they were strangers. Minda had no spare happy love and he had always been reserved. They ate together that Monday evening with Mr. Bob and Henry. Henry had now been away from home for over six months and made a new and interesting life. It might be full because of all the careful training his father had arranged for him but he was riding his own horse now. His days were overflowing with intelligence work and nights wishing he was with Brand and Lucky gambling in the moonlight. Every day he would dutifully visit Mrs Chris to comfort her while her husband was away although it was a pleasure of reassuring peace for both of them. Mr. Bob, had known Harry Trentchard for many years but somehow times past were a childish thing to be dismissed compared with the current situation.

They discussed all aspects of politics and loyalties. None of the men recognised the difficulty Minda was having taking an interest, the

slowness of her reactions. After half an hour she simply got up from the table, said she must sleep, kissed each one, thanked Mr. Trentchard for coming with a weary voice then left. A woman she recognised was outside but Minda's mind had gone to sleep.

"It's Lizzie miss. Your maid from Bartonbry."

Minda took a moment to check she was in the castle at Lostnock. "Oh alright. I'm going to bed."

Minda dreamed of owls creeping under Henry's map like earwigs under bark then growing through it and growing from egg-size to head-size then man-size filling the room. She woke up trying to scream as their sharp suffocating feathers filled her mouth. Perhaps it was the queen's luxurious silk sheets that clung so smoothly? Ha yes. Nothing to be worried about. She would have her own silk sheets! Ughh! The taste of feathers. Wait! Was that an owl in the candle shadow? Silently bobbing, looking without blinking. She tried to back away – impossible when you're lying in bed!

"Are you alright miss?" Lizzie! Now she could see her.

"What are you doing here Lizzie. Am I in Bartonbry?"

"No this is Lostnock. I came to look after you."

"Am I dreaming?"

"No miss. You're tired. Safe in the King's castle."

"I don't know one day from the next."

"Get rest miss. We can take each hour as it comes."

"Arthur! How is Arthur?"

"When I left miss he was the general of Bartonbry leading his soldiers. Making everybody smile."

"I suppose he would. Whatever Arthur does makes me smile."

"No. He orders them to smile from his horse. When they make faces back to tease him he shouts 'I will bombast you varlet!' or hold his head in his hands and moans 'split my sides with sharp spears – what have I done to deserve this.'"

"Bless you Arthur" said Minda as if the message could be sent by talking to the ceiling. "You've made me happy." She asked Lizzie what 'Bombast' meant but she didn't know either.

14 Bartonbry

[Bartonbry Saturday morning]

Flor decided that since his knowledge of defending a town was as much as Little Arthur's he might as well use the same strategy, encourage with a smile and shrug. He ought to get the Abbey to contribute to the defence so he sent notice then went to see the brothers. They still didn't have an abbot. The scheming of factions had been disrupted by Father Harris' blatant treachery against the Duchess and Caxton's defection to the Little Army had weakened the 'peace' party. Flor and Cadet Bob Upton met a committee of ten Brothers in the Chapter house.

"You know why I am here Brothers. I have commanded my men of the castle that they are to protect the town and the abbey as well as the castle. Twice this abbey has tried to destroy the Duchess and now your friends in Lostnock cathedral are at war with the King which means at war with the Minda. So why do I order my men to protect the abbey?"

Silence.

"Tell me."

Clearing of throats but still no answer.

"Alright I will ask another question. What is your plan when two thousand man have blasted or bribed their way through the town gates or landed their own Little Army on your meadow?"

A brother spoke "We expect them to respect the church's property."

"What's your name Brother?"

"Dawson."

"Brother Dawson do you realise what that sounds like to me?"

"Er – Complacency?"

"No. Complicity. Will you have ale ready for your friends attacking the town but sparing the abbey? That's what it sounds like to me."

There was an awful silence.

"Speak up Dawson."

"I understand your worry Mr. Flor."

"So should I eject you from the town as traitors?"

"No Mr. Flor..."

"Carry on Brother Dawson. Look! Cadet Upton has a sword and knife and me likewise. We're going to show them to you. Look!" Eight edges carried a message of bloody death. "What if troops who had seen their friends killed came in this room now. How many of you would live another minute? Tell me Dawson."

"Er – None."

"These blades are keeping you safe. Prayers won't work will they Dawson?"

"I suppose not."

"I'm not prepared to allow any brother to remain here who will not pledge his life to the lives of others in Bartonbry. Those that won't may leave in peace but never let me or any other Bartonbry citizen see your face this side of hell."

In the quiet Bob whispered to Flor.

"Good idea – Say it."

"Brothers, you need a leader. God is your shepherd and you are his sheep but what when the wolf comes?"

Flor added "Mass is in an hour or so. The town will be there. Let us settle this matter straight afterwards in public. Your abbot of the moment will swear loyalty to everybody in the town on behalf of you all. Is that sense? You must help yourselves is that clear? – Dawson?"

"Yes Mr. Flor."

"Do you all say that is clear?"

"Yes" came from all round.

Flor made to depart. "My goodness you are hard work brothers! If you don't elect an abbot in the next hour then the previous abbot's son will inherit the office! That'll brighten things up eh!"

Bob added "Please Brothers, as God is my witness, Mr. Flor wishes for business not mischief."

'Mischief' sparked Flor's memory of Lucky and Arthur lampooning the Abbot. 'Prayers' sprung to mind. "Dawson! Give us a quick prayer. We need all the help we can get!"

[Saturday evening - Bartonbry]

The news of the bloodbath at Lostnock reached Bartonbry late on Saturday afternoon. Flor summoned Bob Upton and instructed him to see that the curfew was enforced.

"Let it be known that the castle the town and the abbey stand together. I haven't said how well you did on Thursday night. You arranged a meal for a prisoner and priest then got the inns to provide food for Bartonbry's little army. You'll be a very dangerous enemy Bob."

"Thank you sir. But I can't stop the other rumours."

"What. About the huge army sent to raze Bartonbry to the ground?"

"Yes. It gets bigger by the hour."

"I reckon any revolt will try against Lostnock now they know the Duchess is there and they have a good reason for revenge. We must be alert but all we have to do is shut the gates, man the walls and wait a fortnight for the King to march over the hills to put the uprising down. It might be tense but we could last out a siege."

"What if the abbey is treacherous?"

"What would you do? Suppose the abbey were secretly encouraging the enemy camped outside the walls what would you do?"

"Burn the Abbey and execute the traitors."

"Then what would happen?"

"Nothing."

"The enemy would see their allies killed and be able to call up many lords who had not taken sides as a result of the outrage. Then if they breached the town walls they wouldn't show any mercy."

"Oh."

"That's probably what has happened at Lostnock. They must be worried about a backlash. There's nothing we can do to help them."

"It's not a nice feeling is it Mr. Flor."

"We must face it Bob. Little Arthur will keep people's spirits up. He is the spirit of the new Bartonbry."

"Should I ride out with him in the mornings?"

"No. Bartonbry is sticking it's chin up and standing alone. I'm sure Arthur's bravery will be a lesson for the rumourers who see an army behind every tree."

"That's very clever Mr. Flor."

"Will you visit Father Farthing for me simply to say that I'm sorry to hear about the catastrophe at the cathedral and that I will still be protecting the abbey to the last. Oh. Now they have a leader, try and find his strengths and weaknesses, he may be as useless as Scamson."

Without a doubt Bartonbry missed the duchess. She was rightfully theirs and lending her to Lostnock when they too could be attacked was a favour verging on folly. Flor had learned the secret of delegation and radiating benign confidence without appearing arrogant. He desperately wished Brock was there to share responsibility. Still, the abbey under temporary-abbot Father Farthing were cooperating. They had decided the brothers themselves would see to the defence of the abbey such as they could while the lay brothers would be a company of fifty to stand together with the townsfolk. Some of them had fighting skills, some would learn to carry a pike without being too much of a danger to those around them and some would simply 'be useful'. Luckily the townsfolk between them knew how to carry arms.

[Monday evening - Bartonbry]

Perce and the cadets Parrick and Rouse returned on Monday with a dozen horses including a fine-looking piebald Stallion for Minda.

"When I seed 'im in Rock'm market I knowed why 'e's there. Too full of hisself – too much of an 'andful. I say to myself I say 'Perce the duchess will like an 'orse in 'er colours she can tame.' Give 'er an intrest like. We already taught im a couple lessns and 'e'll be right perky like a good 'ound."

"What about the boys. How were they?"

"They started rocky like 'cos they spy a good un and praise it – I arsk you! Then the dealer 'e say 'look at this fine coat' or summat and they'd forget everything else. I told em. I shewed em. 'S a game of wits with the dealer. I knows most uf 'em. 'Arsk the dealer about hisself and where 'e's been first. Youm gotta make them trade on their repute. Then you can tell 'im what you want – big, small, sturdy, safe, young, mature and let 'im try one on you. Then you can find faults – Evry 'orse 'as faults Mr. Flor – and you pull the price down or thank 'im and move on."

"Are you pleased with them Perce?"

"Yes. We got a good crop for what we need. Specially the piebald Thunder."

"I meant were you pleased with the cadets."

"Yes. They'll make good 'orsemen. But there's one thing that worry me Mr. Flor. They be right attentive and looked after me right well when we was attacked but/"

"/Attacked! How?"

"First day. We was on foot as we 'adn't brought any yet and we was finding our companions interesting. Parrick was just telling us about 'is father's new mansion building in Melbun – You wouldn't think Flor of the things these rich people/"

"/Just tell me what happened."

Perce took a moment to get to the important part of the story "Oh yes well there we was, as I say, putting God's fresh air to good use when what should we come acrost but a man adjusting his pack and 'e joins us as he's going to Rockham too. Within a minute Rouse arsked 'im something innocent and – those whistle signals are good aren't they. What was it? Low then high for danger. They hadn't told me that then so I was surprised to be pushed into the 'edge by Parrick leaving the traveller on the road. Rouse didn't trust 'im so Parrick gave me 'is knife while they scout ahead. Something was obvious to them and their bows were strung and ready in a moment – That's funny – them carrying bows and needing them?"

"How many?"

"Two."

"How were they armed?"

"I don't know."

"What happened?"

"Well as I said there I was all wonderin in the 'edge. The traveller lying on the ground on pain of death then the lads scampered off there was shouting then the traveller got up and tried to attack me but I'd guessed 'e might and pushed a thorn branch at him as he came at me – see I'd put the knife to good use didn't I Mr. Flor – 'e couldn't hurt me through prickles."

"Yes Perce. Very clever of you." Flor instantly regretted his sarcasm.

"That was a clever thing to do Perce. I'd never have thought of it. You've taught me something and I thought I knew it all. Now continue."

"So there I was when 'e got up. I didn't know which way 'e's gonna go but he came for me so – as I said – I gave him a face full of thornbush. Then 'e tried to run away but managed two paces before stumbling to his knees. Do you know? Do you know Mr. Flor? I 'onestly thought 'e'd just tripped but then I saw the arrow in his back. Then another. He tried to crawl away but the boys got him in the end. They was three of the soldiers dismissed from the Little Army."

"So all in all you're pleased with the cadets Perce."

"Yes. They'll make good 'orsemen."

"Well thank you. I'm sure Minda will be grateful for Thunder."

"When will she be back?"

"We don't know. You've heard she's dealing with trouble in Lostnock but that could take weeks to calm down. Can you tell me if horses can be taken on the river barges?"

"I've seen them on a ferry but only ones that are used to it."

"Could you find out for me. Get the cadets to help you."

At last Flor's 'something left undone' came back to him. "You said you were worried about the cadets. Something worried you?"

"Oh yes. Don't let 'em play cards. When we get to Rock'm we report the attack and where to find the bodies and 'and over their purses to the Reeve. 'Oh dear he say' /"

"/What's the worry with the boys?"

"I took all their reward money off them that night without cheating. The next night they insisted on winning it back but that was another ten shillings to me. I'm very happy with your cadets but don't let 'em out with money."

Little Arthur felt brave each morning going alone for his ride to see if there were enemies at the gates. Some people, worried for his safety, thought to join him but Flor put a stop to that.

"If there is a force waiting to capture Arthur they will capture you too. If you wish please take another gate and ride a mile alone in another direction.

"But he is afraid."

"He may be a bit nervous but you are the one who is afraid. How will your company help him? You will see an enemy in every bush. Now are you going to take another gate?"

"Erm – What happens if there is an enemy?"

"What do you think?"

"They'll kill me."

"Really? Why?"

"Because they're the enemy. That's what enemies do."

"Don't be silly. You would be captured and held for ransom. They would ask you questions about our defences of course, you must be prepared for

that. Tell them the Duchess will be extremely cross if she finds any of her people have been treated with disrespect."

"I've heard what happened to Lord and Lady Ruswell."

"What story have you heard?"

"Her Grace slit their throats in bed then made the servants homeless."

"I know what actually happened. It was a lot more savage than that. If you get captured say to them if they meet nice smiling girls from Bartonbry they should agree with them without question."

"Girls!"

"Nine dead between them while you were safe here. So you and your friends are volunteering to do dawn patrols for the town? Is that right?"

"Er – Yes."

"Thank you. Can I trust you all not to take any weapons with you?"

"What? No weapons? Are you mad?"

"Who do you think you are going to fight? A frightened old woman or fifty soldiers?"

"Um. I see what you mean. Weapons won't be much use. But! Bartonbry must show it is armed and ready and keen to fight Mr. Flor."

"No. We will show that fighting is a chore that we will do with the least effort as we might brush a spider away. If puppies keep nipping we will give them a kick and carry on with more important things."

[Tuesday - Bartonbry]

When the cadets arrived by barge late on Tuesday Flor wondered what Minda would do. Feast and finery. She'd show them off. "Who wants to feast and get drunk in the town tonight my boys?" He asked. "Washed. Best suits. No weapons. Inspection at seven in the main hall. The barber will be taking your beards off too and some of you need a hair cut. I'm pleased to see you. Your holiday will be over by breakfast tomorrow so make the most of tonight."

Then Flor called for Tomlyn. "It's your job to see the castle trades fairly. There's going to be good trade for one of the inns tonight. They will feed our cadets and I want the townsfolk to welcome them back as well. Make your choice and promise the others they will get similar in future."

"Perce spent more than I'd expected on horses."

"I trust him to get value for money Francis. Prices go up in times of uncertainty and demand. See! I've been learning from the cadets. It's useful. I want to be a cadet one day."

"Education is too good for you serf." jested Tomlyn. Flor understood it as a jest. "What about pot-boy Arthur? We're educating him. If him why not the other pot boys?"

"And girls!" Said Tomlyn. "You know what Minda is like. Equal shares for the girls."

"Did you hear what Rachel and Maggie did?"

"Yes. I read the letter. I daren't tell anyone."

"Did Perce tell you about being ambushed Francis?"

"No. What happened?"

"Rouse and Parrick killed three men who were trying to ambush him on the way to Rockham horse market. Soldiers who we'd decided were too bad to use in the Little Army."

"With twenty pounds on him! Have you asked the cadets?"

"Not had a chance yet Francis. I wonder why are they trying to keep it quiet? I don't like secrets."

"Perce is a bit of his own law Flor."

"I trust him. He'll put me right."

"But what is he up to?"

"You're very suspicious Frances."

"Hmm. Yes I am. I see favours everywhere now."

"And you're assumed to be taking favours yourself even though I am sure you're not."

"Why are you sure I'm not?"

"Because you know Minda would flay you to death herself."

"It's true. But the temptation is there. It doesn't matter how much I say no everybody assumes that's because I'm taking a bribe from somebody else and they just offer more."

Flor had been brought up to think as part of a close team. This was not in the woods of Trowstead but his world was now a lot bigger. Now he was the leader. What would Minda do? She'd do something about weakness. "I know Francis! I'll appoint – no you appoint – cadets to be apprentice Tomlyns who could be bribed. We'll play a game with the blatant bribers. We'll teach the cadets to lead on then get the bribers to our court and make them hand over a fraction to the cadets and get a

friendly warning. Then make the cadets – Hey I can see why Minda is sometimes so silly! Everything makes silly Bartonbry sense. We make the cadets do a proper bargain with the traders and make them deliver. That way the cadets learn what cheating is."

"Everyone knows what cheating is Flor."

"I don't. I know I hate it."

"It's everywhere."

"Puddles in the road are everywhere but you don't have to step in them."

"You do if the road has been left unmended."

"But the Duchess doesn't let that happen to her roads – if you see what I mean."

"How do the puddles appear then Flor?"

"Naturally I suppose."

"It's human nature to form puddles of corruption. I can stand against it but rain always falls and there's no road that doesn't have a puddle."

"We must clear the ditches then."

"Agreed Flor. How?"

"By making bribes – humn – turn into delivering something extra."

"Something extra?"

"Something everyone can be proud of. Instead of a present to you the job gets a higher priority or more than the minimum contracted is delivered."

"Time is short if I'm to get this feast in the town going. I understand you but the details are vague. I know what saints feel like by denying all their pleasures."

"But you're not. You have a nice widow and business to marry."

"It's a distraction I admit. And I hear Mary has been distracting you. I hope Agnes doesn't find out."

"Between the two of us. Agnes is a lonely girl but Mary is a mother-to-be."

"What! Already. By God's bones you're quick!"

"Not actually a mother to be. But like Doreen thought you and Paul and Lucky should be married and become steady family men so Mary is catching me. She says I will be the Earl of somewhere one day and I'd need a family of my own to love as my own private love that belonged to nobody else."

"Shall I give you an apprentice cadet to help you out there Flor?"

Flor was confused but conscious of that most serious jesting between men that is the signature of close-woven friendship.

15 Recovery

Things turned out much as Mr. Chris had predicted. Between Brand and Lucky terrorising the country south of Lostnock and lords waiting for somebody else to raise a flag to follow the rebellion fizzled out. Now that the Duchess was prepared and the King was slowly waking up to his neglect it was too late to achieve anything by fighting. The Dowager Duchess of Trest couldn't bring herself to surrender to Minda but she let it be known she had left for Melbun to declare her loyalty to the King in person. Wherever there was a danger of 'Minda's knife' black and white appeared on houses and hedgerows using whatever materials were available. Baron Porlick hadn't really expected all the troops promised for his attack on Bartonbry to appear but even his expectations weren't met. When news of Lord Ruswell's fate spread there were more excuses. He hung on knowing that each day meant Bartonbry was better prepared and hardly likely to be defeated, but hoping that his presence lurking two hours march away would be helpful by distracting forces from Lostnock. After giving up and sneaking home he was served an ultimatum to deliver five hundred pounds to the town of Bartonbry for the offence threatening it. His backers were just as shifty about contributing to this as they had been to supply men but when he got a letter a week before the deadline to say Minda would either send Jed and his army or two teenage girls to teach him manners the fine was paid. A postscript asked if he had a handsome son with nice curly side whiskers waiting to inherit? – If so the girls would be along anyway to see for themselves!

At the suggestion of the Black Team Jed's little army concentrated on appearances. Looking strong and efficient meant the enemy ran away. He was allowed to take them on a tour that ended at Lostnock under supervision so that he and the Blue team might learn the practicalities of taking an army on the road and to remind the lords of the country that the King could reach them. The army tried some experiments with loading armed men into ships but unlike the trip from Bartonbry they would need horses and supplies. It would be something for cadets would work on later so they would know better in future.

The Black Team collected a strengthened Maggie from Lostnock, rode to Ravengap and vanished! The boys had found a cargo for Brian going to Lanconia and they would go with him. They asked the Lanconian ambassador for permission which was given immediately. Then they asked how they might learn the language and were given Jean Espice for an afternoon each day. They wrote to Minda asking for permission and asked the girl's fathers for money in secret. When the freight began arriving at the quay ready for loading they let Xavier know they were going but in secret. He chose James as his agent, making it clear they were not to upset anybody, not to use their weapons except in emergency and come back when called. He was given names of merchants established in the main Lanconian towns and a letter of introduction to the ambassador at the Lanconian court.

The King's ambassador-at-home interviewed them.

"We know you will cause a stir. All sorts of rumours about your bloodthirsty murders are everywhere. In both our country and theirs there are people who see profit in war so be careful. We know the duchess sees profit in friendship and trade so let that be your guide. I'm sure she would want you to display the very best face of Bartonbry. In recognition of the service you have given him, and which he hopes you will continue to give, the King makes a gift of ten pounds to each of you to start your peaceful and profitable trading careers." He continued "Xavier tells me you are clever and resourceful. If we should ever be at war again we will need clever and resourceful people who know who our friends and enemies are, who to trust and who to bribe. We are not at war. We have every intention of avoiding it so use this trip to make friends not intrigue."

Jane asked "Please sir, would you keep our whereabouts secret. We will write but by the time we get to Lanconia we won't be the Black Team as people might recognise us but harmless merchant's children sent away to grow up like the cadets that were given to Minda."

"So long as you keep clear of mischief it is alright I suppose – but heaven help you if rumour gets around that you are on a secret mission." The ambassador-at-home had a request. "I have a son your age. He is a handful and I would like him to grow up. He missed out on the cadet school because he was ill at Christmas. I wonder if he should go with you?"

This was cold water! Rachel said "I will interview him now on our behalf and let you know in an hour. We leave tonight."

For Brand the only times for fighting were attack at night and defence in the day. He and Lucky together would take two dozen men at a time on a two night trip out from Lostnock making the most of the moon. They looked on these expeditions as training because it soon became clear nobody was going to pick a fight with them. They did frighten a few lords by distracting guards then finding a way in. It is very unsettling to be woken in the middle of the night by armed men demanding that you display the black and white colours of the Duchess within the hour, then to have the intruders vanish into the untrustworthy night as if it was a bad dream.

The new sheriff of Lostnock and Minda debated how to stand-down the citizens without letting them feel it had all been a waste of time. They agreed that there was still a small danger but if the gates could be held for half an hour the citizens could form up for organised defence. Minda was getting tired of guessing and waiting so they agreed on a proclamation. *To the best of our knowledge the threat to Lostnock is now over. Thanks to the hard work of the citizens of Lostnock we were the Lion which no rebel would dare to attack. The first steps in an organised defence force have been made. The Duchess cried to see how unprepared the town was. She has summoned the King to regain his castle and review the safety of the town. From the zeal and honest efforts of its citizens the Duchess hopes Lostnock will take responsibility for defence and not leave it to unknown officers of the king to play with. To this end she heartily recommends Lostnock will show the King a determined force of volunteers when he arrives. The aldermen will arrange finance. The Sheriff will arrange training and duties for all men capable of carrying a weapon. Further the Duchess thanks the many people of Lostnock who have offered money, arms, time and words of friendship at this time. She was fortunate to happen to be in the right place at the right time to be of service to the town.*

Paul and Minda shared a grin at the last sentence. Only Minda could get away with claiming she 'happened to be passing' and have people believe her!

"I need a holiday Paul. My breakdown at Bartonbry is not really healed. In a day or less I could be in bed again. You and the others have done better without me than when I was interfering."

"You trained us. We are pleased to serve."

"But you did more than serve. Each one of you became your own leader. Think of poor Flor at Bartonbry. I write to him each day and tell him he's not the only one who's alone and we will soon be hunting the King's deer in the woods again like we did in the old days."

"When were these old days Minda?"

"Three weeks ago... ..Um you're right. A lot has happened."

"You made it happen. You tricked the rebels into showing their hand before they were ready."

"Perhaps they fooled themselves. Perhaps they thought if I was captured or dead Bartonbry would surrender."

"If you were dead what would happen to the Dukedom? I have forged a deed of succession naming Arthur. It is signed, sealed and witnessed but now there's only the two of us who know it. It is in the secret compartment of my document chest at Bartonbry. I will give it to you if you ask."

After a second of outrage Minda was sorry and pleased. "Thank you Paul. You have prepared for an emergency well. When we get back we will make a genuine deed. I should have faced it before."

Minda hadn't forgotten Elizabeth. It was the love and sweet discipline of Mistress Marline at Trowstead all over again. When she had arrived at Trowstead she was about the same age as Maggie was now and Maggie had killed five people without hesitation! No wonder she was upset.

A letter for Maggie arrived from the Black Team at Melbun. They said they couldn't say much but they had met and dined and danced with the King and Queen and things were going their way. A separate note in John's hand said simply: 'I love you. Get beter. We have a grate plan. Be redy!! XXX John Taylor.' From this moment Maggie felt her head break the surface of the treacherous darkness. The dreadful swirling depths were still beneath her but now she could breathe and see a distant shore to stand on.

Now the danger to Lostnock was over Minda needed more peace than Elizabeth could give her. "Lizzie I will leave for home at eight tomorrow

morning. I can't stay here a day longer Paul. Move the household back to the house. Give the castle to the sheriff. If Brand and Lucky come back tonight tell them what I'm doing but tell them to decide for themselves what is best. I will take guards so they don't need to worry about me. Paul will you stay here until we have a clerk we can trust."

"I have already asked Mr. Bob to supply and supervise a clerk."

"Mr. Bob! That's somebody else I must say goodbye to."

"I have made a list. You have one the smiths – Two the sheriff and the town watch – Three the abbess. It might be a good idea to introduce her to the leading citizens. The nuns are quite reserved but that doesn't mean they have to be reclusive. Four Mr. Bob and the tax office – Five Elizabeth and Maggie – Six Red Ken – Seven the castle staff and guards – Eight the aldermen – Nine the remaining little army – Ten the bargemen. Also you need to decide if Lucky's mercenaries are to be employed or discharged. Lucky says they can be trusted to be loyal but maybe offer them to Mr. Bob as guards to keep them out of trouble."

"It's three o'clock now and I have to pack! Help me! I want to vanish."

"Alright. Hold my arm and we'll start now. It shows how important you are when you can't do what you want when you want."

Tom set off on foot for Lostnock. Doreen had given him plenty of money for the journey and reminded him that Minda would always love him and look after him. He'd given up worrying about getting back to work, one or two days absence was now two weeks! He could stop at forges and Agnes, a smith's daughter of course, kept him company. With Mr. Chris' drawing carefully rolled in his pack, money, love and having seen the world he felt like a king. Did kings get saddle-sores, sea-sickness and now stinging blisters on his feet!

After a couple of days in Melburn Doreen realised she had done her important job and it was time to get back to Bartonbry. Mr. Chris could officially supervise the Black Team and he was used to the ways of court and lords. She went to see Minda's country house three miles outside Melburn where the Jed's little army was finding itself. It was a palace! Huge glass windows like an abbey, lawns, gardens, a park within a park! The house had dozens of chimneys telling of dozens of heated rooms and stables three times the size of those at Bartonbry. The facade in warm stone that looked like the sort they've seen being quarried in Willows

overlooked a park and meadows where a bizarre painted pavilion, bigger than any house in Bartonbry, sat raised on a mound like a little castle on the river bank. Jed introduced Doreen to the head of the household who immediately reminded her of Francis and with that came distrust. He was another Tomlyn so that explained it. Too detached to be a steward but ideally placed to take a cut from everything. A handful of suspicious cadets would probably learn a lot of interesting things from his books! Perhaps Minda should bring her school here for the summer?

Henry reasoned that if lords had money to pay for troops they could afford taxes to build better roads. They would find it made a profit in the end but someone had to make a start which meant real money to pay for bridges, drains and harder surfaces. What did the king collect taxes for anyway? Not an army obviously! Henry calculated the work required to make a plan in his head then tried to scheme the politics. He'd better talk to Minda and Mr. Chris. They could improve the river as well. Minda might have to pay for that and charge tolls. Could he persuade Minda to lend him some cadets for three months he wondered. Minda had showed you didn't have to do everything yourself. He would learn from that.

[? poss Friday after Bloodbath - Lostnock to Bartonbry]

Next morning Minda set off from Lostnock to Bartonbry with Paul and Lizzie and a dozen mounted soldiers from the little army on guard duty. Henry, Mr. Bob, Delphia, Lucky and Brand rode with her for the first four miles. Except for Brand instead of Flor this was the same party that had set out less than five months earlier. They knew a great deal more about each other now but hard implicit trust had replaced comforting intimate optimism. They had repeatedly proved themselves as a team but every success brought more complications and individual responsibility. At the parting Delphia had luck cakes for them again, but this time she couldn't think of any special spells.

Minda addressed them. "I don't know what to do next. I'm going back to Bartonbry to rest. I need a holiday." Nobody laughed at this. "When the King has been to Lostnock I'll host a holiday for him at Bartonbry at mid-summer. Those of you living in Lostnock look after it for me. We'll meet again."

What had meant to be happy farewell kisses became an embarrassment of unstoppable tears by Minda. Lucky reacted quickly and stepped in, taking Minda by the arm.

"Come with me Minda. I'll get you to a soft bed in Bartonbry. Brand can cope without me in Lostnock. Come on. Let me help you mount." Minda allowed herself to be led, she mounted and managed to wave to the rest before Lucky whistled 'let's go!' and set off at a gallop leaving the rest standing worried and wondering.

Although a day on the road was tiring, the change and freedom was enjoyable enough to stop worrying. When they arrived in the late afternoon at Bartonbry Minda had her brave face on. Everyone in the town and castle wanted to welcome her. She made herself ride through the town slowly to acknowledge the greetings of growing crowd. Little Arthur rode up in his general's outfit. Rather precariously he stood up in the saddle and shouted to the crowd. "See! I told you she'd come back! Unbelievers!"

Behind Arthur Flor showed himself to Minda and smiled. Brock, the cadets, Doreen and now Minda and Lucky. It had been a relief to see them arrive, but no matter how hard he wished, nothing was quite like it was before. Richards the builder had lectured him on the dangers of using unseasoned timber in haste. Now he knew how the green wood felt as it dried out and lost its springiness. He was just a follower and three years older than Minda so if it had been hard on him she must be absolutely exhausted.

There was no sense trying to continue riding as the well-wishers and friends that needed a hug encircled them. Half a dozen proud bands of citizens hastily formed up with their weapons ready to be inspected for smartness and enthusiasm. Arthur introduced each group to Minda with mostly fictional accounts of their part of the defence of Bartonbry and praise for individuals based on their sympathy for little boys who wanted treats. Minda couldn't bear the thought of these handful of pathetic amateurs trying to defend her town against a real army. In her mind she saw enthusiastic corpses swept into bloody tangles because they believed in her. Lucky and Paul soon found their attention distracted by their lady friends. Flor's hand held Mary's. Brock and Eve were arm in arm watching from the edge of the square at the happiness of their town. Doreen had her arms around two cadets.

She mounted her horse and addressed the crowd. "Thank you all. I'm proud of Bartonbry. The whole Kingdom has been taught a lesson by our town. We may not be the most important, we may not be the biggest but we are the one everyone is talking about." Brock knew the value of rousing the troops and called for three cheers. Minda continued. "We will soon get a chance to welcome the King and other important people. They want to see for themselves how a depressed and broken-down town can come back to life. I have been on the road all day and at war for weeks so I must eat and rest now." It was Arthur's turn to call for cheers. "Come on Arthur" she said "all my menfolk are busy. Take me home."

As Arthur rode beside Minda to the castle he said. "I'm learning reading. Can we read a story tonight?"

"Yes let's do that. I have nothing else to do and nobody to talk to."

– END –

One of these days Minda will become spymistress for the Kingdom. This is what she was supposed to do in the first book but interesting things happened before we could get there. We might have to wait a little longer as interesting things are bound to happen to the Black Team.

Peter Fox

