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The
Black Team
escapes

by
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Sequel to Minda falters
Volume 4 in Minda series

Finished

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This edition is the third printing. Almost every page has been modified since the second so there must be a few more warts. I'm particularly interested in whether the *catch-up* section works for those who haven't read the previous books.

Glossary

Jewel	Precious ornaments. Gold and silver as well as stones.
Magnate	Very wealthy and powerful person
Martinmas	November 11 th
Quiver	Backpack / pocket for arrows.
Sumpter horse	Pack horse for carrying belongings etc.
Vielle	Mediaeval cello-ish instrument.

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 'Trupt'. 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/ /Sssh! Here he comes..."

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1 The story so far

This is the fourth book in the Minda series.

- 1 Minda grows up from an abandoned crippled child to a clever and determined fighter. At the end she is eighteen and has organised the death of her brother...
- 2 ...So she can inherit the Dukedom of Avel. But to do so she has to deal with nasty enemies in the Abbey. She uses guile and charm to win the hearts of a depressed town. Once her castle is safe she goes to the King and 'ambushes him with charm'. Finally she is given twenty noble teenagers for a sort of 'boot camp'.
- 3 Minda collapses from strain of overwork and no close family. Her servants manage well without her to deal with the cadets and shambles of the small army she's supposed to be training. There is a deadly half-hearted rebellion to test the King's resolve and beat-down Minda. The cadets do well to support her and one group of cadets, the Black Team, are involved in brutal violence. At the end the King realises they are the edge of Minda's sword and how much he should have trusted her instead of dithering. So that the Black Team's fearsome reputation for atrocities can be forgotten they're going to be allowed abroad for a holiday disguised as noble children with strict instructions to 'keep out of trouble.'

Catch-up with places and people

Minda who became the **Duchess of Avel** at Christmas has given the town of **Bartonbry** a future by developing the economy. One of her projects is the cadet school which consists of seventeen boys and three girls mostly from noble families. They're learning to work as a team, 'hedgerow fighting', reading, writing, estate management and accounting, business finance and law. She has turned them from aimless annoying teenagers into confident youngsters with the whole world before them. In the rebellion of the early summer they proved themselves.

Minda has special boots to help her walk which are now very fashionable. They have a pocket in the side which can be used to sheath an 'Avel knife' which is modelled on the one Minda forged for herself. Minda learned blacksmithing as a child and is built for it! She may be ugly but knows how to win absolute loyalty and in particular turn enemies or people with problems into friends and reliable assistants.

The town of **Lostnock** is the largest trading town of the kingdom of **Briton**. Minda owns a lot of property there and is respected as the most powerful person by the rich, the merchants and down to the criminal classes who she knows how to use. The capital of Briton is **Melbun**. The King is a ditherer but knows the determination of Minda without complications of politics will be a good way to clean out dark corners of lawlessness and corruption in his kingdom. He is in no doubt about the sharpness and fearlessness she has put into the cadets in the past five months. Due to the charming 'Bartonbry welcome' the ambassadors of **Lanconia** and **Italy** are now aware the duchess is keen for trade and has no time for xenophobia. Apart from the Black Team, the only cadet to return to Melbun so far is a worrying example, **Jed**, the Archbishop's son who was a lumbering and timid clerk destined for holy-orders but is now fit and strong and destined to become a knight much to the horror of his father.

The **Black Team** consists of Lord Weston's daughter **Jane**, two runaways from merchant families **Rachel** and **Maggie**, and two orphans from the Melbun quays **John** and **James**. They have shown themselves to be resourceful and diligent and are being trained to be spies or agents, taught Italian and deception by exiled Italian **Allesandro** as well as fighting and business. Their future arrived too quickly when during the

rebellion Maggie killed five and Rachel three which has given the team a reputation for appearing out of the dark to commit atrocities.

In Melbun the Ambassador-at-home (we might call him 'Foreign secretary'), is working with the King's chief intelligencer, **Xavier**, to direct the Duchesses' energy in useful directions. The Black Team have already shown their strength and now might be a good time to send them away so the wounds of the rebellion can heal and let them have a holiday to explore.

From the end of volume 3

The boys had found a cargo for Brian [a ship captain they know] going to Lanconia. 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. James was given names of merchants established in the main Lanconian towns and a letter of introduction to the Briton Ambassador at the Lanconian court.

The Ambassador-at-home interviewed them. "We know you'll 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'll continue to give, the King makes a gift of twenty pounds to each of you to start your peaceful and profitable trading careers." He continued "Xavier tells me you're 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's alright I suppose – but Heaven help you if rumour gets around that you're on a secret mission." The Ambassador-at-home had a request. "Alefred my son is your age. 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."

2 New blood - New horizons

The Ambassador-at-home brought his son into the parlour. Rachel had already decided that taking him with them would earn a lot of goodwill with one of the King's most important advisors. They were only going for a month so he shouldn't be a worry to look after so long as he wasn't totally undisciplined and caused trouble. "This is my son Alefred. Rachel Whin is going to interview you to see if you can join their Black Team."

As the Ambassador showed no sign of leaving Rachel said "Please Sir would you leave us in private. – Unless you wish to come as well sir?"

"I think I would like to come but not at this time. Thank you for asking and I'll leave you youngsters to it."

When he'd left Rachel said "Hello Alefred. Please sit down." Rachel remained standing. "I'm afraid we're not going to go fighting or spying. Is that alright?"

"Miss Rachel I have spoken with my friend Jed, and want to be like him. I have trained hard at sword school and with my uncles."

"There's no need to call me Miss Rachel. I'm not your mistress."

"But you killed all those men at Trexton. You must be so brave."

"I am brave it's true. We're all brave. Are you?"

"I don't know miss."

Rachel didn't believe in fighting fair. She stood behind him and gently put her hands on his shoulders. "If you had to hold a doorway against three men while I escaped out of the back would you do that."

"Yes miss I would."

"Hmm. I don't know. I think perhaps I'd let them in knowing I had prepared for this and with two of us against three the odds are overwhelming in our favour."

"Two of us against three of them is not in our favour."

"Your mathematics is sound Alefred but I'll explain why it's better to lure your enemies to their deaths rather than let them lurk another time." She

twisted his hair in her fingers. "What was your illness at Christmas that stopped you coming to the selection day?"

"Er. I wasn't ill. It was an excuse." Rachel dropped her arms. "I wanted to go but my father wouldn't let me. He made up the excuse."

"I know how you felt Alefred. I ran away from home to join. Show me your palms." She looked at them then showed hers to him. "My hands are tough. Feel them." He cautiously did as instructed. "Blood-stained too. Scratched by crawling through hedges, hiding in wet ditches, bruised by collecting firewood, bitten by midges. What have you been doing for the last four months?"

"Training to be a lawyer."

"Do you know Richard Risket?"

"Yes miss."

"What's he like?"

"They call him 'snail' because he's not very quick."

"I like him. I'm staying under his roof – except not tonight because we are off at dark. I'm sure he will be pleased."

"I shouldn't have said that miss. I'm sorry."

"No that's really good news Alefred. Just what I wanted to hear."

"Why?"

"I don't have time to explain. Now why do you think your father has changed his mind about you being a cadet?"

"It was Jed miss. He was such a good example."

"Kills his own father! That's a funny example?"

"Er. Um. The Archbishop was a millstone round the King's neck. Jed cut it free."

"We'll talk about the King later Alefred."

"Jed also made friends with the ambassadors of Lanconia and Italy. My father says I should forestall Jed by going abroad first and making friends in high places where it really matters."

"Oh I see. Parli italiano?"

"Sì, parlo italiano e leggere e scrivere."

"What about Lanconian?"

"I can speak and read and write it also. My father made me spend a thousand tedious hours learning. Also some Germanic. And Latin of course."

Rachel held his hands and rubbed her thumb over his palms. That would do for capturing by romance. She looked straight into his eyes as if stabbing them and kept the silence going. He was at her mercy. Harmless and captured. He would do. Now in language he could understand. "My orders are to be obeyed without question. Is that clear?"

"Yes miss."

"First order is you'll call me Rachel."

"Yes Rachel."

She smiled and released the tension with a happy grin. She sat down then conspired with him about what he should and shouldn't pack and wear. "You can have one sumpter horse but we'll probably have just our road clothes and basic court clothes."

"Shall I wear my new Avel boots?"

"Yes of course."

"My father says there just stupid fashion and no good for riding or walking or anything."

"Fathers don't know everything."

"He doesn't know I've got them."

"Have you got a knife for the pocket as well?"

"Yes. Two! With silver hilts. Do you want to see them? They call them the Duchess' tongue – With black and white enamel in the hilt."

Rachel pulled out her knife. It was dull, scratched, pitted, had a kink and not a spark of ornament. "When you grow up you can have one like mine." She saw him wilt. Too late she remembered boys had pride in weapons. "Well done for making a start the best you knew how. We'll soon show you how to fight and I'm looking forward to you teaching me Lanconian."

After the waves of uncertainly, triumph and wondering what all the fuss was about during the last two weeks, Minda's town house was about to return to a state of barely occupied normality. Raysell and Richard Risket paid a nominal rent to please Minda by having the house lived-in but it was a dozen times too big for a newly-wed couple. Minda couldn't wait for the autumn news of a baby Risket. Rachel told Richard about the 'snail' epithet. "Minda says it's really good to be considered stupid. Foolish people will assume you're a fool and not a threat."

"No Rachel. I know I'm not very clever. All the other lawyers run me ragged."

"Alefred said you were slow not stupid."

"I'll tell you a secret because I know you wouldn't tell. At night I say the case to Raysell and she sees where the key is and then it's simple."

"But Richard, don't you see? It's because you explain it so clearly to Raysell and then when she makes a suggestion while half-listening as she's doing her stitching you have everything already in your mind."

"Um. Will you promise not to tell Minda?"

"No." Rachel knew the formula. The Black Team had spent a week exploring the world of 'pretend' and 'excuse' at Willows with Allesandro.

"Oh. I suppose I'll have to trust you Rachel."

"Of course you can trust me Richard. Does our lord and mistress expect us to spoil her rosy view of her friends unless we have to? Of course not. Go on. Tell me the secret!"

"Raysell makes me tell her everything, then decides, often before I've finished telling, then explains, writes the summary paragraph and checks I have filled in the details afterwards."

"When I get back I will find your missing shoe and get a smith to fit it." They both knew who the smith would be. There was only one smith in their lives.

Leaving Melbun

Jed and Alefred's father came to say goodbye to Alefred. Jane and Rachel had their parents to give last minute kisses. Maggie's parents had looked after John and James. The brothers had discovered the joys of having a mother and father that cared or were in a position to care. Four months at Minda's castle had shown them the value of being respectful to everyone and especially the bonus of being loved by women simply by being nice to them. Already they were reaping their harvest. Unknown to the brothers they had climbed from gutter to 'possible son-in-law'. The mothers had questioned Jane and Rachel about their killings and Maggie's as well but that was one of those rivers that might never be crossed. The unstoppable power of Minda's spirit was used to 'make everything right'.

This wasn't the first time the Black Team had organised their own missions, and on their scale of importance this was another no-risk, just

for the fun-of-it expedition. The tricky bits were the organisation which they hadn't had to think much about before so that was a good thing to learn. They had to pick Maggie out of her misery at Lostnock and at least give her a holiday in a warm country surrounded by friends. Now they had to deal with politics and carry a stranger who could be anything. Still, they didn't have to make him one of the team.

This was the first time they had been allowed to go on a mission the grown-ups knew about without an adult. The assumption had been so great that they had contemplated asking Mister Chris who had been such good and interesting guide from Lostnock to join them. A few minutes discussion brought them to the conclusion that the grown-ups were watching what they would do. In one light Alefred looked like he was there to spy on them, but as Rachel pointed out they were not getting up to a single drop of mischief so why should they worry if they were being spied upon.

The Black Team liked the idea of leaving after dark for a number of reasons. Firstly nobody else would. Being different is part of being a teenager. They were still only sixteen. Secondly special permission or money or 'friends' were normally needed to leave a town by the gates during the hours of darkness. As about half of Melbun was outside the town walls and the curfew hadn't been enforced for as long as people could remember this was not an issue tonight. Thirdly they wanted to just vanish! That was the whole purpose of the expedition. The Black Team would cease to exist. Killing nine people in one day between the girls was a record they didn't want to boast about. Maggie had collapsed with shock the next day and was still resting tearfully at Lostnock. They were going to collect her and make her better. Jane Weston wasn't too proud of her botched stalk and kill of an assassin in Lostnock. Rachel was equally proud and ashamed that one of her three deaths would have been sufficient. What was odd was that the ripples of news of their killings seemed to get bigger not smaller as they spread. Fourthly anybody trying to follow their movements would be trapped or shaken-off in the dark. Fifthly it made it easier to spread false reports of where they were last seen. Sixthly when you're travelling at night it's so much more exciting. Us and them. Our own world of bravery and trust. Their hoofbeats, hurrying messengers, blades and arrows.

The journey to Lostnock was by the shorter route they had come by but now in daylight and they stuck to the main track. This time they stopped at inns rather than steal for their meals. They showed their

black and white Avel colours and knives at every opportunity. This road may be remote, little-used and poorly maintained but to them it was as good as any other.

From the moment of departure the boys made Alefred welcome then apologised for showing him how strict they were in their attention to detail, honesty, acceptance of their failures.

James said "We try so hard we often fail. That's why we admit it, learn, then carry on."

John said "We'll look after you. If you have a suggestion then please say it before we get into action. Then stick by us and follow the plan. In a week you'll see how we make up our minds then trust everyone else to do their part."

James said "Always ask for help and always say if you don't understand. That's an order!"

John said "We share burdens amongst those most able to carry them so you won't have much responsibility to begin with."

Jane missed Mister Chris. It was nice to be led by someone who had been the way before and made reading the country interesting. She would make a journal entry each day of things she saw that might interest him. She remembered James had shown an interest in plants thanks to Mister Chris. That would be a good thing to help him with his writing. Now she had to think. If James was making a journal for Mister Chris what might be good writing practise for John? She didn't know so they discussed it. John gave the answer almost straight away. Trade and freight. How much, how it was carried, what the cost and risk were. He would write for himself and sell the information to traders. "Thank you Jane! How clever you are."

"You're the one who came up with the answer John."

"But I didn't ask the question."

"So you could collect some information now for practise then show it to Francis Tomlyn at the castle and he'll show you how to weave your threads into a cloth."

"You're clever again Jane. There's so much to learn."

"Cheer up John. Girls like teaching boys to read and write. All we ask is a few compliments to say how beautiful our hair is."

John didn't know if he was meant to take this literally. "All I can say is that you three girls are the best a boy could ever want. If I could marry all three of you I would do it tomorrow."

"But John! A marriage offer is not the same as a kiss and a poem about our rose-red lips."

"More writing!"

Jane saw his pain "Kiss me you fool! I won't steal you from Maggie."

Jane now tackled Alefred. "What have you heard of the Black Team Al?"

"Jed says you girls are his best dreams and your boys are his worst dreams. He meant that last bit as a compliment miss."

"Call me Jane! Obey your orders or you stay at home."

"Yes Jane. Sorry Jane."

"Good. I know this is new for you but mostly we neither give nor receive orders. We plan, agree then act together. If I ordered you to stand in the middle of the road as an archery target I would expect you to obey."

"But I'd get killed!"

"Do you think I would carelessly let you get killed Al?"

"No miss/ /Jane"

"No of course not. So I have a good reason. A really very good reason. I might want to show to someone how brave and disciplined we are. What would it look like if you argued?"

"Not good Jane."

"Well done. Well done for calling me Jane. Well done for understanding. Your father wants you to be a member of our team. You want to be a member of our team. So far you're a promising candidate but we don't know much about you really. You'll be told if anyone is disappointed with your efforts to your face. Remember to ask for help. We will give you tests – easy to begin with. Some you will never be able to do unless you ask for help. Some will test your determination and are not meant to be completed. And there's one more thing about tests – Some of them are things that happen which haven't been schemed at all. We will do ambush practise but we could be attacked on this road by outlaws or remnants of rebels. If I give you an order what do you do?"

"Obey it miss. Yes I use the word 'miss' because you're my commander."

"I'm sorry Al. You must obey my order and use first names. At the next inn I may pretend to be your sister or cousin so calling me 'miss' would give the game away."

"Why?"

"Because if three noble boys arrive at an inn with sisters and cousins they might just not be the Black Team that killed three of their people a couple of weeks ago."

"Oh."

Jane called to the back ambush-guard. "Rachel! Shall we stop at that inn at Trexton where you killed those three men?"

"Let me think about it. Ask Maggie when we see her. If we do I want an army behind me but it would be good."

"You see Al we know about danger and we know how to ride it. It's fun... mostly anyway."

"Please Jane I have done lots of sword practise but the reason I call you miss is that you know it for real while I am stuck in my books. I am only guessing what you're talking about."

"Of course Al. I'm sorry I should have realised. My fault." Al was confused by this. Jane didn't believe in fighting fair either! "Now I'd like you to help James and John with their writing. I will tell you now that the first time you help them will be a disaster and I will warn them also. You'll ask for help and learn how to do it properly."

Lostnock

They planned their entrance to Lostnock. There were two hours of daylight then they must eat and have a farewell feast at Minda's town house. John would go to the home of Mister Chris to meet Maggie and get the news. James would take Al to docks to find the news. Jane would go to the Sheriff to find out about the military situation and Rachel would get the house organised. Al saw for the first time how the Black Team could split into an efficient clutch of miniature teams.

Joy! Maggie was smiling. Maggie needed to share this moment of release with Elizabeth and couldn't let her go. Elizabeth, 'Mrs Chris', had her own smiles for John and sent a servant to fetch Mister Chris from his office. Never had a betrothal been so lovingly celebrated as that afternoon. Mister Chris knew the groom and Elizabeth knew the bride and they all knew the spirit of Minda that floated the Black Team above the rest. John and Maggie clasped each other. Mister and Mrs Chris likewise with love for themselves and their new children. John explained they were disappearing for a month to Lanconia to keep out of trouble

and see what the rest of the world was like. Could they come to a small feast tonight at Minda's house? – Of course they could.

"See you then darling. Thank you for looking after her for me Mrs Mintern. See you later!"

James and Al left their horses, purses and Al's knives at Minda's house then went down to the quays. They went to the stone quay first to see if any of James' friends from the stone barges were about but drew a blank, however it gave James an opportunity to explain the magic of barges to Al. The sea-going quays were tightly packed with barrels and bales. Carts were queuing. John simply grabbed a pickpocket by the wrist then punched him once to the ground. He shouted to the whole quay "LOOK AT YOUR FRIEND." Then to Al. "Let's go this is a waste of time. We'll ask at the smiths."

"Smiths?"

"Didn't you know? Minda is one of the brothers of blacksmiths. I've seen her forge iron – It's real magic."

Jane went straight to the Watch House. "Hello Sheriff. I am Jane – Lord Weston's daughter from Minda's Black Team. I killed the assassin outside the Moot Hall while you were being made Earl of Lostnock inside. I am not here to murder or threaten. Our little team will be leaving your domain for a month and if you would like to come to a small feast tonight at Minda's you'll be very welcome."

The Sheriff was a lot wiser than most people gave him credit for. "Thank you Miss Weston. Minda has told me your deeds and of your friends. You're far too young to be doing such things." Jane kept quiet. She knew the pattern of praise. "I admit the Duchess is a terror in herself. She saved this town and I'm pleased to say I was her first conquest. But you girls! Nine instant brutal deaths! If you were a dogs I would have you killed as too dangerous."

Jane knew you should climb another rung on the ladder of commitment when you could. She slid her knife from its boot-pocket and placed it hilt first in front of him. "Here is my killing-knife. Shall I tell you a story?" She also knew that if someone is confused then lead them. "It was luck that saved me. Lucky – Do you know the mercenary Minda recruited from enemy to personal bodyguard? – He saved my life then I was so angry at being a stupid girl and not looking up I stabbed Riskin dozens of times when once in the right place would have been enough. If he'd had an accomplice I'd have been dead too. I was so stupid!"

"Killing people isn't easy miss. You got the result in the end. I praise you because I had no idea how to trap him. You did the town a favour. Just don't go looking for trouble."

Rachel played hostess that evening. The object was to reassure the adults that the Black Team were sufficiently responsible to look after themselves. The team had been drilled in politeness and taking an interest in their guests and telling them of their plans to keep journals. Their innocent intentions were not wholly believed but Jane made a little speech explaining that they wanted to put the horrible things of Black Friday behind them.

Leaving Briton

The next morning they left for the day and a half journey to Ravengap. They were accompanied by Brand, Minda's fighting tutor who was patrolling around Lostnock to train her little army with exercises. He had a small troop and would bring their horses back to Lostnock. At mid-day they passed through Trexton. The girls rode inside the others with their hoods up. They weren't afraid of being attacked but why reopen fresh wounds if they didn't have to. Brand organised ambush practise for everyone and tested Al on weapons but he couldn't make practise fun like it had been in the old days. Only last month!

Next morning the Black Team of three boys and three girls left an inn with a display of knife juggling and bows ready. Strangely they vanished. Six noble boys wearing shoes, without a weapon in sight, talking with refined Melbun accents, behaving with upper-class arrogance and immaturity arrived at Ravengap. Brian's ship was at the quay and it wasn't long before the very carefully selected minimum baggage had been sent on board and they followed. Soon Brand was sliding behind them then quickly getting smaller as the most was made of the gentle westerly wind. The routine of a ship was new to all of them. Firstly they were instructed in how to stay out of the way. Maggie asked if now was a good time for them to have a lesson in sailing. "We have learned rowing, now can we try something bigger."

They managed to get to the mouth of the river by evening but had to anchor even though the wind was fair and the stars were clear. Brian explained about tides and how they had to wait six hours until the tide was ready to take them over the sandbanks with safety. This was so

exciting! The gurgling and slapping of the sea! Really those waves were only a few inches high. All those stories of sailors were fantasy! They could enjoy the easy rocking motion of sailing. And the water really was salty!

It was still dark when they were woken by orders and noises of men heaving together. Now the deck leaned more and the ship began to surge like a horse galloping slowly with occasional splashes of spray coming over the side. The stars began to sweep in a circle as their feet went in another circle. The ship itself would wallow in a dip then rise and surge. Soon their stomachs began to worry them.

Brian called them to him. "I'm afraid that my boatswain has some worrying news. We've sprung a leak. Not a big one but would you volunteer to help with bailing?" They were soon passing buckets of bilge water from the cramped below-deck to the main hatch where a sailor threw it over the side. This carried on for what seemed like forever. The motion of the ship made it difficult to keep the buckets from slopping over so soon they were wet, and not thinking of anything else but the next bloody bucket. At last the boatswain said that would do. Brian brought them on deck where it was getting light. "Well done you have worked very hard. Is anyone sea sick?" Nobody was. "Good! That's why you've just been passing the same eight buckets round and round. Show them!" They watched as a bucket was passed up from the main hatch but instead of being thrown over the side was taken to the aft hatch and passed back down still with water in it, topped up and passed back to the team. "We give you something to take your mind off your stomachs for an hour then you've usually got used to the movement of the ship." They were silent.

Al said "My arms ache!"

Jane said "Thank you captain. Nobody likes being fooled but I would rather my arms ached than I was sick like poor Tom Watts."

During the two day voyage sea-sickness was avoided but writing in journals was a sure way to test a stomach so they stuck to learning Italian, Lanconian and how ships worked. This was adventure!

3 Orfleur welcome

By happy combination of wind and tide they arrived at the port of Orfleur on the last of the afternoon tide on their second full day. From the sea a gap in the towering land opened to an inlet possibly two hundred paces wide hemmed-in by black cliffs with jagged rocks licking their lips where they met the water. Even the ignorant Black Team could feel the tide carrying them along. So many impressive and menacing novelties! Jane made a note to describe them in her journal them for Mister Chris. A small castle stood on the top. Further in the inlet widened into a river with the main town climbing up from the busy quay. In a pocket in the hills at the top of the town was a castle unlike any they'd seen before. Smooth round towers with spires, walls with windows, beautifully proportioned gatehouse and the roof and pinnacles of a hall instead of a gaunt keep inside the walls.

When the ship was safely docked Brian took them ashore to see the Port Warden who dealt with formalities of visiting foreigners and freights. Al was given the role of leader as far as the world was concerned. Jane would be their true commander. Al, Jane and Maggie landed in their best finery as if they had been on a picnic. John, James and Rachel played the role of servants in their road clothes. When the clerk saw the papers produced by Al he politely excused himself and hurried to fetch the Warden.

"Welcome to you. I am told you're troublemakers who have been sent here to avoid trouble. You have made good time. Letters from the Ambassador and your King only arrived yesterday. I know you captain. Have they behaved on your ship?"

"They insisted on sailing it for themselves. Miss Ulex will make a good boatswain." Maggie made a little curtsey and smiled at the Warden.

"Lady Weston will make a good captain." Jane bowed stiffly. "And Miss Rachel will have every sailor in every port under her spell." She winked.

"That fits the description I have been given. I see you are not all what you seem. Don't be shocked – It's my job to spot such people. I have been told you might change your plumage. I've also been asked very nicely in those letters to see you are made welcome. I shall read you a bit from the Ambassador's letter. 'Would you make friends with these visitors as you would a shepherd's dog that will fight wolves without hurting the lambs and will lay without complaint in the snow or give good company by the fire.' Hmm. I don't seem to have a bone on me –

Oh dear – I will have to ask the Lord of the town to entertain you instead."

Rachel said "I have a thanking of you for them. Our day is warming by your good deeds." This time she made a proper polite curtsy.

"If you'll wait an hour on your ship I'm sure the Lord will invite you to his castle."

Rachel said "Your word is what we do. Sir our say is 'Bartonbry welcome'. He means to the arms of a woman – no – mama. Our school is there to where we go. She is good."

The Warden said "I have children. I would like them to see your country."

Jane said "Many years?"

"Sixteen and seventeen years."

Jane looked around but got blank looks in return. She decided for them.

"If them come they are to come home with I. Do we have a sale?"

"I will ask. I see you're trouble!" He smiled. They all smiled.

While waiting for an official invitation to the castle Rachel asked "Will Minda really have a foreign cadet school?"

"Yes of course she will." said Maggie. "She likes children who don't have homes. I want my home so badly... ..No I'm alright. Honestly."

Rachel had her arm around her already and a glare for the boys. "Heroes have to leave home Maggie and you'll be back there soon. Now you're showing the weak-kneed-ones how a simple girl broke the back of a revolt."

"I didn't." sniffed Maggie.

"You did! You started then I followed. If Maggie can do it then I thought if I try really hard I can too."

"What good did it do?"

"Don't you know! All the rebels were scared shitless of being pounced on by girls with knives so they found excuses not to join the revolt. You saved hundreds of lives in battles that never happened. You were brilliant."

"Really. No – you're making it up!"

Jane said "No she's not. Outside the walls of Lostnock everyone was so scared of the Duchess visiting them with a smile that they ran away from their houses when they saw us coming. You did that."

Rachel said "If you hadn't been so brutal we could be waiting for something to happen with some feeble truce. She would have sent us away."

Al added. "If there had been a chance that the rebels would collect themselves then the Lords of Melbun would have supported them. You know that means you stopped the King being killed?"

Maggie thought for a long time. The others respected her silence. "I suppose she taught us well. I didn't realise. Now I see I am a piece on a board being pushed around."

"Guess what" said John "It's the powerful pieces on a chess board that get the most action. You are our most powerful piece."

"No. You're just being nice to me."

James said "I'm going to be nice to you. I admit it! I'm going to be nice to you because you deserve every bit of niceness. Oh and you're strong like Brian's ship. It's because of you that we're here. Give me a kiss." They all gave Maggie a kiss.

Jane said "We know you look after us. You were the one who made us a cloak of fear. It's a bit too frightening for ourselves even so we had to escape and now look we are making friends for Minda."

John said "Friends to trade with, friends to enjoy and friends not to fight."

James added "And most of all friends to marry." He got some funny looks. "Minda needs to marry doesn't she. Think about it. She wants a family more than anything else. Perhaps we can find her a prince?" The cliff of blunt truth silenced them. The constant motion of the menace of the rocks at the bottom worried Jane.

Duke of Orfleur

As they climbed towards the Duke of Orfleur's castle they saw the logic of the town. The narrow river mouth between cliffs guarded by a brutish fort. A haven where trading ships could shelter from storms and attack. meant profit to build a castle for show as much as defence.

James said "I'm glad we came. It's so many marvels."

Al said "The Duke of Orfleur is a very important man. A lot of Briton trade comes through here."

James said "So we need to make him be nice to us or he'll lose his port taxes."

Jane said "Stop that! We are here to show we're friendly and keen to be more friendly."

Rachel said "Keep out of trouble. You boys always try to get an advantage. Today's advantage is we are honoured guests not terriers."

"Sorry Jane." said James.

"Sorry." said Al.

Maggie said "I'm frightened I don't know how to be noble."

Rachel said "Leave the swearing to me you tart! While you're quaffing pints of best wine I'll be lucky to get half a turnip for my supper."

Everyone laughed at this jest.

Maggie replied "Servants today! You'll have your half turnip and like it."

John said "Beggin' your pardon miss. I'll steal a whole turnip for her."

Trying not to giggle Jane said "Shssh! Try to stay out of trouble. You servants will be just as confused as us. It's only for a day or two before we get on the road but if we are odd we will confuse any enemies long enough for us to spot them."

Al, Jane and Maggie were shown to guest apartments and soon met again with the others and castle servants to wash, shave and dress them after their voyage. Then the three of them were shown into a magnificent parlour with large windows where the Duke and his son were eager to meet these highly recommended children. Both were dressed in pale blue silk suits edged with lace. Al had heard of the Lanconian fashion for these 'trouser-suits' and wondered how much they cost. Maggie wondered how difficult they were to keep clean. Jane thought the son looked an effeminate hopeful but the Duke himself was a proper man who treated himself to a little bit of luxury for fun. He had a shiny red face like an apple with twinkling eyes and a cheerful smile sitting on a curly white beard. The son, about twenty-five, looked like strong wind had pushed parchment over his features stretching his forehead and ears back over his cheek-bones.

"Greetings to you little ambassadors. My best respect your lord the King and your lady the Duchess of Avel."

Al was spokesman "Thank you Sir. You have already been too kind in making us welcome when we could have stayed at an inn."

"If important people send you then I must look after you."

"Our King and our Duchess didn't send us Sir. We begged them to let us come and they gave up arguing. What a wonderful castle!"

Jane added "In Briton our castles are dull and their owners dull. I see Sir you are beautifully dressed."

"Thank you lady Jane. Your beauty needs no dressing."

"Your wife knows how to chose a man."

"I am sorry to tell you Lady Weston that my wife died two years ago."

Maggie knew how to keep the quarry on the run to tire it out. "Was she pretty?" Then realised what a stupid thing she'd said. "Oh I'm sorry Sir. The memory must be painful."

Jane stepped in. "Al! What's 'handsome'?" He told her. "Sir you are handsome enough for two." She realised this was the truth. He really was as old as those cliffs with the bubbling beard chuckling underneath.

His eyes sparkled. "Now now! Johnas protect me from this lovely young woman!" He smiled.

Johnas struggled. He knew the courtly formulas well enough but there was something special happening. "Lady Jane – er – My father is a well known seducer of young women. Ignore him and let me show you Lanconia."

Jane made up her mind. "I'm only guessing at what 'seducer' means but it sounds like fun." Silence. "What does 'seducer' mean Johnas?"

Everyone saw the bulls-eye but only Jane knew for real what it was like being seduced. How could she close the gap between them?

"Er – It means – Er."

The Duke saved his son. "To seduce someone means make passionate love to them."

Jane said "I told you it was fun!"

Al waited for orders as the Black Team ambushed but after the odd silence he found himself saying. "Our hope is to head towards Arlesene and see who we can make friends with and who we can trade with. Our Duchess is building her strength in fighting for peace – friendship for trade and trade for profit. Do you know Sir she has no family and tries to make families? She has been training twenty cadets and I know Sir she has turned them from rough ore into the finest steel. She teaches us accounts and business and leading men as well as fighting. In five years time we will own the world!"

"I have heard. That is why you're so welcome. Look at my son. Tell me Lady Jane what do you think of him?"

Oh shit! The quarry charges! "Sir I think he would like to – er be like his father but has a way to go?" The duke's faced crinkled in a smile and his eyes danced for Jane.

He said "What do you say to that Johnas?"

"It's true. Mother would say 'Johnas why don't you be more like your father?' and I would ask how and she would say 'open your eyes'."

Jane realised she now had to be Johnas' mother. Then she realised what it meant! For both of them. Stay on one thing! "Johnas you're just a young man. Womenfolk are all the age of grandmothers. Look at me – I'm at least forty inside – Now did she say 'look like him' or 'look at him' Have I got that right Al? 'At' not 'like'?" Al nodded.

"My mother said look *at* him miss."

"And what did you see?" In her unique position Jane realised he would have seen an old man who was past it. Oh dear! "Sir. I see you like your wife. The best – the only – the kindest and most courteous and – er – I must say it – sweetest lover. Johnas sees you as a grumpy old man."

The Duke recovered first. "Lady Jane you have brought a different breeze into my castle. If you were older you could be my wife tomorrow."

"You make me sad Sir."

"Why!"

"Because I would be your wife today."

Another silence. The duke recovered again. "You're trying to seduce me aren't you? You naughty maid! The new breeze here and the scent on the breeze is pleasant and uplifting. Heavenly."

"Father? What about their servants?"

Al and Maggie were leaving this whirlpool to Jane. "What about them Johnas?"

"They're not proper servants are they!"

"In what way?" asked Jane.

"They are your 'Black Team'."

"Does that mean they are not servants Johnas?"

The Duke could see Johnas was being caught in a corner. "Lady Jane. Johnas is right. Your friends are acting as servants when they're not."

Jane replied "Sir. If I treat them as servants what do you do?"

The power of this punch went above Johnas' head but registered as a man's blow from this gorgeous girl playing with him. Married life had taught him a few lessons. "Lady Jane I will do as I please! – So long as it pleases you."

Jane couldn't resist the temptation any longer. She stood up and walked towards the Duke with her arms open.

Feast

The feast two days later was amazingly rich and noisy. The tables were laid with magnificent silverware. Castles sculpted from pastry, roast birds dressed as soldiers, a whole orchestra of roast piglets playing silver instruments, ribs of beef as a boat sailed by swans. Everyone had a glass goblet to drink from and decorated plates in a gorgeous blue and gold. Only Al had seen anything like it before and then he had been practically at the bottom of the table. Now he was the guest of honour at the top table with Jane, the Duke and Johnas. Maggie was a little way down the table. John, James and Rachel would eat left-overs later with the servants.

Johnas tried hard to be 'courtly' as Al had called excessive politeness overflowing with trivial compliments and phrases said as if they should be taken to have another, secret, erotic meaning. Jane played this game by being carefully reserved, showing little hints of encouragement on her face to draw the courtier into making some flimsy or fashionable statement as if it was hard fact. Then, after showing she had tried to think about it, she a mere empty-headed woman who needed complicated matters explaining to her, started a ladder of unthreatening replies increasing in strictness. Her goal was to let the courtier know she could think a lot more deeply than he could and also to appear completely innocent that she'd just done so. 'That sounds bad' – 'Do they all say that?' – 'How do they know?' – 'That can't be true everywhere' – 'Why not? Because...' – 'That's funny because I saw...' – 'But I've seen it with my own eyes. Oh well - It's a funny old world.' Jane knew she could say she'd seen anything and be believed, those long days in Allesandro's schoolroom of deception at Willows had been well spent after all.

Jane's unknowing cleverness was tantalising to Johnas. By drawling habit he was trapped a couple of times more before trying blunt politics. Jane had been almost given up expecting a change of tactic so she was genuinely happy and beamed at him. Within a minute she was replying with suggestions such as 'what do you think' or 'what will happen then' or 'is he really strong enough'. All she had to do was keep him telling his thoughts with little prompts and he took that as serious discussion.

Occasionally she would 'let him into a secret' just to keep him on the boil. Whenever he mentioned some other dukedom, country or movement she would follow-up with 'how interesting – I must visit and see for myself.' Jane was genuinely interested in going to these places and if Johnas had mentioned lands of dragons they would have gone on her list also. He did mention pirates.

She replied "All outlaws have harbours whether they be on land or sea. There are lords of those harbours and I will visit them as well as see every outlaw dead and every lord repent even if I have to do it myself." By now Jane's angry four-before breakfast and six brutal deaths after invented and spread by John and James was accepted as fact. She gently reached out for his hand. "You see this gentle hand Johnas – In the next half hour it will kill a man. Sometimes it has a will of its own. Blood. Red blood. Squirting, spirting, spitting, staining, creeping, creeping into your very boots. Don't let it do that to you Johnas! Save the killing!" Although Jane was acting for effect she knew that Maggie and Rachel wouldn't have been acting. "Don't worry Johnas there won't be any blood I promise. Trust me. In Bartonbry we breathe trust."

Al played the game differently. He knew he didn't have quick wit or deception to use but he had seen many talks between nobles and officials and knew how an ambassador should be encouraging, personally enthusiastic but sadly prevented from promising anything by sluggish superiors. He knew money and status were what people desired and they wanted your power to add to their power, preferably to be given as a favour without payment. John had already talked to Al about trust and the Bartonbry way of trust and how it was in people's nature to trust others and how it could be used. He decided it was time to sacrifice a pawn to the Duke. "You have been honest with me sir so I will be honest with you." As he said it he knew he'd just fallen into a swamp, the swamp where ambassadors rot doing their daily job. "As you know we are the Black Team. We are disguised because we feared people would think us heroes or be scared of us for what we did last month. We came here to try to forget the atrocities." To try to recover his self esteem he asked the Duke "Have you killed people before breakfast Sir? It gives me nightmares and I only saw the bodies in the room." He had it! Fake sincerity! He had it! "It was horrible Sir."

The Duke said "I have seen battles with hundreds killed. I have never killed anybody with my sword – well not on purpose, but as lads we sometimes got into arguments – we never meant to kill and if one of us was badly hurt or killed in our arguments we got a thrashing from the steward."

"Our Duchess took us so we wouldn't fight amongst ourselves but beside each other. Which is better? Some boys hurt and blinded or dozens of unarmed people killed?"

"From what I've heard they weren't all unarmed."

"Some were armed but trapped and some stupid and some were helpless and we still slaughtered them."

"Hmm. You have given me a lot to think about there Alefred. Repentance is a virtue but so is ruthlessness against a foe."

"Sir – In a while you will see a bloodless fight. The two girl fighters will see every drop of blood that isn't there. They haven't forgotten. Take care of them for me when it's over. They're far from home." This was easy! Forget wallowing in a swamp, he was spinning wool from clouds!

The feast tables were removed, the floor swept and sanded, candles restocked and musicians installed. Al let the master of ceremony know their plan and arranged a schedule. Jane and Maggie colluded with the musicians so there would be no delays. After the third formal dance, during which the three young Britons were absent, the master of ceremony called that there would now be a tableau for their enjoyment.

At the top of the hall by the dias Jane and Rachel appeared together in road clothes with their hair pinned-up. They shaded their eyes to look at the other end of the hall to draw attention to the Taylor brothers now in expensive finery standing arm in arm and miming a discussion. Maggie started a gentle tremolo on a cello that soon quietened the audience and filled the hall with expectation. All attention focussed on the arena.

The boys slowly walked towards the girls completely engrossed between themselves in arm strokes, nodding heads, hand emphasis and other body language about something. The girls, full of high spirits, mimed picking the boys out for themselves, then most amusingly arguing about who should have which boy. Suddenly they decided to go on the offensive and deal face to face with the boys who by now were innocently only seven paces away before they realised. Maggie's tremolo stopped with a sting. The situation turned from an afternoon walk into a battle of the sexes. Now Maggie resumed by bowing more urgently as two boys and two girls eyed each other up and checked amongst themselves. Maggie drew a sharp alarm. All four had their Avel swords pulled from their Avel boots. Each of the dancers took a turn to show-off their weapon as an extension of themselves to the audience with enough

flowing body language to tell of a thousand muscles and a single aim. The girls tossed their knives with one loop. The boys answered in kind. The girls tossed with two loops. After looking at each other to check they were still in the game, the boys answered with a two-loop toss. The girls looked at the audience for inspiration then, in complete silence, undid their pins and shook their long hair free. Now with smiles, the sort that brought and sold empires, they agreed and tossed their knives with four! – yes four! turns. Mighty applause!

John was very proud of the next bit. The boys had hidden their knives back in their boots while all eyes had been on the girls. When it was the boy's turn to do toss they held their empty hands up in despair. While the audience's attention was fixed on the suddenly empty-handed boys sharing their defeat with the audience, the girl's knives vanished back into their boots also. Now the girls advanced with deliberate menace, miming two-handed sword fighting. At Bartonbry they had wondered at the pretend sword fighting and found it fun and more. The excitement of a boy and a girl trying a stab, getting a fraction of a second embrace before being thrown away was something only those that have done it could say. Foe leading you into a dance. Absolute concentration to see she wasn't hurt. Careful signalling so he wasn't surprised. Maximum balance so her trajectory was smooth. Minimum distraction so he didn't panic. Tissues of grace cloaking determination.

The girls slashed together. The boys received by evasion. The girls swerved to slash across the back shoulder but the boys blocked. At each blow Al beat a drum. Maggie bowed according to the strokes but nobody was consciously listening. Sometimes the couples would sway together, sometimes in a mirror, emphasising their reach or need for contortion ready for the next wave. They went through all their repertoire of sword fighting moves with the addition of a humorous 'kiss my hand', cleverly signalled to the audience by the girls, before returning to the sword-school routines turned into ballet.

The boys pushed the girls away, agreed between them that death was better than surrender. They mimed stabbing themselves in the heart then slowly sank to their knees. Aghast the girls raced to catch them and cradle them in their laps. In their dying moments the boys tried to present the girls with battered paper roses. The girls sank over them in a final kiss.

The stillness that filled the hall was recalled for years but never lived again. Maggie strummed a handful of romantic chords on a lute. The audience took more than a second to realise the dream was over and reconnect with their now-selves. They applauded and cheered from their hearts. In the middle the girls remained still crouched over the boys as statues in the candle-light. Something unexpected unmoving in the middle of the hall. A rock for the uproar to break on. Something waiting for a spell to be released. The noise died down in expectation. Maggie gave the spell with three 'finish' chords on the lute that faded away into renewed silence. John and James stood up with their arms round Rachel and Jane then bowed to the Duke then the two sides of the audience. They were heroes. Heroes in the wars of love. At this moment of triumph Al started by putting an arm around a silent shaking Maggie but ended lifting her off the ground and crying "How do you do it!" He kissed her.

"Make your announcement Al!"

"Oh yes. Sorry Maggie."

Al strode into the arena of confusion as he'd practised in his mind. Confusion was good! You stood a much better chance of deceiving people so the team had told him. He launched into his prepared speech, but this time he was overflowing with the arm gestures and empathy with the audience that marks a brilliant speaker. "Duke, ladies and gentlemen. Was that not a moment to remember?" He paused. "We thank you for your patience in our games. People tell us we are too young for war and too young for love. We bring you neither. We bring peace and trust and – I lied – " he had practised this pause a score of times – "We bring the love of us, our Lady the Duchess of Avel and our kingdom to you."

The team bowed to the audience, to get a chorus of approval and applause, finishing up with the duke. The hall was filled with more magical silence.

The Duke addressed them and the hall "You are the fairies of legend that spin nets of gossamer and have swords of moonlight. You have conjured with our hearts. Come out Margaret and take your praise. What a wind she blew to drive the ship?" Applause and smiles all around. "Jane and your servant. You remind us your edge is sharp and you know how to use it.

Rachel lunged into the space between the Duke and the surrounding audience. She faced the crowd. "I am Jane's sister. We chose to be mistress and servant today to show you that anyone can serve and

everyone should. Bartonbry, our home, will make you welcome." She brandished her knife. "If I hear a single idiot tell me how stupid the people from my town are without visiting first then I will make sure they don't have the wind to repeat it. The seas are open. Why are we here? To see for ourselves because in our country stupid people tell us how smelly, untrustworthy, cowardly and generally obnoxious you are. You're not! Jane?"

Jane had to think on her feet. "Thank you Rachel. Our country is different to yours. It's different from what it was last Christmas. Please come and visit Bartonbry. Not all at once! You'll be welcome – even your spies get a welcome."

Al took over. "Dear people – please forget long words. Please forget lots of words. Will you come to see us at Bartonbry? Can we be friends?" The team bowed.

There were cheers, 'yeses' and applause.

The formal dance could have continued but the team spread themselves about and the evening was spent talking while the musicians tried to be heard. The shocking phenomenon of having three servants suddenly promoted to high-status was something disquieting that encouraged curiosity. Rachel linked arms with Jane, Maggie with John and Al with James to show they were equals. As people had time to digest these daring young strangers their curiosity became deeper and many decided to send a trusted servant to this Bertonbrie place to find out more.

Hunting

The Duke faced a battle to kick Johnas up the ladder of favour with these ambassadors of the Duchess of Avel. Perhaps there was a marriage to be arranged – The best sort of alliance! He had already dispatched one of his staff to Bartonbry to find out how wealthy the Duchess was but it could be three weeks before he received a report. Two days of hunting was arranged with Johnas as host for the Black Team staying at a lodge in one of the Duke's forests overnight. They agreed this was good training for them all. Jane and Al were the only ones who had ever been on a hunt before and then as spectators.

Jane discussed it with Johnas. "Will you teach us hunting deer as we have spent our few days hunting other things and our many nights being hunted and hunting men to death." He took a while to understand as he was one of those people who confused problem with solution. Jane helped him untangle his mind. Yes he would instruct servants to guide

them and yes – good idea – he would see they were going for a ride first and killing second. He promised it wouldn't be competitive. Jane suggested that there might be some other youngsters to join them?

"There won't be room in the lodge!" He said.

"Oh Johnas! Haven't you ever shared a bed? You can bunk with me. Can you tempt that Paulanne from the banquet last night to join us? Alefred said he fancied her."

"Don't you people from Briton think of anything else?"

"No. What do you think of? Don't you want to try for Minda's hand?"

This was supposed to be a secret between the Duke and his son so Johnas was a bit shocked. "I could do. Do you think I have a chance?"

"It depends whether I get you first doesn't it?" Johnas was suddenly confused in a different way. Women! Why were they so unreasonable!

The first day soon turned to torrential rain so they retired to the hunting lodge without making any efforts at a chase. Everyone had so much to learn. Jane paired Johnas with the Taylors so everyone learned. She suggested that Maggie and Rachel should find some way to play sports indoors with whoever wanted. She dragged Al and Paulanne into the pouring rain – they would thank her later. Too late Jane realised Paulanne didn't have Avel boots to deal with the soaking forest tracks but by good fortune in fifteen minutes they had come across sheltering deer. Jane knew her shooting skills. She told Al and Paulanne to stay where they were still and absolutely silent. For ten tense minutes she crept closer to the herd then chose her target and moment. An arrow to the head then she raced to cut the throat of the kicking beast. Three slashes and she was done! Blood! Blood! Stay calm. Blood! Stay calm. It's only blood. Deer blood not man-blood. Stay calm. Blood all over her. She nearly fell into that well of worry, that nightmare in Lostnock, but remembered the others. Now she must get back to the lodge as fast as possible to show how quickly and casually she'd succeeded where the rest had failed. On the way back she realised she could use this to build her reputation for blood. How ironic. Here she was proving her throat-cutting skills when she hated it. Now she understood Minda better. She couldn't wait to be back in Bartonbry sitting with Minda in front of a fire. Minda was the only person who would understand.

When they got back to the lodge a servant and horse was immediately sent to drag the deer back. She looked so dejected! The Taylor's told Johnas about the reaction the girls felt to blood. They asked how gentle

and sympathetic could he be? They warned him that Jane was more intelligent than the three of them put together and so to shut up unless he had something soothing to say. Did he understand? By now Johnas was convinced these boys knew so much more about how women worked than he did.

James said "What does she want Johnas?"

"Err – Wine?"

"No. Think again."

"Aha! A man's arms around her!"

"Nearly. A man beside her ready to be hugged or hug on command."

"Oh. That's very clever. Are you all this clever in/"

"/Go to her now!"

"Oh yes. Alright."

When he'd gone to Jane, James said to John "An idiot like him will be no good for Minda but think what would happen if Jane got him."

John wasn't quite as quick as James in seeing possibilities. "Oh yes. Jane would have this dukedom like Minda has hers! Clever brother!"

"No you're the clever one keeping his attention then bending him to your way of thinking."

"The Duke want's him to marry Minda to get her dukedom. Can you imagine that? I can't. But Jane is lonely too. You have Maggie and I have Rachel. We're as good as married aren't we? But what about Jane? She wouldn't be happy with Al – Or would she?"

"You're right. Our Jane is like our Minda – she needs people to lead. Al is neither a follower or a leader just a fixed rock."

"What about us two?"

"We're the Duchess' servants. We do as we're told. Keep out of trouble."

"Or make trouble for others."

"I can't wait to be back in Bartonbry and see how she rewards you for that."

"What? Is that wrong?"

"No! She will cry with gratitude."

"Let's face it we're servants while the others are masters."

"She's said I will be the master of many. I will always be her servant."

That evening at the lodge there were enough beds but some doubly occupied. Rachel and Maggie were with James and John. After an evening of nervous concentration Johnas had won Jane, but he didn't see Jane's wink to the other girls.

Al and Paulanne now had wet misery and colds on the way in common. She was a mine of information about the political situation in Lanconia and he was happy to share what little he knew about the new spirit of Briton and everything he knew about sailing ships and how the stupid adults seemed to base all their judgements on guesses and prejudices.

The next day was fine but the ground was soaked. James asked Johnas how they should change their hunting tactics to suit the conditions. James knew nothing about hunting but he did know how to question authority. Johnas had no idea.

"What do you suggest?" said Jane, helping Johnas and assuming James' question was a 'follow-me'.

"The ground will have tell-tale tracks, and the quarry will escape faster than we can follow. Unless we can trap them coming towards us we might as well shoot arrows at the clouds."

Jane looked at Johnas who looked at his Chef-de-chasse who whispered a reply. Johnas addressed the party. "It's hard to hunt today. The Chef suggests we might take the tame herd by the village of Ramporte."

After a moment Jane replied. "No. We will save our arrows and blades for proper game. Shall we split into two groups and hunt each other? Five minutes head start each time. We could go via Ramporte then home to Orfleur?"

This was good ambush practise for all except two of them. Those that knew the routine now had others to look after. Those who had never done it before learned when to fight and when to surrender. Maggie and Rachel who had ambushed and killed for real last month took no part. They knew the value of practise which had stood them well but too many sharp-tipped memories were coming out of the hedges at them.

The Duke's wealth and power depended on controlling one of the gateways of trade to Briton. Now he could see the value of controlling influence as well. He tried to keep the Black Team at Orfleur with rumours of the plague at the capital, brigands on the roads, general

unrest in the country and specific anti-Briton feeling which would make their journey risky. The team insisted they should continue. Of course Johnas could accompany them. They reasoned that having a few Lanconians with them would help their understanding of the country, sort out any mis-understandings and blunt any animosity towards Britons. Al persuaded the team that Paulanne's presence would be good because she would report back to parents what dutiful and harmless boys and girls they were.

Johnas spent many hours being coached by the Duke to see that the Lion and Lioness of Briton had chosen to send their cubs to him. The Lanconian king must realise that he, the Duke, had been carefully cultivating a friendly and strong Briton for a while and now he controlled the main trade port and also the affections of the Briton King and the most powerful lady in the Kingdom. Why else did she send her precious children to him? Now he was graciously allowing the King to see these brave ambassadors for himself. Their energy and enthusiasm was matched only by their cleverness and ruthlessness if attacked. Johnas was also pressurised by Jane to organise this, that, and the other. When he did well she rewarded him with a hug or a kiss or a smile or all of them.

Jane asked for a private audience with the Duke. She thanked him most sincerely for his welcome and continued hospitality. She apologised for deceiving him by presenting three of them as servants. He must excuse them as they owed their lives to deception. She told him truthfully that the boys had never killed anyone but the girls between them killed eight men and a woman in one day. None were proud of those deeds but they had been told the first blow should be the hardest and as a result the uprising fizzled-out as the rebels were terrorised by their brutality. Now he knew the truth he would also know the legend, and it was up to him to credit the truth and the legend as he saw fit.

"Now I have another thing to say Sir. You have realised that our Lady Minda is lonely and needs a husband. I know what I have to say will hurt you but honestly sir – Johnas is not the man for Minda. That is the truth. I know she hasn't got the patience to wait for him. Please send him to Bartonbry with us or on his own so you may know for yourself – but I can tell you now what the result will be. She knows her mind and Johnas would be wearing his nose on the back of his head for his lack of worldliness if he pestered her. I am sorry to be the one to tell you sir – We all have sad deeds to do and in Bartonbry we have a saying 'Today is the day for sad deeds'. She was brought up on a farm, likes everyday

people, practises accounts and archery and many other things for hours on end. She's a blade that sharpens herself day and night."

The Duke hadn't been expecting this but it fitted with these strangers. His disappointment at having his dreams wiped away was matched by his admiration for this girl, on her own, who had the courage to tell him. "Thank you Jane. May I write a letter to your father to say how lucky he is to have you as a daughter?"

"You may of course Sir. Johnas is lucky to have such a lovely father. Please visit my town of Melbun. Our King and others need to meet a few more smelly, lying, greedy, untrustworthy foreigners – I'm sorry to say many Britons think like that. We must go to Arlesene but then I will return here soon to tell you the news myself and then to Melbun. Shall we scheme something when I return? I have heard the dukes of Lanconia keep the King in check like a dozen sheep dogs. I know how dogs are Sir, between them they need a leader. You could be that man perhaps – the one who has steady support for progress and peace from your friends in Briton."

"I have not heard it like that but you're right Jane. Now I think about it you're right in every particular. And in such a few words. You are clever!"

"I am sorry to bring you the bitter news about Johnas and Minda but if you cannot do better Sir, I have a twenty pound dowry given to me by the King himself."

"Oh ho. So you want to steal Johnas for yourself! Now I see!"

"I have said Sir you must find out for yourself. I have come to tell you to prepare for disappointment. Nothing in the world would make me steal happiness from Minda. Never. I knew you would suspect my motives. Don't worry or be angry. I know your dukedom is precious to you. Johnas is not prepared for taking over from you when you are too frail – But in the next few days I will be teaching him as much as I can." The Duke was silent. "Bartonbry wants its friends to be strong."

"Jane. What can I say? I'm sorry to be angry just then."

"Sir. We know these are deep matters that need thought. Shall we think about them more and talk about them between ourselves when I come back from Arlesene?"

"Blast you and blast that Minda! You and she are too clever for me!"

Lanconians shrugged when Britons would have smiled so Jane wasn't sure this was said lightheartedly. "Tell me what the damage is then Sir, we will pay it and leave."

"Now you make it worse!" This time he smiled. "Women! Women!"

"Do you want you Dukedom looked after or not?"

"Yes of course."

"Then for now I will keep your Johnas on a short lead. Five days each way and four loitering in Arlesene and I will report back. In the meantime don't forget to send that nice letter to my father, Lord Weston at Melbun."

4 On the road to Arlesene

The hay harvest was occupying the countryside as they rode the well-maintained road. It should take a week, the weather was fine, and the Black Team, as themselves again, were pleased to be back on the road to the capital and adventure. As well as the Black Team there was Johnas and Paulanne, ten servants and a dozen guards. Also with them was the Duke's secretary.

Jane dealt with that threat head-on. "Thank you for coming with us secretary. We have a way in our country of calling our road-uncles by their real names. What is your name?"

"Hallenson mistress Jane."

"Is that your first name?"

"No. I was christened James."

"Right! We will call you 'Mister Jim!'" The confusion on his face gave Jane her opening. "You're amongst friends Mister Jim. You can trust all of the Britons with your life. Don't confuse them in a crisis – stick to simple phrases – better single words. We will have ambush practise soon then you'll see how important simple things are."

Jane halted them. "This is Mister Jim, the Duke of Orfleur's secretary looking after us. We have been so lucky to have people like Mister Jim to help us in the past and they've all taught us lots about the road and the world and how we might find out more ourselves. Tonight Mister Jim we will sit in the inn and toast the 'older generation!'" Mister Jim bowed as much as you can while sitting on a horse.

Rachel decided Jane shouldn't have all of the action with Johnas. She understood Johnas' prickles of a playing a part where he was supposedly in charge yet being managed by Jane. Anything to put him at his ease. By now the whole Team were behind Jane in her personal objective of winning the Dukedom of Orfleur by marrying Johnas.

None of them guessed Jane wondered about marrying the Duke himself. For her it was one of those butterfly-thoughts that kept returning and temptingly opening its wings for a moment to warm.

Maggie called Al to her and explained the dozen servants and guards were part of their party as well. Hadn't he noticed that in Lanconia there was a big difference between masters and servants. When you visit Bartonbry you'll see that now all servants have been given trust and responsibility and are expected to use it and question. Melbun is not quite like that I admit but here servants don't dare think for themselves or even look at their masters. Everyone would be ambushed if it came to it so the Black Team needed to win the servants to their cause together rather than let them watch ambush practise for rich children that didn't concern them. Maggie remembered the bleak hours at Willows where they had been made to do the menial tasks of the house without praise or even proper instruction.

"Al. The servants have no loyalty to us. It's up to you and me to do something about it."

"What do we do Maggie?"

"Talk to them. Pretend you're learning Lanconian then ask them about their families – that usually works." (Maggie was guessing.) The rest of us will soon have the guards doing a better job.

Tall and skinny with pale wooden face, cold eyes and severe straw hair, Paulanne was now animated like an arctic stream rather than a glacier. Jane and Paulanne were enjoying the each other's company. They had a lot in common. Jane realised Paulanne was very like herself before she volunteered for Minda's cadet school. They discussed the effect of the last five months on Jane. She insisted that normal Briton girls were – er – normal. They don't go round killing people or practising hand-to-hand combat or being made to do sums in their heads or being whipped for no reason except that whipping was a lesson she knew no other way of learning.

"And you speak Lanconian"

"A bit. And Italian"

"Lanconia is at war with Italy."

"When!"

"Generations. There will be more soon."

"Have you told Al?"

"Yes. But I don't think he was listening."

"Oh. Like that is it!" Jane smiled. "It's alright Paulanne. He's never been let out with girls before. He knows a lot and comes from a very important family. I will make sure he listens to what you have to say about what we call 'foreign affairs' as that's why he's here. If he doesn't pay attention again then let me know. If he pays you too much attention – if you know what I mean – also let me know straight away. In Bartonbry we have a ghost of pestering which we see faintly from time to time and deal with."

"How do you deal with it?"

"Um. By dealing with it. Not pretending it doesn't exist."

"But how?"

"It depends. But we will deal with it. And –" she lowered her voice "That applies to Mister Jim and Johnas as well. Is Al behaving properly to you?"

"Oh yes. I am charmed."

"If you're happy and he is happy then I am happy. Let's keep Mister Jim company. I see Maggie is being 'common' again – I shall toast her tonight."

Al had grown up in the last three days and could laugh and smile when given or giving a compliment. By now he knew to take orders from the girls because they really did know what they were doing. He tried to follow Maggie's way of flowing into your servant's life but couldn't find the right tone. Maggie saw his difficulty and after a while stopped the party of servants.

"Our Alefred has never gone hungry in his life, he has never slept under a hedge, never had to sell his most precious possession to eat. Tonight we will be warm at an inn while Alefred and one of you who will volunteer will be gnawing on chicken bones under a hedge for the night. Al! All of us have slept under hedges now you must find out for yourself that it's just one of those things. Not nice but it won't kill you. Half this country is hungry every day – now it's your turn."

"As you say mistress."

Al realised he should get as much credit for quick capitulation as possible. "Servants! Miss Margaret speaks the truth. I need to learn. That's why we're here. Please help us." That made him happy even if later he would have spiders and drips of rain under his cape.

John and James rode with Johnas. "We make everyone welcome and important in Bartonbry Joe."

"And the important people are only people Joe."

"There's no happiness on a long road unless we're good friends is there Joe?"

"No I suppose not James."

"Minda beat it into us. She even had Jane whipped for no reason just to show how stupid some people could be."

"What! Your Duchess whipped Jane! Outrageous. Wait 'till I see her and she'll have some chosen words from me."

James said "I should have a word with Jane first. Ask to see the scars on her back. We were there. Minda said one of each team would get five lashes for no reason – yes she said that – no reason at all – but we were to pick one of our team. Jane stepped forward first of all the teams and demanded to be whipped. She was so cross when there was nobody to whip her there and then. So she ripped off her shirt and demanded of the sergeant that she was whipped immediately. When it appeared that this was a matter to be discussed for tomorrow she started swearing so badly at first then this half naked girl kicks the sergeant in the groin, punches him in the stomach then orders him to stand to attention in his pain and then she does the kick and punch again. This time he had sense to stay still on the ground."

"What happened?"

"A whip was found."

"Then what?"

"They gave it to the sergeant to use of course"

"What happened?"

"He held it, waved it to get the feel but threw it away and refused to use it."

"Then what happened?"

"Jane picked the whip up and said something I will never forget. 'Jed! Come here! The women are going to whip the men.' Jed was the

toughest of the cadets. He'd already volunteered without thought after he saw Jane do so. At Bartonbry you don't hang back. He took his shirt and mail and undershirt off. He bowed to Jane and placed his hands outstretched on the wall. 'Are you ready to be whipped by the women. Look at my muscles Jed! I will hurt you!' There she stood ready with only her britches on, sweating with anger and on fire with aggression. 'Go on Jane. Will I give you a single stroke in return. How will you like that!' Then she threw the whip over her right shoulder – I can see it now – and hugged him from behind and then in front. Jed is huge and Jane is average for a woman but they soon found a way for their bare chests and faces to meet in sweaty oneness."

John said "Now you know Sir why I will be forever her servant. Our Jane has the strength to turn pain into pleasure. But she did get whipped next day."

James said "Please look after her every day Joe. Our lady Minda gets melancholy and we don't want this to happen to our Jane. If you can make Jane happy then please try for her sake."

"I have seen women cry and I wish I knew how to stop it."

"John is right " said James. "She's said how much she fancies you. Please try to make her happy for us."

The Taylors with Johnas in tow descended on the servants. One of the first lessons at Bartonbry had been memorising names. Even though the accents were strange, a few repetitions fixed this for the Taylors. (Later they would have a names test for Joe.) As the guards were collected for inspection and instruction and told the whistle-signals the girls automatically took the front and rear guard.

Later Jane suggested Al should make the most of Paulanne's knowledge of politics first and then be her happy partner. When they arrived at the evening stop everyone thought that Maggie had forgotten Al's cold, damp and hungry night ahead but she hadn't. Al was instructed to spend a night under the hedge by the windmill they'd passed on the way in to the village. His horse would be looked after for him at the inn where everyone else would be well fed. Now one of the servants was to volunteer to join him. None did.

"Oh dear!" said Jane. "It looks like you'll have to make your own bed and cook your own food. Off you go!"

When he'd walked off with nothing more than a cloak Jane addressed the servants waiting in the inn's courtyard. "He will do as he's been

ordered. I know you are not from Bartonbry where every one of you would have volunteered to share his discomfort. Why? Because you would know there was a reward for loyalty."

The hedge by the windmill was not quite lonely that night. Firstly the Taylors visited with food sneaked out of the kitchen. Then the Reeve, prompted by Johnas who was prompted by Jane, came to see Al was safe. After a pleasant evening of inn-games Jane briefed Johnas and Paulanne to creep out with her. Paulanne stayed with Al in his hole under the hedge while Jane and Johnas found their own hole on the way back.

The next day Jane began to realise how large her party was. They'd left Briton as five who would look after themselves and Al. Now she also had Johnas, Paulanne and Mister Jim and a host of miscellaneous servants. Something that she would only recognise later was already happening: The rest of the Black Team were getting on with her duties without bothering her. They understood the larger the party the greater the responsibilities so while she was leading with higher concerns they took their share of responsibility without being asked. The guards were being taught active and intelligent guarding. The servants were being coaxed to take responsibility. Johnas liked being called Joe. It was fresh and familiar and now he felt he had a new personality to be proud of and live up to.

Jane asked herself how to bond with the secretary. Obviously he would be interested in politics and secrets and advising without being seen to advise but that was his professional duty. She had to find what he was interested in and be interested herself. Eventually by persistent small-talk she found his strength – or weakness. History and folklore. He was also interested in the way people spoke with different accents and used different words for the same thing in different places. When she'd discovered this she asked their mimic John to join them as they plodded on. She kept Mister Jim talking while John would repeat the key phrases then ask about them. Eventually John and Mister Jim agreed, just for fun, to try and fool the people of Arlesene that he was a native. John would later realise that he learned a lot of Lanconian language and thought without knowing it. As he began to assume the character of the son of an Arlesene trader he was shocked by the arrogance required when they tried it out on servants. Mister Jim learned about the true and legendary history of Minda and the Black Team. He needed to know more about the Star-iron girl song and this 'striking-three' and 'making a

shoe, knife and needle'. John saw no reason why they shouldn't share a bottle of wine with a smith at their next stop. Mister Jim was nervous about mixing with such a low person but John insisted.

James was brought into the game. He picked up every technical term and noun but was lost with the cultural fault-lines that John could absorb. Hadn't Minda had told them that everyone was different and that just because somebody was good at a particular thing it didn't mean you had to be too. She'd also said that it took time and events to find out what you were good at. Without anything much to do on the journey James revived his interest in plants that Mister Chris had started on their way from Lostnock to Melbun all those – days – only about a month ago! Paulanne would write the names down for him and she was quite a good artist.

Al was now a bigger man. Not yet one of the Black Team – he reckoned that would take months but he knew he was getting there. He would never forget that night in the hole under the hedge. Maggie had asked him what he'd learned?

"I'm not sure. First I didn't die. Second people felt sorry for me. Third doing as you told me was good for me. – No That should be first. It's like a river going over a waterfall. I had to do it and now I'm bolder."

"Good. I will tell you a secret Al. I made up sleeping under a hedge on the spur of the moment. I'm glad it turned out alright."

"Whatever your Black Team does turns out alright."

"You're nearly one of us Al. If I wasn't already John's then you would be mine."

"Thank you Maggie. I will give you a really good kiss – Um – Paulanne has shown me how to kiss properly the Lanconian way." Al's new growth was now silhouetted against his previous outsidersness.

Maggie smiled. "I'm so pleased you're with us Al. Now don't forget you have to win servant loyalties. Last night none of them volunteered to attend to you under a hedge. That must change. Who will make it happen?"

"Us."

"Anybody else?"

"No." Al realised! "No it's up to us. We have to do it."

"You have learned the Black Team's motto Al. I'm very proud of you."

Al had heard about the spell-binding powers of the witch of Bartonbry from Jed. Now he was bewitched by the Black Team's own witches. Until now he'd been dutifully obeying as an apprentice with a lot to learn but now he was soaring. He had left the nest and could fly!

That evening after a gentle dusty day on the road they stopped at a village inn. Mister Jim knew which one to use and used his ducal authority to make sure that his charges were properly looked after. John and James brought a bottle of good wine then took Mister Jim to the smithy. Unknown to him the boys had visited the smith privately a few minutes earlier to explain Mister Jim's interest. They primed the smith with a fraction of the Minda legend and what striking three was and that making a shoe, knife and needle was what any smith must do to be a smith according to the Briton smiths anyway. Please to remember that their visitor was secretary to one of the most powerful people in the kingdom. They would be grateful if Mr. Jim found something interesting.

When the three of them arrived as strangers, John practised his Lanconian on the smith's wife as he had been shown by the girls. James introduced Mister Jim and his interest. He said he would be returning soon to Briton and the Star-iron girl who they all loved. Had he heard of the Star-iron girl?

"Yes. Young Sir. We have heard of this lady in black and white who smites bad smiths and finds wives for good ones. Tell me more about her."

"She is eighteen. She has her own sorrows more than us all but when she smiles we are uplifted into the warmth of the summer air. This man will tell you Sir that she has saved the kingdom of Briton from stupid rebellion."

"She is real! You know her?"

"Yes Sir. If she could be she would be with your wife now twittering women's talk then smiling on you."

"They say she has imp girls to poke her enemies with."

"Boys also. We are they Sir." James held his arms open to show he wasn't armed." The smith crossed himself. "Don't be afraid smith. We are good imps. You have nothing to fear. While the other imps are feasting in the inn. Shall we open this bottle and share this ham?"

John played his 'I'm an orphan far from home' part. James played his ambassador's part and Mister Jim managed to get a word in. He didn't refer to the smith as 'Sir' but was able to ask specific questions and get them answered. As if by chance the rest of the Black Team arrived with more wine and the sort of food only the wealthy could afford. The girls took it in turns to hug and kiss the smith and his wife with "Our lady Minda, who you call the Star-iron girl, sends all her love." When anything happens in a village everyone wants to see what it is. Soon there was a crowd round the smithy. Jane dragged her most skilled language expert, John, out to address them. "If you can find us a Vielle or Grand-vielle for our Margaret to bow we will perform a tableau for you by torchlight. Also I announce the Sou-Duke of Orfleur Johnas will give ten cents tomorrow to any man woman or child of this village who will give him one cent tonight." This was news to Joe but Jane soon told him to obey and be happy to do so. Completely bemused, Joe did as he was told and made himself ready.

The 'battle of the sexes' as the Black Team called it was watched in silence by the villagers. What nobles did was a strange world that meant nothing to them. The body language that sent shivers through the audience at the banquet was wasted. The suspicious villagers knew they were being used as playthings of the nobility. Lending the Duke's son a cent until morning was clearly spiteful witchcraft. In short, Jane's plan to show their happy generosity only resulted in deep suspicion. This was bitter and confusing. The shock was so sudden nobody could think of an answer. Only two drunks egged-on by their mates and the acknowledged village fool took up Johnas' offer of an overnight loan at 1000 percent interest. To rid himself of the embarrassment Johnas paid them a full Crown back after ten minutes. This confirmed everybody's suspicions. The man couldn't even keep his bargain! Ten times as much as promised in return for nothing! It must be evil. The square was soon empty except for a devastated Black Team. They had reached the end of their magic. Maggie knew the mid-winter carol ending to the Star-iron girl song. She got John to explain what it was to the smith and his wife and with linked arms they went outside and Maggie sang it solo under the summer stars. When John saw her tears sparking in the torchlight knew twice over he mustn't cry but carry her to a sweeter land of nothing-dreams. He cried.

Mister Jim used many candles writing down legends he'd heard in the smithy. Jane had that sort of draining night where sleep and wakefulness mingle in blurred repetition. The Lanconians in general

sensed a rust beneath the shine of these glittering jewels from Briton. John, James, Maggie and Rachel took it in turn to guard. Al helped Rachel without question when she asked. At least they still had the goal of giving the King and Queen Minda's greeting.

The next day was just another day crawling towards the capital. No rumours of plagues had come this way. No rumours of anti Briton-ism had been heard. The Black Team were asking themselves what had gone wrong last night? Why hadn't the villagers applauded? Why hadn't they queued-up to pay one cent to get ten back? And when they got one hundred back immediately why were they so surly? It would never happen in Bartonbry or Lostnock or Melbun. What was wrong with the Lanconians?

Johnas asked Jane about the lending one cent business.

"It's about trust. If it's too good to be true... Oh thank you Joe! I can't thank you enough. I've been awake all night asking myself that question. Now you ask I can tell you straight away! Nobody trusted you to give them ten times their investment back. Oh dear! I knew that in my heart when I first suggested it. I have got too used to acting on my own thoughts without discussing things with the team first. What a stupid leader I am! I must go back to working with them together." Jane stopped the party and gave the 'to me' whistle while holding up the no-danger hand signal. "The rest of you go on ahead." At the first signs of hesitation and questioning she shouted "Go!" and dismounted. "I'm sorry everyone. I let you down last night. It's my fault. I should have asked you first. I've been taking too many decisions on my own for us all. Sorry."

James reacted first. "We made a mistake. We made that mistake. Not you. We all went along and you know we would have said if we thought there was a reason not to. We've learned a lot. We've had a bit of a shock."

"Like me having to sleep under a hedge." said Al.

Maggie said. "You're the best leader we have. Please ask if you want but we'll follow anyway."

"Me too." said John.

"And me." from the others.

"You're just trying to be nice to me. You just feel sorry for me because I'm going to end up marrying Johnas."

Maggie jumped in. "Stop feeling sorry for yourself now Jane! Nobody says you have to marry anybody – How did you get that in your head? Shake off silly boys and lead us to the King."

Al said "You're the shepherd and Maggie and Rachel are the sheep dogs."

James said "I will serve you whatever happens."

"Me too." said John.

Al said "Why are we going to Arlesene Jane?"

"We're going because we have nothing better to do. We make friends. We show the surly Lanconians the happy, bold face of the Britons. We learn."

James said "We're also showing we can be trusted to keep out of trouble so we'll be allowed to go further in future."

Al said. "Then we have made a good start. Jane you were excellent at Orfleur. I ask so we don't lose sight of our goals. Do we have any real plans? My father said to stop things getting out of hand so I thought I better speak up."

"Well done Al. Of course you should speak up." said Jane

John said. "We don't quite know who we are. We came as three nobles and three servants now we have let that disguise slip without taking another."

"Why do we need another?" asked Maggie.

"I mean others have to know who we are so they can deal with us. If they're unsure we'll confuse them. If we're not clear who we are they won't take us seriously. Maggie and Rachel are you fierce and cruel warriors or is it Jane who kills because she feels like it? Do you see?"

Jane said. "You're right. We have three more days on the road. Shall we think about it now and talk about it tonight?"

John said. "I have a thought for now. When we catch up the main party we need a story to put us above them."

"How do you mean above them?" asked Rachel.

"Something like we've had secret intelligence and we may spend the day occupied with extra duties. Or be very angry at some stupidity in Arlesene that we have to deal with when we get there."

"You're our king of deception John." said Rachel "You're right we must stay separate and special."

James came up with the story. "Say I went to the smith this morning and he warned me that if wages weren't increased the peasants would revolt... But then I couldn't get more except it was up to the imps of the

Star-iron Girl to look after themselves and if possible stop people getting hurt."

Rachel said "If that was the case whose side are we on?" Silence.

Maggie broke the silence. "Ours. It's James' invention but we must be ambassadors. Al you've made a start. We must keep working at the servants. The guards are more lively already. If we are attacked the nobles will be shitting themselves."

John said "Our shield is our reputation. People in Briton know any one of us can kill in a moment. Here the ordinary outlaw or rebel doesn't know that."

Jane said "Stop! Yes you have all said good things. Our legend protects but we must live today not our legends. What James has said is a story to make people afraid so we can show we're neither afraid or careless. Remember our intelligence is secret. Any questions? – Thank you all. Let's go. If anyone wants to lead for a while the job is yours. Come on. At the first smithy we'll get our blades sharpened – that should be a clear message."

Their deception teacher Allesandro would be proud of them as subtle signs put the party into a state of alert. They were split into Red, Yellow and Blue groups with two of the Black Team and two guards assigned to each. Jane stopped them. "You all know what to do if we're attacked. My team will give commands. I'm here to enjoy my visit to your country and I don't want it being spoiled by silly people who see attackers in every hedge. Is that understood?" She then gave them all a lead by making a show of calmly chatting and smiling while it was obvious she was on full alert. Jane was really tired. "Johnas? Do you think I should marry you or your father?" After the shock even Johnas could see the implications. He was stunned by this sudden charge. Jane took this moment to carefully scan the horizon. "It's alright Joe." she said while looking away from him "I'll make my own mind up. Just something to think about." Jane was furious with herself for putting her cards on the table. There was no need! She must rest or get another to lead.

"Er. Miss Jane? Are you serious?"

"I'm always serious – except when I'm deadly serious. Today I'm deadly serious. Don't worry I'm looking after you. Please don't interrupt." He didn't interrupt so she knew she had him under control. "Please write to your father and tell him what I said. I like him. He's made of oak."

Gradually the full implication dawned on Johnas. He had no allies in this battle of the sexes. His only confidant was the Secretary. When they stopped for the evening he summoned Hallenson.

"Mister Jim – I have to call you that now – And everyone calls me Joe. How quickly things change."

"Indeed Sir."

"The Lady Jane has said she can't decide between me and another. What should I do?"

"Who is this 'other'?"

"I would rather not say."

"Sir, there are two matters. First is Jane a good wife for you."

"I would have her tomorrow."

"Answer the question Sir."

"Um..."

"Yes she would be Sir. She has every manly strength a man wants in a woman. She can fight, lead men, swear and is not afraid."

"What about the womanly things a man wants in a woman Joe?"

"She would command me and my household if that's what you mean. I could leave her to manage my castle while I went to fight the Italians."

"And if she told you to stay at home while she went and made peace with the Italians – what then?"

"Er – I'd know she was the best man – woman for the job. I would have to let her go."

"And then she would go to bed with every Italian she met –Then what Sir?"

"I suppose she would. Um. I couldn't stop her. But she wouldn't try to spite me."

"Because – Sir – you're not worth spiting or because she really cares for you? You're a lucky man who will inherit a dukedom that the Black Team are about to make even more powerful but you need her like a mill needs water."

"Do I?"

"Of course you do. You're the runt of the litter, no brains, no bravery, no vision, no sense. Why do you think your father was so determined for you to marry the Duchess of Avel?"

"So I could assume her wealth."

"Idiot! So she could be his daughter-in-law and show you how manage your dukedom. Have you not heard everyone talking about her?"

"No. Except she's the girl who killed her father and brother then threatened the King of Briton unless he gave her twenty children."

"You are more of an idiot than I thought. Who is this other?"

"I won't say."

"Tell me or tell the other people who are waiting to help you..."

"Um. Promise you won't tell!"

"Sir. Your confidences are safe with me. That's what secretaries do – we deal in secrets."

"My father."

"Jane wants to marry the Duke?"

"She said she couldn't decide. She said she liked him as he was made of oak."

After the second of shock and another second of catching up Hallenson understood Jane's logic. There was no contest between the father and the son, but would Jane have the nerve to marry such an old man? Probably yes she would. She'd have the nerve for anything. He took another half minute to see the beautiful cleverness of Jane's attack. Either outcome would be good for the Dukedom but the father and son were being put on their metal. What a fairy-witch! Oh yes the same one who invented the give me a cent and I'll give you ten. "You are against opposition stronger than you Sir. My advice is to be the sweetest lover – be careful. Don't try to win her by guile or strength or wisdom because your father will beat you."

"Would she really marry my father. He' an old man!"

"What do you think Sir? I think she would."

"These Britons are hard to understand."

"No they're not! They may be hard for you to understand but it's simple. The fates have spun them a thread that entangles the twits like you and is woven into legends for them. These girls weave men's guts before breakfast.

"I don't know what to do."

"What choices did you have in mind Sir?"

"Er – none – as such."

"Then I can tell you that either outcome will be better for you than neither."

"So what should I do?"

"I've just told you Sir. You're outclassed by these girls and your father. Follow as close as you can and try not to get trodden on and see if an opportunity arises. If you don't marry Jane who would be your wife of choice?"

"Er – I assumed father would tell me."

"Good boy. Now have you any ideas of your own?"

"Paulanne is nice."

"The first woman you go travelling with who is nice to you and you want to marry her! Why don't you look around at Arlesene? Word went round Court a long time ago that you were a bit thin when it comes to brains but day by day the Dukedom of Orfleur becomes more valuable. If you want a good match don't whisper that Jane might have your father. Do you understand?"

"Oh – If she marries father then I don't inherit for a long time. Oh – um – best to keep silent. Oh I see. Thank you Hallenson. Suddenly life is getting more complicated."

"And better. If Jane was the duchess she wouldn't spite you – you said so yourself. You could have all the rewards without the hard work."

"Thank you Hallenson."

"I'm Mister Jim now Joe."

"What spells they weave Mister Jim!"

The Black Team, including Al who was now one of them really, talked amongst themselves before supper. The day's edginess had been a success. There were signs that the servants were beginning to understand that the Black Team at least would make the effort to look after them. John and James had pestered the smith and for a mere half-a-crown had ensured that if the secretary enquired he would get the same legend as last night. James gave the smith's wife another half-crown on behalf of the Star-iron girl.

"Please Lady her girls are far from home, only sixteen years old and they miss their mothers – I never had a mother I'm an orphan – if they brought a present would you care for them as a mother for a half hour for me?"

"Who are you to say they miss their families?"

"Ask them. They're lonely girls full of hope on their way to see the King and Queen."

The smith's wife was charmed by the reference to royalty. "They can come but make sure you come to collect them. You too are lonely and what you have said is jam on my bread. Go and send these poor girls! We have no food to spare. Can they bring their own?"

Jane, Maggie and Rachel vanished from the inn as if on a military mission. After briefing Paulanne to bring food and drink in a while they took a circuit to the smithy and paid their entrance with relived and stressed smiles. They had no difficulty faking coming back to mother's arms... The smith's wife was genuine and soon the girls were ashamed of their deception. The smith kept away and left the girls and his wife to calm themselves. James' guess had been right, the smith's wife was a good mother. His instinct that the girls wanted a mother's touch had been right as well. Jane would kiss him. Maggie would kiss him and tell him. Rachel would hold his hand as they walked along the river bank and kiss him and explain. Not long afterwards the girls held a conference to ask weren't the boys lonely too? As James had found them a warm nest after last night shouldn't they be looking after him? The conclusion was that sisters looked after brothers. And uncles perhaps?

At the start of the next day's journey Jane addressed the whole party. "Johnas is in command today. As far as we know there are no threats but just in case I want everyone to remember what we have taught you. I'm going to give you one minute before we start to remember that. If you've forgotten then speak up." Nobody spoke up. Jane didn't believe for a second that everyone had remembered their ambush lessons. She was getting fed-up, and anyway it was Johnas' problem. She hadn't told Johnas the plan and watched him carefully to see how he would cope. Why did people who hadn't got any thoughts always look around? What a stupid thing to do! If you're in charge you have to take charge, not hope some random person might have a suggestion.

Mister Jim told legends in slow Lanconian where it was understood that anyone learning could stop and ask for clarification. He asked them about the Star-iron girl legend and their own true stories. Whenever Little Arthur was mentioned he would call "Est sólo uno" and everyone would join in with "There is only one". He got them to describe Arthur in detail, his background, appearance, his impersonation of the Abbot, becoming the general of Bartonbry when the town needed a mascot. "I will make a story of him. Just you wait!"

James said "No Mister Jim. Just you wait until we bring him. In life he is more than can ever be written. Write his true history and nobody will believe you."

Mr Jim thought about this strange contradiction. Always where there was legend based on fact the legend was more devious and exciting than the dull truth. Hey! How amazing if the legend was simplified to make it easy for everyday folks to understand but the reality was a sparkling complex. He'd stumbled on Little Arthur without knowing it. Now he had to see him for himself. When he surfaced from his meditation the Black Team were all smiling at him.

Rachel said "Don't be embarrassed Mister Jim. Minda goes away to think sometimes. She calls them 'thought-eggs'. Was it good?"

"Yes. I'm happier than happy and in a while I'll be sorted out how to get you home safe. We'll do our duties in Arlesene, return to Orfleur then I must come with you to Bartonbry – Even if I have to swim."

Jane said. "We're so lucky to have you with us Mister Jim. You're a pleasure to be with. And still I know nothing about you!"

Joe did a very sensible thing. He respectfully asked Jane what he should be doing to lead the party. She encouraged him with smiles and simple questions he could use to decide for himself. "Is there anything you must do now, this minute?"

"No. I don't think so."

"Good. See you've learned leadership already."

"Have I?"

"Yes. 'If there's nothing to do – Do it.' "

Joe took a few moments to understand this. "That's clever Jane. You are so clever. I wish I had your brains."

"And if there *is* something to do?"

"Oh – Do it!"

"Exactly. See you're not as stupid as everyone tells you. What does it mean?"

"Do what has to be done."

"You earn at least a kiss for that Joe."

"But I don't know what has to be done."

"Yes you do really. Have time to think. Hours if you need it. I'll watch for trouble, you ask and answer in your head. If you think of something or

half of something you can ask me or the boys. You don't have to do what they say – they're just giving their ideas."

"Oh. I'll try to think then."

"I'll make it easy for you Joe. You must decide where we stop for lunch. We have today and tomorrow on the road before we get to Arlesene. Have we got enough of everything? Start with that."

"Yes Jane. Thank you. You'll make me a lovely wife Jane – You're so patient."

"What a sweet thing to say Joe. You'll make a good duke if you carry on as you've started. Now think!"

That evening at the inn Joe helped by Jane made it clear to the whole party that certain standards of discipline would be demanded when they got to Arlesene. Their Briton guests might have unexpected needs when they were dealing with royal commands so everyone should try their hardest however inconvenient. Also they were to be ready to leave at two hour's notice. The Black Team had practised being ready at five minutes notice and would be now. Brand had drilled the importance of running away into them. Two of them helped by two strange mercenaries had taken on twenty armed men and saved a kingdom as a result, but now they really meant to escape to stay out of any trouble in Arlesene. Running away was just a disappointment not a failure. Maggie made a note to impress this on Al immediately. Obey the low-high-high whistle signal in your sleep!

The first business at the Black Team's private meeting was for the girls to thank James for thinking of them last night. Yes it was nice for the girls to be with a mum and gossip. But what about John and James? Weren't they lonely too?

James said "I can't remember having a mother. We were brought up by an aunt and uncle. I think they meant well but we never had enough food."

John said "It wasn't they didn't try. We were just poor."

James said "Last night I gave the smith and his wife a whole crown. That's two months wages for them here. I can't help giving others what I never had."

Rachel said "Mary said you were welcome as her son at any time. Not because you brought money but because you cared for us enough to call her a 'Lady'."

Al asked "Later will someone explain?"

Rachel said she would and it was something nice not a deceit.

Maggie stood up and addressed them. "May I lead for a minute Jane?"

"Please sister."

"There are three things on my mind. The first is we can leave when we wish. Other people's troubles are not ours. The second is that the longer we stay in the capital the greater the chance of being reduced from exciting strangers with a bloody legend to a handful of noisy children. Thirdly, since we have to make our plans as we go, can we look at ourselves and our companions and see who fits with which role? Who should go and see the King and Queen for example. Who should accompany Al, the son of our own Ambassador-at-home, to see the Lanconian Ambassador-at-home?"

Their discussions were curtailed by supper but a few things stood-out. They were not scheming anything. They must not write secrets. Jed's experience with the hospitality of ambassadors that led into bedrooms was a warning. They should use their letters of introduction. Mister Jim would have contacts to help them. They should meet as many merchants as possible and keep notes. They would aim to be here for four days. Jane was their leader.

Legends

After supper Mister Jim demanded the attendance of the nobles and Black Team in the private parlour.

"As you know by now my hobby is legends."

"Est sólo uno Poco Arthur!" Called everyone.

That set the happy scene for an uncle telling a legend to his nieces and nephews.

Hundreds of years ago, before Christ walked on God's earth, and hundreds of years before that, the king of the northern gods Votain had a one-eyed daughter who made music by hammering on an anvil, spun thread from sparks, embroidered chain mail and wove with strands of red-hot iron. Can you guess her name children mine? It was Minden. All the brave young gods brought her gifts hoping to win her heart and she would kiss them and thank them and wish them a safe journey home. They were sad to be sent away after meeting such a strong girl with

golden hair and – between ourselves children – she was saucy! Just what every young god likes. She too was sad but she knew it was her doom to turn them away or her forge would vanish into a pile of grey ashes and be blown away on the wind. The lives of the gods are not all wine and sweet-cakes children.

One day Minden was wandering in melancholy solitude beside a big lake called Urdarbran and found a basket with three baby girls in it. "Hurrah" she cried. "At last I have children." She ran home with them and kept them in a warm cradle next to her forge. They were magic children so they soon grew strong and healthy. She called them Janet, Ranet and Manet. In no time at all they had grown into young women so fair I can hardly describe them without weeping. There was black-haired Janet who was always watching for strangers from the forge entrance. There was chestnut-haired Ranet who teased the servants, and there was straw-haired Manet who watched the other two and hardly said anything. When the girls had grown into women Minden said "You cannot stay pining with me, you must go out into the world. I will give each of you a piece of magic iron to watch over men for me." Long and hard Minden worked to make three wondrous tools each made from a whole piece of star-iron.

"Janet I will send you to watch from the highest mountains. You are to travel far to see the doings of all men and find the bravest and the strongest and bring them to me. I have forged you a horseshoe which will take you fifty leagues in a day." Dutifully Janet put up her black hair and left with many a little tear. "Ranet here is a knife. Each time you use it the edge will get sharper. If you see men squabbling you are to show them their reflections in the blade while they dream and they will see slaughter and maybe also see sense. Go now my wise Ranet and defend us all from the butchers." Dutifully Ranet put up her chestnut hair and left with many a little tear. "Manet take this needle. It has three powers. Firstly if floated on water it will point the way home to a mother's arms. Secondly, looking through a teardrop placed in the needle's eye will show the smallest sorrow that it may be dealt with. Thirdly it is a needle for sewing with any thread – even the threads of men's lives." Dutifully Manet put up her straw hair and left with many a little tear.

So now my dears Janet, Ranet and Manet were wandering the world looking for brave, wayward and needy men as they had been told and poor Minden was all alone again. One day Minden climbed the lonely peak of Vallenberd, so high its top is always covered in clouds. There she found three baby boys wrapped warm in eagle feathers. "Hurrah" she

cried. *"I have children again."* She ran home with them and kept them in the warm cradle by her forge. They were magic children so they soon grew strong and healthy. She called them Reven, Korpen and Fisken. In no time at all they had grown into young men wanting to leave and see the world for themselves. But unlike the girls, Reven, Korpen and Fisken were as ordinary and unthinking as any peasant. They were strong and dutiful but knew nothing. Minden was at a loss what to do. She could make girls into women of the world but these boys were oxen whatever she tried. They could blow her bellows, lift the trip-hammer and swing her grindstone but knowledge was morning mist under the sun's fire for these boys. *What do you think she did my children?*

She went to see the King of the imps. Now this king was always joking and teasing and laughing. He could turn the world upside down and make it seem the right way up. He could point at a man so that everyone would laugh at him. My children, if you saw him going to battle he would be in his silk suit and fop-hat waving a wooden sword that had conquered the King of Briton. Have you guessed the name of this magical fellow yet children?

"Arthur!" called the Black Team. "Est sólo uno!"

Mister Jim knew he had reached that moment story-tellers dream of, second only to 'tell it again'. "Shall we say goodnight? – Or do you want me to continue?"

"Carry on!" Came the insistent reply from them all.

Jane said "Please carry on Mister Jim. I want to know what happens to Janet – I hope it's something nice."

"It was a long long time ago Jane. When wolves the size of thunderstorms were drowned in rivers flowing with knives. Blood-red cloud wrack rained arrows. Witches and warriors fought inside egg-shells. Ants built roads in a night for the ghosts of animals to pass along to their spirit-moots. The world was in turmoil as the spite of gods left nothing that wasn't torn, battered or burnt."

A nudge and mime from Jane to Joe and more wine was brought. Mister Jim continued.

"So as I have said, Minden went to see this imp Arthur" he waited for the usual response then continued "in his magnificent palace of a pig sty."

She told him her problem. "My three boys have no spirit. What shall I do?"

"Minden" he said "If you will read a story with me tonight then I will tell you the first one." The bargain was agreed so Minden and Arthur read a

story together about a deserted castle full of ghosts that men and women came to and drove the ghosts out. In return Arthur gave Minden a walnut shell with the spirit of a fox inside it. "Forge this into a ring and when Reven wears it he will be quick, clever and devious."

"Thank you King of the imps. Then I shall send him to help Ranet." So it came to pass. Reven kissed Minden then strode into the dawn without looking back.

The second bargain was the same as the first but Minden had to let him have a golden dagger also. They read a story together of an old king with two heads that argued with each other. None of the noble courtiers would volunteer to cut off one or the other heads so the arguing continued and the kingdom decayed. One day a blacksmith came over the mountains and got the King to put both his heads on the anvil and beat them together. Arthur gave her a purse of thistledown with the spirit of a raven in it. "Forge this into a ring and when Korpen wears it he will be a messenger who spies the land and is known everywhere."

"Thank you King of the imps. Then I shall send him to help Janet." So it came to pass. Korpen kissed Minden then strode into the dawn without looking back.

The third bargain was different. "Now we have read two stories we must write one. Each year at mid-winter we will write a story about Janet, Ranet, Manet, Reven, Korpen and Fisken. We will get our three chamberlains to help us. Mister Bob to check the facts. Mister Chris to draw the pictures and Mister Jim to see we have told the story as stories must be told. The third bargain was agreed. Minden added a kiss from her and in honour of this kiss Arthur gave her his immortality. Wasn't that a strange side-bargain children mine? Minden's kiss in exchange for Arthur's immortality! Shall I tell you?

"Yes!" they called.

"For her, a kiss was the only valuable thing she had. For him, he'd never had to confront death. What difference would being mortal make? If it meant he died so what then? Another day would no doubt come tomorrow."

Arthur gave her a blank sheet of paper with the spirit of a cuttlefish in it (Interrupted, Mister Jim explained what a cuttlefish was to the Britons and how it would change colour to suit the different colours of the seabed and confuse its enemies or sneak up on its prey.) "Forge this into

a ring and when Fisken wears it he will be able to vanish or appear, deceive or confuse.

"Thank you King of the imps. Then I shall send him to help Manet." So it came to pass. Fisken kissed Minden then strode into the dawn without looking back.

Now do you see children mine that these magic children had gone out into the world and again Minden was all alone. She and Arthur often wondered together where the three boys and three girls had got to. Even though Minden knew she was now immortal she wondered if she would ever see these precious children again. Even though he was now mortal Little Arthur, the King of the imps who had 'there is only one' on his banner knew he would play games with them all again.

"And for now that is as far as the story goes children mine. There will be more."

They applauded Mister Jim. There were many compliments and questions. Jane collected them all together. "Mister Jim, you have a little bit of Arthur's spirit in you. Enough to make us love you forever. Enough to wish you peace wherever you go. Enough to weave for us what we can't weave ourselves. You told of Mister Bob and Mister Chris. They served gently and steadily. You deserve to be with them."

Without prompting by Jane, Joe said "Mister Jim. I am the luckiest person alive tonight. One day I will be in your legend as the wooden carving that comes alive with a spirit brought by these Britons. If the three boys in your story can be given a spirit then so can I."

This was to be their last day on the road. By now Maggie, Rachel and Al had managed to get some spirit of loyalty into the domestic servants. John and James's easy-going manner had made a team out of the guards. They had been given little patrol tasks to organise for themselves. On this final day they would meet face to face with the Black Team as ambushers and ambushed. This training was so that each of the Britons would have at least one personal guard they could trust. At the lunch stop Rachel addressed the guards.

"Later we will be entering a strange city where we need you. We have come to see the King himself but who knows what enemies he has lurking in alleys? Just think of the trouble at court if a stupid thug gets to strike one of us? Jarvin! What do you think?"

"Er I don't know miss."

"Would you get blamed?"

"Someone would always blame the guards right or wrong miss."

"True. So we mustn't give them a chance. If I'm attacked what would happen?"

"You'd be hurt miss."

"And my attacker?"

"Oh. He'd be dead miss. You'd kill him."

"I wish it were so Jarvin. I could be dead from a cross-bow bolt and that's why I need you guards to look at upstairs windows and be ready to call our signals. In our team each one can call danger or give an order and we all obey. That means you guards have to look once – be certain – then call."

Jane took over. "You'll be looking after us before the attack. We all look after each other during an attack. Our first rule is run away to a place of safety. That's why we are here. Because we ran away to keep breathing."

Maggie took over. "Don't panic. Do not be scared. All of us girls have killed with our blades because we knew how to with a single strike. Our enemies panicked while we kept our heads and kept killing. Don't worry about your backs if we are with you but listen for the low-high-high whistle and if you see a way to safety call it yourself."

Rachel finished. "On the road back we will learn more. For now do the best we can. Now line up and I will inspect you. I won't have unshaven guards and I want every enemy to look at you and see you know your business. Tonight you must get rid of this road dust."

Jane added an after-thought "Al and Joe can fight in a tournament but not in the street or inn. If they're attacked they need simple instructions then it's up to you to be quick and decisive. They will help a little but it will all be over by the time they know what has happened."

5 Arlesene arrival

Every town has landmarks you can see from a distance recognisable as a person's face. As the road curved round the steep slope of the river valley Arlesene appeared only a couple of miles away and said hello with an unmistakable odour on the breeze. A light haze covered the sprawling town through which four pointed spires shone golden in the late afternoon sunlight. Like Melbun it had a river running through it but the walls and castle were much more prominent and well looked after. Unlike Melbun most of the town appeared to be inside the walls.

They were expected at the Duke's town-house. Within fifteen minutes the Black Team boys and two guards were making the most of the light to map the town. At dusk they naturally found themselves by the quays hoping to find a Briton captain to give them the street-news but it seemed few sea-going vessels came this far upstream. In desperation they entered what seemed like the largest inn and James told the landlord that there would be ale for any British-speakers who cared to join them. Nothing happened but it was the first time John and James were able to treat their servants with ale and simple company. They would be the eyes and ears of the Black Team on the street, the ones that found an escape boat, the ones to hear rumours. Also, Allesandro at Bartonbry had taught them that if they made a point of being strangers some spies might be tempted to come and see for themselves who these strangers were. That suited them fine.

It took half an hour for a shy boy to claim his ale. He was like Al but a bit older, spoke with an Arlesene accent, and said he was the son of a cloth merchant. The boys were delighted to meet him.

"I'm James, this is my brother John."

"My name is Lawrence."

"And what is the name of your companion?" asked James. Lawrence wasn't ready to lie and stumbled. "It's all right Lawrence. Am I right to think you've been given five minutes notice to find out about us? We're from Bartonbry in Briton, please ask us what you want to know."

Lawrence was ashamed at being found out so obviously. "How did you guess?"

James said "We expected it. When odd strangers arrive word will soon travel to those who need ears everywhere. Do you know what in Briton we call an 'ambassador-at-home' is?"

"Yes. He advises the King on foreign affairs."

"The son of our Ambassador at home is travelling with us. He's very much like you."

"Alefred."

"You know him! Would you like to meet him Lawrence?"

"Yes. Do you know who I am?"

"No. Except only one or two people in this town would know Alefred's name so that means you might be related to the Ambassador-at-home or chief intelligencer."

John spoke up "Also Lawrence – either your appearance here has been the result of a panic or a plan. Either way we are happy. We have nothing to hide and we would like the chance to show we have nothing to hide."

"I'm lost."

"You may have heard stories from Briton recently. You must know about the Black Team, Duchess Minda and a revolution that was snuffed-out. We have come here to forget the fighting Britons and make friends in Lanconia. That's the only reason we have come but nobody will believe us. We are happy to submit to questioning and carry our mistress' message of goodwill to the highest powers in your land."

"News has been confusing. Didn't you murder all the priests in the cathedral at Lostnock?"

"Both of us were in Lostnock that afternoon Lawrence. We were both asleep after 36 hours of hard work when it happened. Then as soon as it got dark we had to go on patrol to hunt a very clever assassin on the loose. I can tell you for a fact Lawrence or my name's not John Taylor that there was a lot of death that day that didn't need to happen. In short – You can have it longer if you want – a promise of peaceful surrender was broken by the Bishop and boys had to order men to kill them – "

" – And be killed. Two of our brother cadets were killed." said James. "How old are you Lawrence?"

"Nineteen."

"Those boys were sixteen. They volunteered to do the job of men ten years older. The only training they had was four months of thinking before acting."

"If you're going to visit us at the Duke of Orfleur's town house then please remember that the girls have blood on their hands. Real blood. Lots. Not just on their hands. Have you ever cut somebody's throat Lawrence? Have you seen how much blood spurts from a man's throat? Each spurt getting less I admit – but to kill a man by stabbing and slashing is a big laundry bill."

Lawrence tried to come back after this barrage "I know how to wield a sword."

"Dear friend. Please don't say that in the hearing of any of our party as they may ask you to prove it. And you still haven't introduced your companion!"

"Oh. Excuse me."

While Lawrence went to persuade his minder that the game was up John said to James "I bet you he is the son of the Ambassador at home."

John said. "I agree. No bet! But he could be here on his own behalf? Possibly nobody else knows."

"Or he thinks nobody knows and there are others watching in the crowds."

John said to the silent guards. "You know the 'retreat' hand sign? When I give it we will soon be going and it will be for you to make sure the path is clear so we can get away quickly." Lawrence returned with a servant.

"Servant – you master is no danger. We like him. We will take him to the Duke of Orfleur's house see who is there and then bring him home safe. Is that alright?"

"Please Sir why ask me? I am only a personal servant."

"As you wish. We know you're here to keep your master from harm. Shall we go Lawrence?"

"Yes I suppose so. Kneive will you tell father."

James said "Your father will be welcome if he comes to collect Lawrence but our household may be in confusion." James gave the signal. The guards cleared their way so quickly that the three boys were outside without the minder. "Guards wait for the minder then follow and talk to him. We can look after ourselves. Come on Lawrence!"

At the Duke's house the four girls were bathed, combed and ready for visitors. Mister Jim and Al had gone out together to make their arrival known and present letters of introduction. Johnas and Paulanne were to be ready but it was explained to them that the first defence of the Black

Team in a strange town was best done by the best fighters. When whatever happened settled down they would be brought in.

John introduced Lawrence. "Lady Jane, Mistress Rachel and Mistress Margaret. – I have brought you a spy to play with. His name is Lawrence, he is very well bred." Lawrence bowed.

James said "It's alright Lawrence, John is playing games. I'm sure the girls will make you welcome."

With an encouraging smile John said "They will tease you! Be warned!"

James said "We will leave you ladies now and wash off our road dust. Be gentle with him!"

"Come and sit with us Lawrence." said Rachel. "Share our wine. How naughty the boys are to tease by not telling us anything about you."

"My name is Lawrence Espice son of Jean who is assistant to the Lanconian Ambassador to your country. My father went to Bartonbry to see for himself and has many words of praise. And you speak Lanconian! He said you were learning Italian instead."

Jane said "Oh yes. We are not good at Lanconian or Italian but we have nothing else to do."

Rachel saw Jane's 'follow-me' hand signal. "Yes. Nothing to do. No pirates, no bandits, no outlaws."

Maggie joined in with a sigh "Yes. Nothing to do but sit and wait for boys to entertain us."

"What is there to do in Arlesene Lawrence?" asked Jane.

"The forest of Arlesene has hunting, tournaments, gardens, pleasure lodges. Just ask the Warden of the King's forest and I'm sure you'll be invited."

"Yes!" said Rachel. "Let's do that. Will you take us to see this Warden tomorrow?"

Maggie said "It's nearly a week since Jane killed anything or anybody. I saw her cut the throat out of a deer while the rest stayed in a lodge out of the pouring rain."

Al took his King's letter to the Briton Ambassador. The Ambassador had been warned about the Black Team and heard many tales from many people. "Now young man you're to keep out of trouble. Is that clear?"

"Yes Sir. We are on a mission of friendship."

"I want you all to report to me here at eight tomorrow morning and I will explain what you may and may not do."

Al sensed the start of a battle. He was ready. "That will be too early Sir."

"You'll do as I say."

"We will be calling on the court officials tomorrow morning."

"You cannot just walk into the court. These things will take time for me to arrange."

"Oh I agree it will take time. I passed the Ambassador-at-home's house about three minutes before reaching here so it will take three minutes."

"I forbid it!"

"Sir we come here on the direct orders of the King spoken by his own lips and with the Queen's kisses too. Please be good enough to put your reasons for this 'forbidding' in writing ready for my servant to collect at – shall we say eight tomorrow morning? I am a busy man – Please forgive my rapid departure. Oh! Quick! What is the Lanconian Ambassador-at-home's first name?"

"Why should I tell you?"

"Because if you don't I will carve my name on your face!"

"Robert."

"Thank you. Every time you obstruct me you obstruct the King. If Jed can kill his father I can kill you. I've had a long day on the road and now a long evening of diplomacy ahead – Already you have spoiled it."

On the way to the Ambassador-at-home's house he knew Jane's elation of killing that deer. He shot with the denial then cut the Ambassador's throat with the demand for written reasons. He would ask the team if he'd done right. He would write the facts to his father tonight.

Meanwhile Mister Jim had smoothed the way for Al and explained to the Ambassador-at-home that Al was the son of the Briton Ambassador-at-home. Mister Jim told him that as far as he knew there was no political purpose to the visit and definitely, as he must already know, no violence intended.

"But Mister Hallenson I think we both know that however innocent of political intrigue these boys and girls are they have assumed the protection of the Duke of Orfleur and the Duke will be using that as a

bridge to Briton and the young Duchess. If he welds Orfleur and Avel he will have enormous power. Enough to make and break kings."

"That is a good reason to remain friends Sir. You must have heard how the Duchess of Avel calls the tune in Briton and will only get stronger. She is but a teenager and has many years to get stronger each year and collect more loyal friends. Within six months of becoming a Duchess she has sent these children to make friends with the Kingdom of Lanconia. You know my Duke is strong without being stupid – Not like his son. I have seen with my own eyes how this Black Team have realised for themselves that they don't want a stupid young duke of Orfleur as a neighbour across the narrow sea and have taken him in hand. I can tell you for certain that the future of Orfleur is one of strength, wisdom and progress. Please have a very gentle private talk with Lady Jane Weston on that subject. She holds the key to more than just friendship."

Al was shown in and bowed low to the Ambassador-at-home. "Sir – Mister Jim may have told you who I am but here are my King's words." He handed over his King's letter.

The Ambassador didn't bother to look at it. "Welcome to Lanconia and Arlesene. Mister Jim as you call him – I have heard of this first name habit of yours from Briton – has told me that you are the son of your own Ambassador-at-home."

Al had been told by Rachel to try to get accepted as a son by the Ambassador-at-home. "Yes. May I call you Lord Robert Sir?"

Mister Jim's smile and 'I-told-you-so' raised eyebrows loosened the Ambassador resolve to be formal. "Lord Robert is my fate! I have been told you make friends like waves meet the shore. Now I know for myself."

"Do you have a son yourself Sir?"

"No Al – see I have your name as well young man! Us oldies can still play the game – A teenage daughter about your age."

"I believe my Lady Minda is planning to host foreign teenagers both boys and girls. If that happens I pledge to personally escort them to see my father and Briton. They're welcome at any time of course Lord Robert but I may have other duties."

"That is a very nice offer Al."

"There are some people in Briton who think all foreigners are untrustworthy thieves and smell. I would like them to know better. We all would."

"Well said young man. I think you mean to make it happen."

"Please Sir. Our party has just arrived but by now the girls should be ready to see visitors without ceremony—" A messenger came in and gave a whispered message to Lord Robert. After a short while for thought Lord Robert said to the messenger. "Get the guards I'll come myself."

When the messenger had left, Lord Robert explained he'd been told that the son of one of the foreign staff had fallen into the hands of the boys of the Black Team and had been taken to the Duke of Orfleur's house.

"There's nothing to worry about Sir." said Al.

"But there is for me young man. I trust he isn't going to be hurt but I don't know if he is acting on orders or for his own curiosity. If the former then I need to know whose orders. Do you see?"

"Please come Sir. They get sad if they don't tease or charm. Tonight is a charming night. I'm sorry Mister Jim for interrupting you I seem to have pushed you aside."

"We are a team Al. Each serves."

On their short journey through the dark lanes of Arlesene from the Ambassador's to the Duke's house Al quietly briefed the two Orfleur guards to scout ahead with a great show of purposeful energy. They would appear to be smart and looking for trouble while the Ambassador's guards were hoping to scare off old-crones and beggars. They exchanged grins with Al and were off!

When they arrived at the Duke's house there were welcomed by the staff and invited to the parlour.

"Aha! Lawrence! Up to your tricks again. Can't you leave peaceful people alone!"

Rachel said. "Please Ambassador. Our boys brought him here – And he's a sweet young man."

The Ambassador had noted the efforts the girls had made to be courtly and after-all he had two daughters. "Ladies, thank you for looking after Lawrence. He's one of our clever troublemakers."

Rachel jumped in "So you have more than one clever troublemaker? Can we meet them?"

Al winked at the Ambassador. "The girls have ears and brains Sir. In a fit of madness God must have connected them together."

Maggie said "We know you've come specially to say hello. If we have disturbed you then we will come tomorrow at the time you appoint or we will have wine and cakes here."

The Ambassador wondered how it was that these girls could so quickly ask him to decide for them without prejudice. "I have a meeting but I will postpone it for you. Al! Would you fulfil your promise and bring my daughters. Take your time. Haste and panic are our enemies."

Jane asked "Please Lord Robert ask Al to bring your whole family."

"Do you have a wife alive? asked Maggie.

"No she died a year ago."

Maggie jumped across to sit beside him arm in arm. "We know too much for our age but Al – off you go Al! – will have your family here soon."

Truly as waves crash on a beach!

The girls had made their first attack and now the boys and Paulanne were invited to join them. The Taylors were well dressed, freshly shaved and perfumed. All the boys quietly performed the roles of servants, bringing food and wine, checking that their guests were comfortable and had everything they wanted. Jane was determined to play the lady with complete control and obedience. She called a halt "The boys you see here are our best servants. John and James are of our team." They bowed formally to the high-status guests. "Johnas has never served before so we are teaching him." Johnas bowed. "All of our boys are precious to us. Thank you boys. That will do. When Al returns you can finish your letters home." The boys bowed to Jane and retired. Jane continued "Too often the boys cling to the men. Too often the boys treat every day as a holiday. Now they have the time we want them to use it usefully in our service. Lord Robert let us tell you that Mister Jim has been a great help to us. He makes us feel like we are living today and yesterday and tomorrow all at once. Isn't that lovely!"

Lord Robert didn't understand a word but knew the female voice of command. Mister Jim roasted as his modest creation was being borne aloft by these girls.

By hard work the Black Team made Lord Robert one of their family. By good fortune they made friends with a free-spirit who was entrusted with secrets at the heart of government.

Banished upstairs, the boys decided that the reaction of the Briton Ambassador was unexpected and suspicious. They reckoned that Al had done very well all on his own. His first time out alone and he'd made an enemy – that was good. Yes it was good the Taylors assured him. The Ambassador's enemies might become their friends, and his friends who secretly despised him would give the Black Team respect. So well-done again Al. They didn't know enough yet but Briton traders would surely have something to say about him tomorrow if asked in the right way.

Johnas was amazed. "All that going on downstairs and we are sent to bed! I can't believe it."

"It's like a hunt." said James. "You only want a handful when it gets close or else everyone gets in everyone else's way."

John said "Word will get round and people will be curious. All of us will be asked why we let our womenfolk rule us."

"Er – What's the answer?" asked Johnas.

"Think for yourself but give the answer we were doing something just as important but nobody knows it."

"Oh. What's that?"

"No silly. It's a pretend." Said John.

James said "Actually leaving them to do what they do better than we can isn't a pretend."

Al said "Lord Robert will have a pleasant time. The girls will make him happy. I saw Maggie pounce when he said his wife had died. She went straight to sit beside him and be a comfort. We boys would say we were sorry but she took his arm for sympathy and company."

John said "Well done Johnas at playing the humble servant. It makes Jane look like she's got the power of a queen. Tomorrow will be different. Although we must always be humble if we get to court – you especially must be like your father – strong and determined – a man not a sappy boy. You'll be a man who knows what he wants and how to get it."

Al said "Nobody but us knows that you're not going to be the next Duke of Avel. What do you think people will think of the Duchy of Avel and the Duchy of Orfleur being joined?"

"Um I hadn't really thought."

"That's why we're here not chattering downstairs." said James.

Al said "Just suppose the three dukes neighbouring Orfleur should combine would that worry you?"

"Oh I see. They might be planning something."

"And if you had a quarrel with one you couldn't deal with it because the others would join in. Now the Duchess is one of the most powerful people in Briton on her own. Your father is one of the stronger dukes in Lanconia. Together they would be very difficult to beat."

"So there will be a lot of worried dukes."

"And the King won't be too happy either." said Al.

"Jane is the herald for a battle of worry." said John "You are the knight and we are your supporters. You will be quizzed so we need to decide on a story. We have a couple of hours of question and answers to prepare for the next few days."

Al said "The first rule of combat is get close to your enemy. You know that Johnas. We hope to get invitations to hunt or dance from the worried ones trying to get close to us. Lawrence is an example. I want to know who sent him and so does Lord Robert."

"And don't forget your Ambassador." said Johnas. "From what you say he is nervous."

"Good point. Well spotted!" said John. "What is his game?"

"Who is his master?" said Johnas.

"Another good question. He could be in somebody's pocket." said John.

"Or in somebody's bed like Jed." said Al.

After Lawrence had left with Lord Robert and his daughters there was a catch-up discussion. Jane apologised for being so brutal to the boys but they reassured her it was perfectly played. Now she had an imperial reputation to go with her bloody one. Mister Jim was smiling in a cradle woven from his dreams.

Al said "Is there something you would like to help with Paulanne? You don't have to. I'm sure that as you are so different to us you'll see or hear things that we're blind or deaf to."

Rachel said "Is there any danger of actual attack?" As nobody spoke she answered her own question "I don't think so but the longer we stay the more chance enemies have to plan. I suggest we tell everyone we are here for seven days but leave earlier. That way they can plan their 'accident' for a night when we'll be gone."

Paulanne said "Don't be silly. There's nobody going to attack us."

Rachel said "We can't take the chance. If a cuckoo came to our nest it would be killed as soon as possible. If we were in our own country that

might take a day but here a couple. I expect nobody will be so rash with us to start with."

"But you're not a cuckoo in a nest."

Al said "Yes we are. What everyone will think is that the strongest and richest Duchess is going to marry the already strong Duke of Orfleur. That's what we're telling people. Combined they will be unbeatable. The next Duke of Orfleur could be the next King of Lanconia."

"And Briton" said John. There was a thoughtful silence.

Tuesday

Paulanne took the role of discovering more about Lawrence. Maggie went with her to invite him to ride in the Duke's park. He wasn't at home and nobody knew where he was. In fact everybody was certain they didn't know.

"Did you believe them when they said they didn't know where he was Paulanne?"

"Yes – um – but as you mention it – no. – Strange."

"What does it mean?"

"I don't know."

"Start with the obvious and go from there."

"I don't know where to start."

"Somebody isn't telling the truth. Let's start there. Why?"

"Because they want to hide the truth."

"That's a good reason. Any other reasons?"

"Aha! Because they don't want us to see him."

"Much better."

"I'm not used to intrigue Maggie."

"So that's why I'm teaching you. I'm doing something else at the moment. What's that?"

"Sorry. I don't know."

"I'm guarding you. We already know Lawrence is mixed up in intrigue so we must be alert."

"You're making me scared."

"I'm a better guard than the guards we don't have. Did you realise we didn't have a guard with us?"

"I never thought about it."

"You're our guest Paulanne so we don't expect you to live every minute alert."

"Are we going to be attacked?"

"That's why we're wandering like two easy targets. To see if anyone will be tempted."

"Why would somebody attack us?"

"Steal my carelessly dangling purse or snatch this silver brooch. My purse has pebbles in it and my brooch is wired to my chain mail vest."

"What good is it to tempt thieves."

"I want to see if word is around on the street that you don't try stealing from me. If it isn't then it soon will be."

"Why?"

"Once thieves understand that I am not soft they will respect me when I want them to steal from others for a small fee or follow somebody. That's why I found you a small dagger case to put on your belt."

"Why is it empty?"

"So it can't be used against you. It looks like you're armed and I'm not. You're tall and look like an eagle while I'm short and look like a maid with a lucky kiss for brains. A thief will see me as the easy one."

"But why?"

"You remember the whistles and hand signals? Look at my hand! What does it show?"

"Um. Danger."

"Keep looking at my hand as I tell you we are being followed. Don't look behind!"

"What do we do?"

"We go shopping. Our follower will have to wait outside at each shop then at one we'll go out the back way."

"Are we going to be attacked!"

"Not by the follower – At least I don't think so. Don't forget the follower might be a friend."

"How can they be a friend?"

"Easy. Suppose Lawrence has been taken by somebody to be questioned or hidden from us. Perhaps his faithful servant wants to let us know."

Let's go into the nearest shop a man would go to and we will look around."

"Why?"

"I like the way you keep asking questions Paulanne. It's a good way to learn. The answer is we invite the follower to follow us into the privacy of the shop. If they do then we can talk and if not we know they're just watching."

"How clever!"

"Don't forget to act like we're having fun shopping. Point at things. Stop and start and chat. You know."

"Oh you mean pretend!"

"Yes. The more we really look like shoppers the less anyone watching will be suspicious."

After two visits to shops the girls were still being followed so at the third they stayed for ten minutes and at the fourth a few cents changed hands and eventually their shadow was informed by the shopkeeper that two girls came in for a minute twenty minutes ago but didn't buy anything and left.

"In Briton I would have trapped him but we're under orders not to get into trouble. Let's get back. We've learned a lot this morning."

"If this is your idea of not getting into trouble I worry to think of what your normal day in Bartonbry is like!"

"When we get back I'll show you how to use a dagger in the street to defend yourself. You never know when it may be needed. I'll send a messenger to Lawrence's house to say if they had hadn't sent the follower they should know we were followed."

"Why?"

"Another good why. To let them know we are experts at this game. Anything to bring them into the open. If it wasn't their man it will make them worried. We know they were lying to us and we still don't know why. I expect John and James will think it through."

"What does it mean for Lawrence?"

"Oh him. He's a pawn. Possibly a pawn that has made a false move. Of course we don't want anything to happen to him but I think we can say for certain he's in a bit of trouble."

Jane and Rachel took two guards and went to see the Briton Ambassador. As they passed Lord Robert's house they left a message to

say thank you for indulging them last night and they were available to talk about what little politics they knew, but better, how should they go about making friends to trade with?

At the Briton Ambassador's house they were kept waiting. After five minutes Jane and Rachel walked through into the back of the house to find the kitchen and let the upsetting of normal rules confuse a stupid man or devious enemy. They refused to be chased back into the parlour to await the master of the house. When Rachel suggested he had been woken by their arrival and was being shaved and dressed there was no denial. The girls had practised questioning servants many times so soon had nods to Rachel's suggestion that a hangover might be involved. From the state of the back of the house they guessed there was no mistress of the house and following this clue discovered that the Ambassador's wife had returned to Briton three months before and was unlikely to return. The girls asked themselves what would Minda do at this shambles. She would be furious.

Rachel said to Jane "We want this idiot to lead is to his partners in stupidity. We can't replace him."

"We could make Al the official ambassador of Bartonbry. It wouldn't be a replacement but as good as. When we tell the King at Melbun he can decide what to do."

"I know! With Paulanne! She could be the Duke's ambassador. Avel and Orfleur together! That would upset the worriers."

"Is Paulanne keen on Al?"

At this interesting point they were interrupted by a servant who asked them to come to the parlour to see the Ambassador. Jane began the moment she went through the door. "Ambassador. Good drinking last night was it? Have a hangover this morning do you? You're the Ambassador to the most important and closest neighbour to Briton and we find you laying-abad drunk. You can start packing your bags man. The first thing I shall do when I get back to Briton is go to Melbun then the King's castle then the King's parlour and tell him to his face you should be sent to the bottom of a river to tell the fishes about Briton. At least you'll have enough to drink! Servant!" Jane snapped her fingers.

"Yes miss." said Rachel falling into a practised routine. "Your first item Lady Jane is to ask the Ambassador for his 'forbidding' reasons in writing as required by your servants last night by eight this morning."

"Thank you Rachel." Jane looked at the Ambassador in silence.

Eventually the Ambassador replied. "Your demands are refused."

"Second item miss is for the Ambassador to arrange a gathering of Briton merchants so we may discuss the state of trade and how to improve it."

"Go away children."

"Third miss – will the Ambassador help to organise a visit from the Duchess of Avel to the King of Lanconia in two month's time?"

"Certainly not!"

"Anything else servant?"

"No miss."

"I have something else. Your wife has left you. Why?"

"Not your business. Get out of my house."

"As you wish." Rachel opened the door for 'her mistress' made a rude face at the Ambassador and they left.

Rachel reminded their guards that they had to look up and behind. After a hurried conference they decided to go back to their friend Lord Robert. They had nothing to hide and as Rachel pointed out he probably knew of useless Lanconian ambassadors. He wasn't at home but they should try the castle. They'd already stormed the King's castle at Melbun by going up to the gates and asking so they didn't expect difficulty. It took a while of perfectly proper delay to get entrance and see the Ambassador-at-home.

Jane said "We have news or maybe not for you Lord Robert. The Ambassador of Briton is drunk and useless. We will see he is replaced as soon as possible Sir. In the meanwhile we want to know who to make friends with so we may discuss the state of trade with Briton and how to improve it."

Rachel said "Our King gave us twenty pounds each to start trading. We have no idea! Help us meet the traders."

"Of course I knew."

"Why did his wife leave him?"

"Goodness! You have been finding out fast. Our Ambassador says your Duchess is impatient. Now I see for myself."

"No you don't Sir. We should bring her with us next time then you would know about walking on hot coals. Don't worry she will sooth your burns herself."

"I'm very busy now girls. I have noted your request and will put a man onto it to give you some names by dusk."

Jane said "Thank you Lord Robert. We're so lucky to meet such nice people."

Rachel said "You're welcome any time Lord Robert here or at Bartonbry and I'll tell the King how you were an uncle to us in a strange town. If you see Al ask him if he knows a way our King can honour you because you have already earned it."

Johnas, to be accompanied by the Black Team boys and Mister Jim were summoned to a private audience with the King. The Taylors insisted that Johnas was to refer to their very humble birth even though now they were richly dressed and highly favoured by important people. "Remember that in Bartonbry we prize honesty and scorn deception."

Three of the King's privy councillors interviewed them for over half an hour before they could see the King. Johnas managed to stick to his story that he was looking after the Black Team as a favour to the Duchess of Avel. Al pointed out that the Duchess was new at her job and only eighteen and wanted trade and peace. One of the councillors asked "Why have you brought messages for Lanconian rebel leaders?"

James said "We don't know what you're talking about Sir. Our baggage is ready to be searched. We have not heard of rebel leaders."

John added "We spent a horrible two weeks fighting rebels in our own country. You have heard about the bloodshed?"

Al said "Either there is some grave mis-understanding for which we apologise or your information is false – Maliciously false. Tell us more so we may deal with it."

"It has come to our knowledge that you met with one 'Red Thomas' two nights ago at the village of Trepault."

They looked at each other blankly. "Mister Jim said. I am pretty certain none of our party met with such a person."

John saw the flaw "Your informant would be able to say whether it was all of us or one. What did he say?"

"Er. I am not at liberty to tell you."

"So it's a lie." said Johnas. "Now you have wasted our time with lies we will see the King."

"You'll wait until we are satisfied with your answers Johnas."

"Let us have your names that we may tell who prevented us from meeting the King. And we will depart." said James.

"Don't be hasty. We're sure it was a mis-understanding."

Johnas said "I'm sure it was a lie. Secretary! Do you know these men? Shall we have their heads on pikes boys?"

James said "No Sir. We will promise not to let the girls hear of this if they tell us who has been spreading these tales to them."

Al said "Please ignore them sirs. Our instructions are to keep out of trouble. We will ask the King about you and your reluctance to find the truth. I fancy he will be happy to give us a present of one of you for our lionesses to play with. He knows full well where the power lies and doesn't need grit like you in his eye."

Mister Jim, almost to himself said "I expect he's been looking for a reason to rein you in. Now he wins against you and wins by pleasing Orfleur and Avel."

The meeting with the King himself was tense. After the introductions and presentation of Al's King's letter, John addressed the King. "I am sorry to start with a bad note Your Highness but we have been falsely accused by your three councillors of aiding rebellion. We have just fought against it ourselves so we are unlikely to be encouraging it now Sir."

James added "We've told them that you will find some punishment for their lying which would be more merciful than telling our girls. I hope we did right Your Highness?"

Mister Jim saw James' trap and was awed by his cleverness and boldness. 'Get close' indeed! He had trouble keeping his countenance impassive.

"Young man – James isn't it? I have been told about you. I have been told you're nearly as clever as your girls themselves."

"No Sir! Please don't tell them that! They cherish cleverness like women cherish beauty. Us boys have steadiness and loyalty and luck."

The King laughed. "What other street-boy could walk into my court?"

"My brother John here and have you heard of Little Arthur Sir?"

"No?"

"May I take a big liberty Sir and say we need at least half an hour to tell his stories. Mister Jim will vouch for that."

"Yes Your Highness. A boy from the kitchens the Duchess of Avel has adopted as a mascot. He is a legend already Sir. He won the heart and a golden dagger from the King of Briton."

"Very well, another time then. Johnas! I have been told that somebody has at last found a use for you."

"I was a sobby boy Sir. Now I am training to be a man and then a lord."

"Good to hear it Johnas. Our kingdom needs strong and intelligent lords. 'Strong' and 'intelligent' are not words I have ever had cause to use when discussing you before. Is it those girls?"

"Yes Sir. I follow the girls and these boys support me closely."

"Secretary! I am grateful for the way the Duke of Orfleur has looked after these children for us. I understand what they must mean to the Duchess. So please thank him for bringing them to us. Thank you too Johnas. Now I will invite the boys of the Black Team to join me at lunch. Thank you again Johnas and Mister secretary."

This calculated snub was unexpected. For a moment the boys wondered if they should protest but they could look after themselves.

Johnas and Mister Jim were put out but when they talked it over with the girls their shame at being so badly treated evaporated when it was pointed out that it was a sign of desperation or stupidity to snub someone as powerful as the Duke of Orfleur. They mustn't feel provoked because it had exposed the King's policy. Didn't they see that the King had snubbed the girls as well? That showed he could only cope with a few of them at a time and would be easy meat for them together. Now all of them had to be seen in public about the town. Did Johnas feel he could host a small banquet at his father's country house? If so that would be fun to organise and fun deciding who should be invited and who should be snubbed. Rachel suggested they have an afternoon of teenage sports including taking a tent down and putting it up together as a team like they had done at Melbun. Suddenly they had a purpose, plenty to occupy them and opportunities to test the locals. Paulanne would be the hostess who knew the fashions and the Black Team would be the guests of honour. So much to do in two and a half days. So many people to test.

At the castle the King sat with the boys in the garden in the shade of an awning. The boys were unused to this muggy heat. The King asked them about the Duchess and Bartonbry and the rebellion. The boys answered simply and enthusiastically. He wanted full details of the massacre at Lostnock cathedral.

"To be truthful with you Sir" said John "If James and me had been there we would have looked to escape. That's what we have been trained to do if attacked by unknown forces."

James added "Those cadets had been tense for a day and had men to command so when the fighting started they were not going to stop for a moment. They were lucky they didn't know how badly prepared and disorganised they were."

"Hm – I have been told the Duchess's troops stormed the gates and gave no quarter."

"They were not troops Sir. Ten boys our age each with a dozen men. The bishop was a criminal who had publicly defied the King. Our Duchess tried all sorts of ways at her cost to get the Cathedral to surrender or betray him or catch him trying to escape but without success. The King was scared so what should she do? The peaceful clearance was going well until a friend of ours was shot in the cloister. The Lady Jane took an assassin's life later that evening but we don't glory in sad revenge."

"Is it true what they say about these girls?"

"I don't know what you have heard Sir but the facts are these. On the same day as Lady Jane killed a skilled assassin in Lostnock our two others were surprised by a troop of pikemen on their way to attack Bartonbry. The quiet one who we thought would be our quartermaster, keeping us fed and clothed shot three in a clever ambush. The brazen one commanded the men to surrender and they did. She turned them round, had her two guards disarm them, forgave them and marched them back to their homes while smiling and joking with them. When she found out they hadn't been paid she took them to the lord who had sent them to demand they got their pay and teach him a lesson. When he refused and his wife used a crossbow to wound one of the girls the quiet one stabbed both the lord and his wife to death in the heat of the moment. Later that day the two girls alone in an inn were nearly captured by four armed men. They confused the men then the brazen one killed three in moments. We have been taught how to kill with our knives Sir – not wound."

"And that's all?"

"Yes Sir. We know there are legends."

Al added "We're here Sir to put those memories in the past. It was too dreadful for two of them and they became very upset. That's why we're here. None of us boys have drawn blood. We have been taught self-defence so we may roam without fear. Our King may be fearful but our Duchess is fearless."

"I have been told that your Duchess may marry Johnas. Is that true?"

"We don't know Sir." said Al. "It's possible and we would like to surprise her with news of a prince to suit her as she is very lonely."

John said "Between us Sir – if I may be so bold – I think Johnas is too weedy for our Duchess. The Lady Jane isn't so sure and is trying to fatten him up as it were."

Al said "Orfleur have been welcoming to us, are our neighbours and I think Avel and Orfleur will be easy allies whatever happens but there are other dukedoms and other kingdoms. She has already sent us here and soon I guess we will be going to Italy to make more friends. She is hoping to have another school of cadets for foreign children – the next generation Sir."

"My Ambassador-at-home has told me much the same. We must meet your Duchess. I have in mind a prince that will suit her I will send him as my Ambassador to Bartonbry. It's a shame she has made an enemy of the Church. There are many strong and well paid voices already demanding retribution."

Al said "She won't worry about them Sir. It's the well-paid ones that move in silent darkness like mice behind the skirting that are difficult to deal with."

"Ah but young man you don't understand. Every day I am told by powerful men it is up to me to act against this outrageous wanton girl who defies God."

John said "Please Sir we have the answer to that. Do they want an honest and godly church or a corrupt church run by criminals? Let them know that there is no room in Lanconia for the latter."

"I say what goes on in my country! Your Duchess can keep her nose out!"

James pounced "Oh that's a good answer too Sir! – You can tell these people pestering you to deal with Minda that you won't be poking your nose into her kingdom. I wish I could see things as simply as you do Sir." The boys let James' thrust do its work in silence. This was hunting!

"Hmm I see too clearly now that your Duchess has no intention of staying in her castle. She has sent you imps to test me."

James kept the King on the run "Have you heard bad things about Bartonbry from your Ambassador Sir?"

"No. He tells many good things. But he also warns me that she is impatient and demands honesty. Kingdoms depend on favours and payments for power. Lots of people have to consider their own interests

before they agree so they move slowly. Do you see why many would like her caged before she upsets things?"

"Oh yes Sir" lied Al "She's very good at catching people being slow and corrupt but then gets them to go faster and be honest. If they're ignorant she teaches them. If they're wasting their lives she gives them a purpose."

"Like Johnas." Said John.

"And the Duke of Orfleur" said James.

"Or she kills them with her own hands." Said John.

"Like the Abbot of Bartonbry and the Bishop of Lostnock" said James.

Al said "And I'm afraid as you must have heard Sir that the fashion for killing corrupt churchmen has caught the King of Briton too. The Archbishop of Melbun was murdered by his own son on the King's direct order."

"It shocked a lot of people." Said John.

"Yes Sir. Nobody could remember the last time our King gave a direct order." Said James.

The King held up his hand to stop their barrage. "Enough! I have your message. I have a lot of slow consulting to do. I can tell you came here with more important things to do than meet with treacherous conspirators. I don't think you need me to tell you to be careful."

"Thank you Sir." said Al. "Will you be careful too. If you need help against councillors who have invented lies for their own purposes then use the password 'Votain's daughter' and we will be fast and trusty as far as we are able."

John said "That goes for our Duchess too. She has no army yet and has to get Briton settled first but if 'Votain's daughter' comes to her she will do her utmost to aid you."

When the boys of the Black Team arrived back at the Duke's town-house their first thought was for something to eat. They had refrained from discussion knowing that there would be a better opportunity when the whole team could comment and suggest. Johnas and Mister Jim were the only ones left at the house as the others were making things happen for a sports-day and feast. Johnas and Mister Jim were scheming and sending messages. Nobody had mentioned a budget but it had been agreed that Orfleur would pay for it all now, and the Minda would pay her half later, and there would be no silly extravagances. They would impress by being themselves. After hearing that Johnas and Mister Jim

had been encouraged after their royal snub the boys quickly told of their tense meeting with the King. "It was good it was just us three" said James. "We could bait him without tripping over each other. Well done Al! You were brilliant."

Al said "My bit was just common sense."

"No!" said John. "You let me and James block the exits and you blocked the entrance."

"What?"

"He was on the run and then you showed him you'd see which ways he thought he'd escape. He knew you were ahead of him which ever way he turned. We just got him worried. You cornered him and made him listen to our message."

"What message?"

"Didn't you hear him say he'd got our message?"

"Yes. That if people didn't behave they would be called to account or killed."

John said "That was our message but yours at the end was better. That he should look after himself and we would help him if needed. We've not sworn allegiance to him in general but in case of need. A man like that is bound to always be wanting help. Every time he want's a bit of help he will wonder if now is the time he needs us and Minda."

James added "You didn't say we had a price. That's what people like about Bartonbry – our friendship is free and full."

"Oh I see" said Al "Our friends are our family... ..Oh I'm sorry John and James."

John said "Just because we're orphans doesn't mean we don't have a family. We have Minda and she has us and she has the Black Team and Little Arthur and so do we."

James said "You're one of my family now Al. We know you're not a fighter like us but you're really good at being a respectful noble gentleman with good connections who will go far."

Mister Jim said "It sounds like he's already gone far. How would you like to be the de-facto Briton Ambassador to Lanconia?"

"I might give it a try one day."

"How about tomorrow?" said Johnas "The girls have found the Briton Ambassador is drunk and useless. They wondered if you should stay here as the Bartonbry ambassador together with Paulanne as the lady ambassador for Orfleur?"

"Oh hells fires!"

"What's the matter?" said Johnas.

"I want be with the Black Team. I can't be an ambassador just because I'm an ambassador's son."

"From what they say I think anyone could be better than your present one." said Johnas.

"And it would make Avel and Orfleur into one."

Johnas said "What's wrong with that? I may not be the next Duke of Avel but I will be the next Duke of Orfleur and I'm determined to make it more than it is."

Mister Jim added as an aside "He doesn't quite know how but he's determined."

Johnas said "Mister Jim! You're right. Just keep your mouth shut. We don't want everyone to know!" They all smiled.

"I can't be the ambassador for Bartonbry – I've never met the Duchess! And anyway what would people think if a boy an a girl who quite liked each other were living alone in the same house! It would be a scandal."

"You might have to marry her for the sake of peace then." joked James.

"And pay for her shopping when she needs a new dress." joked John.

"You can joke but I can't. I would love Paulanne as my wife but I'm not yet seventeen!"

Mister Jim called a halt to the jesting. "Al we have been testing and you have passed. Our test was 'do you know your own mind'. The answer was yes. What you decide in future we will understand and follow."

After a moment Al replied "Oh I see. Do I have brains?"

James said "Don't worry Al. How would we know where our friends stand if we don't ask? Also we might volunteer you for service without your knowledge. That means we have to be fairly sure your heart is in it."

John said "That's why the girls 'wondered'. Now we know."

Johnas said "Talking of volunteering – you have been volunteered to organise a sports-afternoon, like your cadet selection they called it, on Friday at my father's country house. We have been working on the invitations, but it's for fun not selection and there will be a banquet and dance afterwards. Can you do that?"

"No!" said John. "We haven't got a clue where to start. We don't know who to ask to help. You two will have to deal with the servants, quartermasters, suppliers and organise the tents and ranges. We can help but we don't know how Lanconia works."

James said "How many boys and girls are you expecting."

There was an odd look between Johnas and Mister Jim. "Girls? Oh of course."

Al called for a servant. "Wine for five. Food for three." They started again from scratch deciding what they were trying to do. What sort of people they should invite to make it a happy event. What sports they should offer to give everyone an opportunity. Would there be sports for parents? – If not how would they be entertained? What special rules or changes to the targets should they make to give it that Bartonbry tease? What sort of prizes should there be? How would all the guests be made welcome and part of a big family for the afternoon and evening? They assumed the girls were already spending money like water on a banquet and dance. John and James knew the success of the event would be measured by smiles not presents or private deals.

The Ambassador-at-home supplied ten names of merchants who traded with Briton. The Black Team picked the nearest three to visit in pairs immediately. Jane with Al, Maggie with John and Rachel with James. It was easier to whisper niggling worries privately arm in arm and easier to feel total trust arm-in-arm. They made their purpose known, told them Bartonbry wanted to trade and they were here to find out more to make it easier and more profitable. Business meetings were arranged for the next day.

Espice mystery

Supper was lively. Legends on the road had been left behind as more interesting and immediate issues had to be dealt with. Johnas was enjoying his new responsibilities while knowing his limits. The more he worked at something the more he found he earned respect. This was good!

When the servants had been banished Rachel called them to attention. "Just a word about enemies. Paulanne and Maggie found the Espice household denying they knew where Lawrence was. That was a lie but we don't know why. Then they were followed but we don't know who by except it wasn't friendly. The barefaced lies about bringing sedition to Lanconia from the King's councillors is serious. Luckily they were unprepared and we won the first round but it shows there are some well-placed opponents. I guess the opponents of Avel are the Church and the opponents of Orfleur are rival dukes. Together they're a bad mix. We

must show them we stand together even if the King himself tries to put Orfleur onto the sidelines. We must expect evil rumours and nasty tricks. Also the Briton Ambassador will have reason to poison our visit. Thank you for listening."

Jane said "John and James we need you to divert merchants tomorrow to introduce you to the shippers in case we need to escape by river. I have also been thinking that someone might pick a quarrel with one of you men. I might go with Johnas to see the Sheriff tomorrow to tell him you're under strict orders to avoid provocation. If it happens then invite them to the sports-day as you're far too busy to wipe a fly off your nose just now."

A guard entered. "Please. Lawrence Espice has turned up."

Rachel said "Make sure he is disarmed then show him in." John and James took position either side of the door."

Jane said "Remember! No violence."

Lawrence stumbled in breathing heavily and dirty. "Thank goodness I've reached safety." Paulanne was about to say something but Jane covered her hand with hers showing the 'stop' sign. She kicked Johnas under the table and hoped he understood to stay silent.

Mister Jim asked "What's happened Lawrence?"

"I was kidnapped from my bed last night. Blindfolded. Tied up. Questioned about you and threatened with death."

Mister Jim continued simply "Where were you kept?"

"Er In a room. Um near a market I think – I could hear all the noises."

"How many of them were there?"

"Two questioned me."

Jane held up her 'stop' signal to Mister Jim then said to Rachel "The prisoner is yours." Lawrence coloured.

"We're sorry to hear you were kidnapped. Of course you can stay safe with us. Did they feed you?"

"Yes miss Rachel."

"Good." She poured him some wine.

"How did they stop you escaping?"

"Tied my hands and feet miss."

"Did they let you escape or did you manage it on your own?"

"I don't know."

"How long did it take you to get here?"

"About five minutes miss."

"So you could take us back there now."

"Err I got lost a bit."

"So it's really a lot closer – Well done Lawrence – That helps us. How did you escape?"

"I managed to get the cords off my hands then untied the bonds to the bed frame then jumped out of the window into the street."

"Oh very well done! Now drink up your wine – You deserve it." Lawrence did so. "Now go and stand in the corner and face the wall until you decide to tell me the truth." John and James gently took him by the elbows and assisted him. "If your hands had been bound I would see the marks but there are none. Stay there! Think first what lies you have already told and then those lies you have been sent to tell."

John whispered to Lawrence "You're among friends. You haven't betrayed us and we've seen it all before. Take your time before telling the true story."

As if it was not relevant James said "I thought you were a bit tough on that poor thief earlier Maggie. You just wanted an excuse for blood didn't you."

"I can't come all this way then go home and admit I never used my knife. I let him keep his ear."

"But only in his pocket."

Jane said "You boys don't understand how once we've tasted blood we must keep tasting it. I'm desperate."

"Leave Lawrence alone girls! I expect he wasn't given any option. I'll keep you safe Lawrence. And your father too if that's a worry."

"Well get him to hurry." Said Rachel. "Nobody knows he's here... Except they do. Did anybody notice he didn't ask us to tell his father or anyone else he'd escaped?"

Jane indicated to Paulanne to fetch Lawrence from the corner to the table and that the tormenting was over.

Caution had stopped the Black Team from mentioning that Lawrence's father had taught them Lanconian for a week of afternoons at Melbun. Caution turned to suspicion when Lawrence didn't mention it either. There were unanswered questions. After refreshments had been brought

for them all but before the confession could begin Rachel said. "Shall we invite your father here to collect you safely?"

"Oh er Yes. The house at the top of Grellier street."

A message was sent immediately. Lawrence admitted that his father was being blackmailed because he owed certain people a lot of money he couldn't pay and those certain people wanted to know about the Black Team and Johnas for themselves. Where they were staying? How many guards they had? Who they met? Where they went? Anything and everything. As they'd discovered he hadn't really been kidnapped but these certain people – no he didn't know their names – thought you'd be hoodwinked by a kidnapping story to trust me. "Girls are always taken-in by suffering they said. You'll be looked after like a wounded knight they said."

Maggie said "You'll be giving your contacts information we chose to give. When do you see them next?"

"Oh am I still a spy?"

"Of course. Didn't you realise? Once a spy always a spy! Now you're going to be telling lies for us. Is that clear?"

"I was hoping – Er - I thought..."

Maggie's knife placed gently on the table took the colour from his face. "We offer you safety and friendship but you have to earn it now you have chosen to try to betray us. The dog that bites once will be muzzled. If it bites again it will be killed. If it repents it will be petted. Do I make it clear?"

"Yes miss."

"Good. Now will you go with Paulanne and Rachel and Mister Jim next door and write everything you can think of. Your life depends on it and so does ours."

When they had gone Johnas asked how they'd been so quick to discover Lawrence as a fraud.

Jane answered "Because we were looking for it and because we didn't all ask lots of stupid questions. We've practised this. Now we have his father to deal with. This is going to be more difficult because we know him as a friend from Melbun who taught us Lanconian and is a good friend of Bartonbry."

"Strange he should be here" said James. "We spent a week at Orfleur so he must have sailed as soon as we did or soon after."

Jane said "He was probably a very good person for the Lanconian Ambassador to send with all sorts of messages. As he knew us and had actually visited Bartonbry he would be ideal to explain to the court what was going on with this bunch of teenagers who innocently cause trouble."

The arrival of Lawrence's father was announced. Maggie raced out to meet him in the lobby. When she returned ahead of Jean Espice she had an extreme expression and held up the 'follow-me' hand sign. The reason was obvious to the Black Team. This wasn't the real Jean Espice! Thanks to Maggie's warning they played the game.

Jane said "Your son is just confessing Jean. We have caught him out easily and he says you're being blackmailed so we are keen to help you too – That's what we do in Bartonbry. People who are attacked by our enemies are sheltered by us. Please excuse John, Johnas, Al and me for a moment. Maggie! See we get refreshments. I want something sweet."

Outside Jane ordered John to take Al and Johnas to the Ambassador-at-home and bring help. John will explain on the way. You'll be in danger so go out by the back and run all the way. Alright John?"

"Yes Jane. I know what we're doing."

On the basis that an open mouth gives away secrets James made small-talk until Jane returned. "Our lady Minda says there was a Jean Espice that visited Bartonbry as a spy. She was sorry not to meet you but she was ill."

"I understand said 'Jean'."

"We were a few miles away learning Italian. If we'd known you were visiting we'd have pestered you about an afternoon of Lanconian." Said Maggie.

"You have learned it well nevertheless."

"We had lessons. Lots of them. Long ones. My head exploded." Said John.

"So is it true you're being blackmailed for a debt Jean?" Said Jane. By now if 'Jean' had made a wrong move he would be looking at three knife blades. If he had reached for a weapon he would be looking at three knife hilts sticking out of his chest.

"Yes. The trouble is I owe certain people a lot of money and they want information about you. I thought I might put them off by gathering harmless stuff through Lawrence."

"What sort of harmless stuff?"

"Who you meet? Where you go? You've got nothing to hide so why would that be a problem?"

"It's a problem because there are people trying to sabotage friendship between Avel, Orfleur and the kingdom of Lanconia. What do you say to that?"

"Avel is a fine dukedom – er with a fine duchess – but she won't obey commands of God's church so we must be careful lest that idea spreads here."

Jane said "One of the commands of the Abbot of Bartonbry was to have the Duchess poisoned. The Bishop of Lostnock set an assassin out to kill her. Fortunately I killed him with my own hands first. Now who was right? Me or the bishop?"

"Er – Those are weighty matters."

"So you see we deal with weighty matters Mister Espice. Mere blackmail like yours is nothing to us. In two days we could murder your persecutors. Not ourselves of course. I can't tell you the price as we don't know the killing rates here but we could have them killed cheaply in time or quickly for a proper amount. What is it to us? We have the building of kingdoms to do so we can't waste time on silly arguments amongst thieves."

"I'm not a thief miss!"

"Sorry Jean. What do you do for a living?" So Jane kept the general conversation going until at last Johnas appeared with the 'alright' signal. The Ambassador-at-home appeared at the door and Maggie rose to meet him and give him a little kiss. She used the opportunity of being behind 'Jean' to take out her knife and with one arm linked with Lord Robert held it ready in the other. Guards showed themselves at the other doors.

"Please take this imposter off our hands Lord Robert. The real Jean Espice was the one who taught us Lanconian at Melbun. We don't know who this Lawrence is either. I expect you will know by morning Sir. If we were in our home town this man would be screaming for mercy but we respect your laws Sir."

When Jean and Lawrence had been trussed and sent to the castle gaol Rachel thanked Lord Robert. Then "We need to know the real Jean Espice is safe. If he is alive we won't leave until he is free."

"I will do my best."

Jane said "In Bartonbry friendship is for life. That is we will give our lives for you."

James said "Like we told the King today."

Rachel steered Lord Robert into a quiet corner. "Sir. In our country the King has secret intelligencers if you have the same I will send the one of us who is specially charged with secrets to see your intelligencers now or at eight tomorrow morning. Without any condition. We are your friends. We know by dawn tomorrow these two will have told something useful. There must be some truths in Lawrence's confession. If his father had stayed at home we would have been fooled for a couple of weeks. Please help us keep the real Jean safe."

"Your intelligencer is Maggie."

"You could be right Sir."

"Don't you want to know how I know?"

"I do but I didn't want to ask a cherished friend like you such a question."

"Go on!"

"I can see you have wondered long and must show me how cleverly you picked the secret. Go on. We secret people love other people's secrets."

"It's obvious when you think about it. She was the one who wanted to be my special friend last night. She was so sweet to me about my dear dead wife and growing daughters I knew she must be trying to catch me unawares. It's the oldest trick in the book."

"And she was the first to claim you tonight wasn't she?"

"Yes! So she was. That proves it."

"Lord Robert she likes you. She isn't an intelligencer. She's a housewife amongst the rest of us. She is the one that cradles us all when the day has been too much. And then – Oh! It's too horrible – The one that looked after us herself became a wreck – That's why we brought her here to forget the eight bloody deaths on that day. Both of us covered in blood!"

"You were covered in blood?"

"Both of us."

"Didn't it affect you?"

"No not really. I don't have bad dreams. Why carry a sharp blade if you're not ready to use it. The trouble is practise isn't like the real thing. The way a knife goes through a neck is – odd."

"Like cutting bowstrings?"

"Yes! Bowstrings that fountain blood. How did you..."

"I've slashed men's throats Rachel. I was older than you but just as unprepared. It was kill or be killed in a battle so we accepted it but you were on your own."

"Those deaths were the needle that burst the bladder of rebellion – so they say. I was trying to stay alive but after the first one couldn't resist a second and then the third was standing open mouthed so why not try a throw into the mouth and see what happens!"

"I don't know when you're romancing."

"I could take you though each of those twenty seconds Sir. The boy charged to be ready for intelligencing is James. I don't think he has any idea what it means except he must have a way to send messages to our intelligencers. When and where do I send him?"

Wednesday

At eight the next morning James went to the castle and gave his name as he'd been told. James was shown into a room with three busy clerks. Obviously a test of some sort.

"I have come to the wrong office where there are six ears and three mouths. Can you tell me the right place or I must leave."

"Who are you?" asked one of the clerks.

"My name is James Taylor, servant of her Grace the Duchess of Avel in the Kingdom of Briton and servant of his majesty the King of Lanconia."

"Oh are you? Prove it."

"We can play games all day. As you truly know who I am that would be wasting our time and give me no pleasure. Would it give you pleasure?"

"Why have you come to this office?"

"For reasons you know."

"It looks like I will be here a while so perhaps you will introduce yourselves so we may make friends?"

"We have no names."

What would Minda do? "Oh dear!" cried James. "You poor nameless things you must have some. Let me see. You can be 'Wooly' – Yes your curly grey hair and sheep's face are just right. 'Beetle' would suit you in the middle. The way you perch your hands on your desk and twist your

back instead of your balding head is just right. Wooly and Beetle, now that leaves you.

"That's enough!"

"No it isn't" said James "You started the game and I will finish it. "You can be 'Hasty'."

"Alright you have had your fun James." came a refined lady's voice. A well dressed woman in her early twenties emerged from behind a screen. She was trying not to smile.

"Did you want a name as well lady?"

"No I already have one." James waited as he'd been taught the value of silence instead of casual conversation when dealing with strange interviews. "Don't you want to know it?"

"It's up to you my lady. I will invite you however you wish to our banquet on Friday. It would help the Duke's secretary who is dealing with invitations. It would also please me as it appears this office has confused silence with secrecy."

"Very well James. My name is Helen de Raqueronne."

"Will we do business my Lady de Raqueronne? – I hope I've got that right."

"Yes. I understand you James. For one who can hardly read or write you're doing well to learn our language."

"Thank you my lady. Our Minda tells us we must learn quickly whatever it takes so we may be given more things to learn."

"But she let you come away for a rest."

"Please my lady I don't wish to talk further except alone."

"Very wise. I wouldn't know who Wooly, Beetle and Hasty would tell. Follow me."

James had been expecting to be shown into a little clerk's room like Xavier's but instead followed Lady Raqueronne into a luxurious apartment with a view over a lovely walled garden. He kept silent. "I will fetch my father. He is crippled so I help him." She returned helping an old man obviously finding it difficult to walk. "This is my father Marquis de Raqueronne. He is like your Xavier."

"Welcome James. I'm sorry to be slow I have the gout."

"Sir! Do you take what we call 'celery seed'? At the docks of Melbun there is a lot of it among the labourers and celery seed keeps it away."

"Really? I must try it."

"My uncle and cousins swore by it Sir. Miraculous they said. I promise to find out what 'celery seed' is in Lanconian and see you have some by this afternoon Sir. My king has given us each twenty pounds to begin trading with. That is why we are here."

"And to escape, and to learn, and to grow up, and to tell us about your Duchess. Thank you for coming."

"Sir! I like polite people but the Black Team need to know the real Jean Espice is safe. What can you tell me?"

"Oh. To business then. Firstly your Thaddeus and Xavier have been open with our Ambassador and Bartonbry was hospitable to Jean Espice. You will be treated likewise."

"I don't care how you treat me Sir. We don't want favours. We want Jean safe. I can tell by your delay you can't tell me he's safe."

"Be patient young man! Er as you say I cannot say for certain anything about Jean."

"What's the last you know?"

"He was due here two days ago."

"That doesn't answer my question."

"James will you listen to me a moment! My men don't always return. Some get wrecked on the seas, some die of disease, some disappear and some die horribly to let us know how future spies will be treated. Why are you here talking to me today?"

"To find how to rescue Jean."

"The other reason is that Xavier and myself spend our days watching for where the real threats are and who we may bribe or blackmail to stop disagreements becoming disputes then arguments then fights then battles then wars."

"But surely you are different countries against each other."

"We might be but your Xavier himself took our Ambassador and the Italian Ambassador to see the unloved fortifications of Melbun to show you were not prepared for war. It was show really because it was his gesture of cooperation that counted. Jean was a really good servant of Lanconia and his report of Bartonbry was outstanding. I had hoped he would be here to help me with you. I didn't know if you were evil faeries or imps of mischief."

James looked at the floor in silence. "So he's dead. Please Sir in future tell us. Sugar doesn't sweeten poison." What would Minda do? "Does he have – does he leave a wife?"

"I never said he was dead!"

"You think it or else you wouldn't have said 'was a really good servant'."

"No. It may be the language. He may be or not but erm how to say clearly – In the past weeks Jean has given us good service."

"Please Sir. Are you pretending? I had Wooly, Beetle and Hasty playing silly games with me. I will see you get those seeds whatever you say or do Sir but I don't know if you mean what you say."

"I mean I don't know that Jean is safe. He may be innocently delayed. He may be dead. I want to know too. I am trying to find out. Hmm. Let me tell you – are you listening Helen I want you to see James really is one of us – I am doing a great deal to find out for myself. It was the Black Team that rang the fire-cry. I am worried James. But there's one thing I'm not worried about. – You won't tell anyone I'm worried."

"Thank you Sir. I wish you could meet the rest of the Black Team. I don't know if you have to stay hidden Sir but if you can think of any excuse you could summon me."

"Thank you James. I know you've been told to stay out of trouble and I am trying to keep you out of it for all of our sakes. The King wants good relations with Briton and Bartonbry so we mustn't give his enemies any excuse to cause trouble."

"They already are Sir."

"No James. They have given us a test."

"Like the test that you overheard in the ante-room."

"Er – Yes I did. How did you guess?"

"I guessed – then I knew because you didn't question who Wooly, Beetle and Hasty were when I used those names so you must have been listening."

"James! You're the cleverest spy I have. I will send you to Bartonbry to spy for me."

"Only if you let me have the first dance at our banquet with Helen.... Oh no Sir! I didn't mean that. I did but I didn't! What I meant was –Um – You have a charming daughter Sir – Mistress you see I'm blushing! – And I think we all understand that we keep secrets so we may spread trust between the very few that can be trusted."

"You haven't asked me about the Espice imposters James."

"I knew you would tell as much as you thought fit and the Black Team will judge accordingly."

"It's difficult for an old man who has met many people to credit you with such wisdom. Jean – the man we all hope is safe and well – wrote to me telling there was wisdom masquerading as innocence at Bartonbry. I would like to come to your event on Friday but please may we not have a conference there."

"Sir, I will send John with the 'celery seeds', and he will convince you that we know how to deceive. We have been taught! Now is there anything you want to tell me about the imposters?"

"Lawrence really is Jean's son. The one called Jean you saw is Lawrence's uncle."

"If you need what we call a prisoner's key – the hope that turns into a promise that a prisoner will be set free in return for a confession then myself or John could do it. We know the two sides of trust. I'm sure you do too Sir."

Helen said "Father! Tell him!" James stayed silent. Observe, don't indulge in arguments was another lesson from Bartonbry. "James. Jean is dead. His body was found in bed yesterday at an inn on the road here. Killed."

After a long pause James said "Lady Helen I ask you from the bottom of my heart would you come with me so that we may find what we call 'celery seeds' for your father? I am leaving now. Please help my sorrow."

James got up and slowly left by the door he came in. Helen soon caught him up and took his arm. "Let us share our different sorrows."

"I cannot share trust so I must share sorrow. How hard is fate!"

Helen said "He is in pain and stressed beyond what most men would bear."

As they exited by the ante-room James addressed the three clerks. "Dear sirs you'll be forever Woolly, Beetle and Hasty to me. I hope to share many things with you in future. Let us part for now in friendship." He shook hands with each of them! "The friendship of the Black Team and Bartonbry means you can wake us in the night to hear your sorrows. We are true friends."

Before they reached the gatehouse James said to Helen "You are too old for me but how I wish I could be your husband. Don't blush! Everyone can see you don't wear a ring."

"I have set my heart on keeping my father able to do his work."

"So let us find the 'celery seeds'. Will you guide me with you arm Lady."

James realised that Rachel now had competition! Suddenly life was complicated! What if Rachel found out? Could he hide behind an excuse? No. That would be more wrong than wrong. He could deal with devious spy-masters but women were – were women! Then he thought! If Jane could consider marrying the Duke or sous-duke for gain then he might marry the key to the intelligence of Lanconia. Her smooth walk, soft voice, sweet scent and praise gave Helen the advantage. It was only later realised he'd forgotten about Jean. Still Frank, as Helen called him, could now try 'graines de aipo'.

Helen wanted to know more about the Black Team. James told her everything he could in half an hour. James wanted to know more about Helen. They parted with a kiss.

James broke his bitter news first privately to Johnas and Mister Jim.

"The rest of the team will be very upset. Please don't try to be cheerful. Catch them if they fall and gradually we will collect ourselves with new purpose."

James told his news to the rest of the team. "Jean was murdered the night before last at an inn on the road coming here. That is my bad news. I have some small good news. The King's intelligencer is friendly and I may have found a way to put him in our great debt. I will not say more as it is not necessary but if you get a message from 'Wooly', 'Beetle' or 'Hasty' it will be important."

After the shock Rachel asked "What about the imposters?"

"Lawrence really is Jean's son. The imposter is an uncle. I know they're being questioned hard and if we can be of help we will be asked. For now we are not the only sad ones."

After more silence Rachel asked a general question. "Why was Jean murdered?"

Johnas said "Can I take you to the cathedral and light candles for him."

Al said "It was the Church that murdered him!"

James said "We don't know that. Minda has made enemies in the Church, Jed has made enemies in the Church and Briton in general is/ /Oh shit! Oh shit! I was going to say Jean would only have been murdered by someone who knew who he was and what he did. That is either someone in the intelligence office or Lawrence. Jed killed his father – Has Lawrence betrayed his father?"

Jane said "I'm catching up with Rachel's question. If we don't know 'why' then 'who' might be a start. Somebody betrayed him. Johnas! Did you know anything about Jean?"

"Not until last night – On my oath!"

"Mister Jim?"

"I had been told to watch out for him as a friend of yours and if I had recognised him I would have tried to make secret contact. But do you not know me by now? I would never betray him."

Maggie said "Thank you gentlemen of Orfleur. We had to ask. Now watch as we ask ourselves could we have given him away without realising." The room was very still for a long time. "I was asked about how I learned Lanconian many times but I don't think I would say his name. Even if I did I don't think that would betray him."

Rachel said "Yes! It must be somebody who knew about this plot with Lawrence and what he did for the chief intelligencer."

Al said "Just suppose our Ambassador was the one. Would he know about Jean Espice? Would he be in the plot to poison Lanconia against Briton?"

Jane said "We have lots to do. I like Johnas' suggestion. We should see Arlesene cathedral for ourselves. Johnas? Is there a way you could let the cathedral authorities know we are due to visit. I would like to see their considered reaction."

John was briefed by his brother about the celery seeds, and told to keep his dirty hands off Helen! "I've told him you're our sleight of hand expert so be prepared and see if you can't win his private respect. Tell him it was an Italian that taught you."

They planned to visit the Cathedral at Vespers time. For the Black Team this was as much a military manoeuvre as ambushes. They could be attacked but possibly not with steel weapons. They would have to keep alert and watch for hand signals and listen for whistle codes. A very solemn procession left the Dukes' house to walk the few minutes to the

Cathedral. It was huge! Far bigger than any of them had seen a church before. It was spread out with a web of flying arches, pinnacles and high windows leading the eye from the spire to the side aisles and attached chapels. Inside it was noticeably cooler, much quieter than the market outside and full of decoration and colours beginning to fade in the evening light.

They sat in a side chapel listening to the cadences of the choir. Johnas and Paulanne were lookouts. Mister Jim was to parley for them. For half an hour nobody spoke. The only noise was the occasional snuffle.

Mister Jim intercepted a priest and there was a whispered conversation. After a while the priest came into the chapel with Mister Jim and said a prayer in broken British. The Black Team prickled with the excitement of engaging the enemy. Mister Jim addressed them. "This brother knows Paul the Duchess' secretary. He has just had a long letter from Paul about the trouble of Bartonbry and deaths at Lostnock and the murder of the Archbishop of Melbun by his son. He says he has two halves that don't tally. Paul's of arrogant churchmen and the other things he's heard of devilish imps slaughtering innocent priests."

Jane said "First we are so pleased not to be attacked outright here. We know our reputation – false though it is – gives you every cause to worry. Second will you come to the Duke of Orfleur's house tonight so we may tell you more about Paul and what really happened?"

Johnas signalled they should retreat. He even used the correct hand signals! Soon they were home and changing. The physical process of becoming noblemen and high-quality ladies detached them from the sorrow and provocation at the cathedral.

That evening they tried to settle down but there was something wrong. Obviously there was something wrong, they could all tell that, but they couldn't see what it was it complete. The councillors, the Ambassador, the imposters and the murder were words in a sentence of a foreign language they couldn't understand.

They spent an hour with the priest and two brothers. The troubles with the Church were described finishing with their now standard question "Do you want criminals hiding in the Church?"

"What about children slaughtering their parents and harmless people?"

There were various soothing excuses given then Maggie said "It happens. It happened to me. I revenged with blood – lots and lots of it –

you have no idea how much somebody bleeds when you stab them properly – blood in your eyes, hair, soaking your clothes and inside your boots. You see butchers with bloody hands but they're normally cutting dead meat – When you put your hand into the guts of an old woman as you stab up to her heart your arm is covered in horrible smeared bits. Could you cope with that? Go on tell me!" Silence. "It leaves smears on your mind. Killing people is fantastic! Really fantastic – for a few seconds. Then it's a job of butchery. Then the escape begins. That's why we're here to escape – And now look what's happened! I lit a candle tonight for my friend Jean Espice who was murdered. Then I sharpened my knife. Now I have sharpened my determination. You lucky men of the cathedral you can sit and watch and be sorry. I expect you would like to see evil driven out? Am I right?" The priest nodded. "Well I'm not going to drive it out so that it goes to be a plague on your neighbours. I will kill it on the spot! I have arrived. Show me the evil and I will kill it!"

Mister Jim asked the priests to leave now but to stay friends. There were hurried good-byes and they were seen out by Mister Jim. Maggie blazed with determination. The others were trying to repaint the forgotten past and keep the shutters closed against the future while they adjusted to Maggie's mood. Even John dare not catch her hand. She needed a reassuring hug like a thunderstorm needs a mountain.

When Mister Jim returned he broke the confused silence. "Margaret! That was awesome! You climbed on their skulls to catch the golden light of the sun in your face and the steel of the moonlight in your heart. Never was there a more noble knight. Your vision scares me. I am not a fighting man but I will paint and carry your banner – and bier if needs be."

Jane said "We are here to keep out of trouble and escape all those things. The storm clouds gather whether we like it or not. Maggie has climbed the steeple to gauge the wind better and be a figure the rest of us on the ground can look up to. None of us will sleep early now Maggie has woken the dogs."

"I'm sorry" said Maggie "I just said what I felt. I wanted those men to realise it wasn't games."

Al said "You succeeded there! You taught me a lesson."

John said "It's good to know you're stronger now than lying abed in Lostnock. That's why we came. So can't we go home now?"

Jane said "After the sports day. We will leave the ills of Lanconia to others."

Mister Jim said "Wise words."

Rachel said "We can't fight unless we know what we're fighting."

Mister Jim said "You can and you are. Every minute you're here is a taunt for the anti-Briton, anti-Orfleur and anti-Avel factions. They think you have come deliberately to find them and punish them. Today I spoke to the one James christened Beetle – Us secretaries are normally familiar with such men – and your team is being used as a tethered lamb to tempt wolves out into the open."

"What!" exclaimed Johnas. "I was sent here to look after our friends and you say they're bait in a trap!"

"Nobody who needs to know has any doubt about the Black Team's ability to look after itself Johnas. I expect James has already realised that he wasn't questioned too hard on that point this morning. I have betrayed your strengths to your allies – but nothing could prepare me for Margaret's speech."

Jane said "That's all very well but our allies are not telling us anything! We are being kept in the dark."

"I think that's because they're in the dark themselves. May I suggest that you have a day left to scheme your games. You have made a start with making friends amongst the merchants and I can tell you everyone is talking about you on the streets already. Tomorrow if you visit the shops you'll find a lot of good-natured curiosity. I have spread some of that to mask the darker rumours."

6 Games

Thursday

The next day the girls spent the morning being seen and chatting in the town and the afternoon supervising preparations at the Duke's country house. Johnas and Paulanne had a long list of noble families to visit. Their main purpose was to gauge how genuine the warmth of welcome was. Obviously all of these had already received invitations. Mister Jim had borrowed a chamberlain from a small duke to help with arrangements. Luckily the Duke's staff at Arlesene were used to unexpected visits with urgent and impossible demands. John now employed a clerk as he visited merchants and shippers. If he was going to be a serious trader he should appear able to afford a man to read, write and run errands for him. James went straight to Helen's office. After being perfectly civil to the three clerks he was allowed to see her.

"Lady Raqueronne I have a request. Jean was your servant and our friend and he got killed. Mister Jim is our friend and your friend. How is he being protected?"

"Oh. I hadn't thought of it like that."

"We have. We don't know this landscape but you do. We will do our best but we cannot fight shadows or keep away mist. We are busy as you can guess. We already have one of our team who will revenge Jean with bitterness sharper than a thousand spears. Mister Jim will tell you. Either take away the temptation or let us see the prey. If Mister Jim is hurt the wolves of revenge will hunt without mercy."

Then James went to the quayside to watch and think. Six months ago he was a one of those boys who survived on their wits. No matter how hard he tried he couldn't think of a way to do for the ones on the quays at Arlesene what Lucky had done for him and John at Melbun. After further thought he realised that this sports day was not a test but a happy celebration of the new spirit of Bartonbry and Briton. John met him and they discussed the games.

"Don't you see" said John "Word of what we do here will return to all of Briton and other countries. The further it travels the better. When it is reflected back we will be able to nod into our pottage with our grey beards knowing that we started it all."

"Oh! So after we get back people will be telling us about how Briton is shining brightly abroad."

"Yes but what they will think is how Bartonbry leads the way. They will be proud of Bartonbry and so our town will win the hearts of all the Britons."

"I should have been able to see that for myself. We could have gone on a tour of Briton and faced sullen audiences or done this. How clever! Who's idea was it?"

"I don't know. We had the idea to come but the people who let us must have known it would do some good."

"I wonder. I wonder if they had no idea except it wouldn't be much harm."

"Too late to worry about that now eh? You're in with the spies, I'm in with the merchants and traders, Al could be our next ambassador, Jane is getting married."

"That leaves Rachel and Maggie. What about them?"

"Have you noticed that Rachel has taken to looking after us while Maggie is the fighter?"

"Hmm – I think they're both a bit of each. But Maggie scared me last night. I didn't know what to do."

"Me neither. The hairs on the back of my neck stood up."

"Mine too."

"If Maggie told you to go and kill somebody would you do it?"

"No. Not without a lot of questions and good answers. I think she's a bit twisted when it comes to killing. Obviously if were attacked or on a raid then I would stab to kill but we have to think she might just be a bit too keen."

"What about Rachel?"

"Oh she loved it. If she asked me to go and kill someone I would think she was sick. She'd want to do it herself."

"Why are these women so bloodthirsty?"

During the afternoon the household gradually relocated to the Duke's country estate. This was a park four miles away from the sweaty stink of Arlesene with pleasant meadows, shady copses, formal lawns, lakes and gardens. The house itself was a castle made stately. The grey stone was smooth and perfectly jointed. Towers rose gracefully from their splayed footings to pinnacled turrets. The moat wasn't clogged with weed. The

contrast with the grim box castle of Bartonbry was astonishing. "Don't let Minda see this" they joked to each other "or she'll want one."

Jane and Johnas walked arm in arm. "I wish my father was here Jane. He would be so proud of you and happy to see me becoming a worthy son."

"I'm sure he will hear lots of good things about you. I wish he was here too but he knows you won't grow in his shade."

"What about your family Jane?"

"They know I'm doing something very few children can. I write letters. They know I'm coming back soon. They know I'm independent and determined. I'm sure they smile. When I get back to Briton I will be running all over warning people to behave. You know my reputation as a she-wolf – however unfair it is – I am not like Maggie – Not yet anyway. I have to get us all home safe."

"She-wolf you are! A fine creature admired and feared by men. Of course you hunt at night to feed your cubs. Of course if stupid men make fires where none should be you'll snake your silver way through the pearl moonlight and ivory snow to teach them a lesson. I shall never go wolf-hunting again – Not ever I swear."

"Stop it Johnas! There are no wolves anymore."

"Yes there are. In Lanconia anyway. Last winter was mild but the one before there were many attacks in the dukedom. I didn't go hunting them but I saw the pelts. My father gave a bounty for each one."

"There are none in Briton."

"There's one now. If you were a witch I know you'd let down your hair and fade – amber with eyes aflame – into the forest."

"Johnas. Please don't use the word 'witch' as it causes trouble. Churchmen march out at the first suspicion of witchcraft. I know they make it up anyway but we mustn't encourage them. What about you? Wetter than a bucket of piss was what I heard. Not any longer and tomorrow you must be the great lord. This is your only chance to get the respect of the other nobles."

"I am trying hard Jane."

"I know you are. In a while we must have a practise – The Black Team always practises before a raid. You have done really well Johnas. I know tomorrow will be a success. Everyone important from Arlesene will be coming to see the Black Team but also to see if that bucket of piss is as wet as before."

"Was I really that wet?"

"Yes. I will tell you a secret Johnas. Do you want to hear it?"

"Yes my Lady Jane."

"I have never thought of having my own home. When I joined the Black Team I had more important things to do than find a home and husband. I had never thought of having a castle. The Duchess' castle at Bartonbry is a sour lump of leaking stone. The King's castle at Melbun is well kept and strong but not pretty. Lostnock castle is rugged but not a nice place to live. But this one is beautiful. Do you think this castle could be mine one day?"

Johnas went cold! "Of course. I would like that. I would plant a wood specially for you to pad through when the moon comes up."

She held him tight. "I can't decide now but I think Orfleur calls me to be it's next mistress." They kissed and took their time adjusting to their emotions. Jane said "Come on Johnas. We have to get you ready for tomorrow. You're the host and we're just your novelty guests."

Sports day Friday

The only experience the Black Team had of organised sports was the strict test day at Melbun last Christmas. This was to be fun for children and parents. The only time they had hosted a banquet was at Melbun when the King and Queen came incognito to a private house. How lucky they were then to have Mistress Doreen to set the right mood amongst servants and guests. The truth was they didn't know what they should be doing so they chose what their imaginations said they could do. Novelty indeed! To the Black Team the most important thing was taking part so that's how they planned the afternoon for their guests. The magnificent power of money had a hundred people working day and night to bring everything together. Favours were asked, bribes paid while energetic ideas enthused tradesmen and merchants all of whom wanted to be able to say they were the ones who had done something essential for this unique event.

As the guests arrived at the park gates they were welcomed by Paulanne and Johnas dressed in immaculate hunting clothes. The dress for the afternoon was to be hunting clothes, then they would return to the castle to change into evening dress. While Paulanne and Johnas were greeting their guests with animation and enthusiasm as rehearsed, the Duke's staff detached the servants. Mister Jim and James had the same idea

and saw that the idle servants would be cheerfully entertained with wine. At least one was supplied by Lord de Raqueronne to see if there was loose rumour about. A cheerful Lord de Raqueronne and his daughter arrived to join in the fun. "Look no crutches! Just a stick!" he shouted. "Bless Bartonbry!"

The plan was to have energetic tests for teenagers, co-operative team-tests for men and exercises of gentle skill for the ladies. Nobody was forced to take part in anything. Refreshments and shade was available in tented pavilions. All the servants and the guards who stood at strategic positions smiled. Nobody had heard of the 'Bartonbry smile' in Arlesene yet but they soon would. The smilers were told to look at the faces of the guests and think of nice things to say. If they got a sour reaction they were to reply that they were under orders from Bartonbry to win first confidences so they might be trusted with whatever the guest needed. They were also told to report sour reactions to one of the Black Team girls. In return the Black Team made sure that the servants would be rewarded in a small way but and not to worry about small things. If in doubt ask, if there was nobody to ask then get on with it. That's how they did it in Bartonbry and when mistakes happened everybody learned and nobody was blamed. They couldn't remember the last time one of the servants at Bartonbry had been whipped.

The events for teenagers were to be in two parts. Individual and then team exercises. They watched staged sword fighting between Maggie, John, Rachel and James. They were given wooden 'Avel blades' to try tossing and catching as demonstrated by the Black Team. At the end of this John called the teenage guests together. "In a minute you will be gasping for breath but still alive. This is not all fun! Especially not for me who is to join your next exercise. But listen to these three girls. First Lady Jane. How many has your blade killed?"

Jane held it vertical in her hand. "One. With my own hand."

"Margaret?"

"Two. An old man and an old woman. I hate myself but would do it again. Think children!"

"Rachel?"

"Three in a fraction of a minute. I have never been so alive as when I killed those men. If there's anybody here who really want's to kill people and have their blood splash all over you in a squelch of their final breath then talk with me later."

Al blew a whistle. "Who wants to play the game we call run-ride-shoot?" After a hesitation it was what everyone would have a go at. "Right. Boys first! Your horses are down by the river you have to run down there. Off you go! Don't worry girls we will give them a few minutes to get ahead or else everyone gets in a muddle at the shooting."

The events for the ladies were based on the gardens and lakes. All sorts of boats had been borrowed. Paulanne and a specially selected swarthy matelot with good manners and fine coarse limbs encouraged the ladies to row. When there were a good number on the water, games were started. If you had the ball and were bumped by another boat you or your passengers must throw the ball away. Plenty of people got pleasantly splashed and sweaty in brief competition. The thing about rowing was it was backwards so what was more natural than a race round buoys. A relay with teams of six cheering their team mates back and across the lake was fun. A challenge was given to carry a ball on a flat board balanced on a boat across the lake. The rough matelot smelling of tar of was always first to greet the winners with a smile and an irresistible hug and possibly a kiss. Little friendly fights with splashes from oars broke out. Boats were rocked with false menace. Iced drinks were served! Apart from the mischievous muscled matelot there were no men around. What a lovely way to spend a hot summer afternoon.

The men were in the charge of Johnas and Al on their own to start with. Later they knew the girls would be there to help them but for say twenty minutes they would have to 'defend the castle' themselves. The first defence was alcohol. Servants came among them with pitchers of cold wine. Al stood on a little stage inside the marquee. "Lords of Lanconia welcome. I hear the King will be with us soon. Our plan today is that you enjoy yourselves with much pleasantry and a little bit of friendly competition. We have a challenge for six teams later."

Johnas continued "My lords I know I am known by some as a bucket of piss. That is now changing. I have every intention of bringing the sharpest government to Orfleur. Our friends of Briton may be young but they carry the spirit of the future better than grey-beards."

Al continued "Today we bring friendship. For the last few days we have been exploring trade. We want to trade. We want prosperity. Please ask the King if you don't believe me – He said the same."

Johnas continued "We are at a turning point. I know I have turned my back on bucket-of-piss and will be buzzing like a bluebottle to bring the

future here now – Whether that's because Arlesene is a heap of shit is up to you."

Al continued "What my friend means is the energy of youth has been let free in Bartonbry and now we come to see if your youth is going to go out to fetch the future or stay in bed."

A suspiciously well informed Lord de Raqueronne shouted "Even if we don't want to because you Bartonbry Imps are racing for the future we must join in."

Johnas said "Lord de Raqueronne I myself joined that race a few days ago and was daunted – but these boys and girls have held onto me and pulled me along with them. There is not an ounce of malice between them."

Maggie appeared with her yellow hair waved in the Arlesene fashion. Clearly dressmakers had been employed to make her a delight in immaculate tight-fitting hunting jerkin and britches. "I will take twenty volunteers for mounted archery in the woods." She soon had enough and explained. "We have marked a trail through the little forest with targets of many sorts. Some swinging in the branches, some small, some running on a rope. There are obstacles so we see who can ride quickly and shoot straight." Servants brought their horses and away they went.

John took the stage. "I will take six gentlemen who would learn deceitful tricks of the hand." He soon had an odd collection to take to his tent.

Rachel appeared with her chestnut hair in a beautiful headdress which was pretending to be a hunting cap. Like Maggie she was dressed to impress. "I will take a dozen sword-dancing – and we might have a practise as well. It's a new thing and much fun and skill for those who know their swords." Her quota was soon filled.

Al said "Gentlemen! To sit in the shade enjoying gentle music is no sin but here is Jane."

Like the other girls Jane was carefully dressed but she had a whole belt of knives and an axe, a bow and quiver on her shoulder and casually carried a crossbow. She carefully scanned the remaining men under her hand and then said "My games are specially for father and sons. Do we have any pairs?" Two pairs volunteered. "Can we find two more pairs to

be father and son for today? Finally I would like two old wise and active gentlemen to help me." Jane got her volunteers then led them away.

Twenty of the older men were left. James said "Alefred and myself would talk. You see we are not pretty like the girls and there will be a chance to be active later if you wish but we have come all this way with two ears each and we know the Briton Ambassador is a turd in a sewer – Al is the son of our Ambassador-at-home. We may be ignorant of politics but we mean to learn."

The teenagers' events turned into more than a run, a ride and a shoot. After reaching their horses they had to harness them properly and answer questions from strange servants about horse care and have their sloppy harnessing pointed out to them. Then the ride was a trail with obstacles. At the butts they were handed a bow and three arrows. The first for sighting, second and third to count. Then, after running their horse back to the stables they had an obstacle course for humans where the challenges were mostly about being careful and having some nerve than brute strength. Cold refreshments were served at the end with congratulations from James and Mr. Jim. James promised more games later and told them about the Cadet school and some of the Black Team's escapades. Mr. Jim was chief of the clerks and had the results and some silly booby prizes to announce to good-natured laughter.

The afternoon beside the lake was punctuated by more boating games. One was a challenge for six solo rowers to get a fox, a hen and a bag of corn from one side of the lake to the other without the fox eating the hen or the hen eating the corn. Only one item could be carried at a time. Pet dogs had to deputise for foxes but it was an amusing challenge for brains, rowing skill and strength. Charmingly the rough smiling matelot put on a laughable yokel's accent to jest about the progress of the peasants going to market. More than one noble lady wondered if it wouldn't be fashionable to have their own matelot to impress the lesser nobles. And other reasons.

The target-chase through the woods hunting for hidden and pop-up targets was run twice by popular request and later a second batch of men tried it out. Maggie was gently taunted to show her skill with bow and arrows. "I will not practise – the memories are too fresh. I killed three men last month. Two in front of the ear and one in the eye. A

dying man stares at you in a way I wish I could forget. Do men talk of your deaths or is it just girls that cry?" There were no answers.

John had an assistant to help the flow of his show. So far it only lasted less than ten minutes which could be padded to fifteen with a good assistant. After showing them how some tricks were done he challenged them to spot it even when they knew. Then he taught them a simple one to try on their friends. He had no problem answering general questions about how and why and other things about the Black Team. In the brown gloom of the tent John found it easy to pick pockets and steal other things. After being so open, friendly and intimate with his audience they were uncertain how to react when he stopped them as an afterthought as they were leaving when, after a rehearsed whisper from his assistant, he asked with a serious face "Has anybody lost anything?". They were shown a collection of their purses dangling from the peak of the tent. After the shock John said with a smile. "You don't want to worry about me, it's the girls you have to watch! They'll have your hearts and they don't give them back. Now not a word to the others! Send another six to me." John's assistant was an Italian who claimed to know Allesandro and certainly knew a great deal more about this business than John. After the first 'house' he knew John was a natural confidence trickster and worth the time Allesandro had spent on him.

Rachel's group learned sword ballet. "I know you're men who excuse yourselves by saying grace is a womanly thing, but that's because you don't try. You can be strong and graceful. Women like men with poise and precise strength. We want to see your muscles at work. I will show you." She had the help of two dancing masters who had been indoctrinated into giving life to movement. A quick demonstration with James and then the men took it in turns to fight a few choreographed moves with Rachel. She was sweating but smiling all the time. At a break she addressed them "Of course we fight for real but we must stretch our every bit of being when we get the chance. What should happen if my ship back to Briton meets pirates? Will I sit and wait my fate? Will I hell! Let them come! Now as for you men? You have shown me you have grace so all you need is strong opponents."

Jane's group were led to an uncertain fate by the stables. "Today is about trust. Can you trust your father or your son?" Will one of the old wise gentlemen be a pretend Duke of Orfleur to Johnas?" On cue Johnas appeared. "That leaves one old wise gentleman to be my father for the day. Come here and let me give you a kiss." She put the crossbow down,

unshouldered quiver and bow then unbuckled the belt full of blades. "Those were to deceive you I'm afraid. Our games are not about fighting but being together as one." We have five pairs. I have the advantage of knowing the plan but I don't like being so far from home without my father so I'll join in for fun to make six." Each pair had a handcart to be pushed or pulled with one riding, or possibly standing to reach into trees to pick what they needed for later. They needed balance, strength, patience and cooperation to cope with an obstacle course and finally finishing with jousting best described as a pillow fight on wheels.

The teenagers were parcelled into teams and sent back over the obstacle course with silly and 'impossible' additions. The wall of logs was now ten feet high while a grapnel and rope were a quarter of a mile away. They had to hang somebody by their legs over a wall to get a key. A bucket with a hole in it in one place, a pond in another, corks for the holes floating in the middle of the pond and an urgent need to fill a cask in another place added to muddled cooperation. After the puzzles and obstacles there was another rest and James talked about the excitement of travelling at night by boat after a day loading it, how to plan an ambush, the different sorts of plants you find on different ground. "Now you know what team games we play at Bartonbry – we also have to study accounts and law and marshalling and many things – I can tell you next year there may be a cadet school for Lanconians and Italians. We also do practise fighting but mostly that's so we don't have to fight for real."

Mr. Jim explained "What James means is that only the stupid or very strong would think of attacking a convoy where cadets had been in charge for a few days. These guys trap and kill."

James said "So far the girls have been the real killers – nine between them in one day – but the boys are everyday watchful over their sisters." Eventually they went to watch the men's team event, the grand finale.

Six teams of seven men were collected.

They started with relay rowing across the lake three to a boat, then archery while standing in a boat! Then they had the same puzzle obstacles as the teens. The finish was to dismantle a small pavilion tent, transport it across the lake then re-erect it on the main lawn and fly a pennant from it. Throughout there was lots of advice being shouted from family members and anyone who felt like it. The confusions of erecting the tents was most amusing. As soon as each team finished servants brought them iced drinks to applause.

Prizes were given. A golden, silver and iron horseshoe to the best boys and girls. Oversized golden, silver and iron needles to lady champions. The best men at the targets and obstacles in the woods got knives. The teen teams got chains with a link for each member and the men larger chains with seven links. In the area where the prizes came from ten small trees in tubs remained.

Jane and Johnas with the Black Team, Mister Jim and Paulanne behind addressed the crowd. Johnas said "Thank you all for coming. Arrangements have been made to see you're refreshed before the banquet."

Jane said "The Black Team from Bartonbry would like to thank our host the Duke of Orfleur and his son for a lovely afternoon and our hosts – your country for your warm welcome. We hope to see many of you in Briton."

Johnas said "Please Your Highness. It's a great honour for us today to have you with us. All of us on this platform have thought what to give you as a symbol of our friendship. Will young pear trees that will grow and fruit in time do?"

The King replied "Of course. That very thing is what I wanted to hear. I expect nothing less than the best from Orfleur and Bartonbry. I am impressed."

Jane replied with bow and said "Sir, I bring one more thing for you. It comes from our Lady the Duchess of Avel. She ran to him smiling, carefully kissed him, went to hug him but picked him up instead and twirled him round twice. "I can only manage that twice Sir but our Lady is a small giantess with the heart of a shepherdess. I do my best to bring her love to you."

The King knew all about Minda's ambush of charm of the Briton King at Christmas so he wasn't completely surprised but this was an unprecedented end to an afternoon that he couldn't have organised himself. "I was warned to expect the best – " he paused and looked round at the audience " – I believe in Melbun there is a new thing of making a petit-Earl from a particularly outstanding young person. Does not the new Earl of Melbun hold his title only as long as he stands once a year on its bridge? So shall I make you the Lady Earl of Arlesene on the same terms Jane Weston?"

Jane thought for seconds but what seemed to everyone a very long time. "Sir. I will take no honour unless I can be your true servant. You will need to show me your will, you'll need to give me your errands and tell me your enemies."

"You drive a hard bargain young lady."

"I'll pick you up and swing you round again if you don't let me serve you!"

The King faced the crowd with hands raised to show he was helpless.

"What can I do?" To Jane he said "Alright. You can serve me – But! I will have my revenge on your King and Duchess!"

Jane hugged the King and kissed him. To the crowd she said. "Ever since I put my foot on Lanconian soil I felt my destiny was here. Isn't he a darling!" Jane was living Minda's legend. It must be a dream. So long ago she'd removed her knife along with all those other weapons.

"Maggie! Toss me your knife!" It came spinning through the air in a high arc which Jane caught. In a moment she was offering it hilt first to the King and knelt to get official recognition."

The King said "There has never been a Lady Earl before. You're the first. I make you Lady Earl of Arlesene so long as you shall stand on Arlesene bridge at least once a year."

Jane stood up and as if it had been part of a ceremony whose origins were lost in time she kissed him as a daughter. As a reaction against the tension of the last few days and hours she whispered to him "I meant every word about serving. Now time presses."

The King took the hint. "Thank you Johnas and the Black Team for a novel afternoon. My new servant tells me you ladies have to comb your hair for tonight's banquet. People! May I hear your cheers for this afternoon's games."

As soon as she was able Jane went to the Queen and presented herself as a dutiful daughter. She wasn't quite sure how far friendliness would be taken as false so she kept her obedience short and sincere. She knew that the King's eldest son was married but the younger wasn't. That was a complication that must be avoided for today.

The rest of the Black Team didn't feel neglected. They were hunting as a team and if Jane was their leader then she should get the honours and they should stay alert and loyal. Johnas was uncertain. A few hours ago Jane had been virtually his fiancée but now she seemed to have decided for herself to devote herself to the King. Mister Jim was satisfied that his quiet suggestion that Jane was worthy of an honour had been developed. Paulanne was amazed at the power of pyramids of people. Al had kept a rough track of the costs and was finding it difficult to compare large figures on bills with enormous amounts of goodwill. John and James who had been at all the Bartonbry accountancy lessons recognised good

investment. They were happy that if it had been their money they were spending they would have done the same so long as they had a fraction of the rewards. They didn't know where to start calculating the rewards.

The chief herald announced that rough and ready arrangements had been made for the boys (and separately the girls) to prepare for the banquet. Adults of course would have their servants and be well looked after in the castle. The girls went first led by the girls of the Black Team. The boys had to wait half an hour during which time they watched and practised sword fighting until it was their turn to bathe in the warm waters of the lake and have servants bring their evening clothes. In the girl's tent there was a lot of mutual assistance as well as the professional beauticians. In the boy's tent there was a lot of mutual chafing as well as household servants dealing with the most difficult cases. In both tents the many different phases of this afternoon of surprises was the only topic of conversation. A few wondered whether there were surprises waiting in the banquet and afterwards.

The shape of the hall wouldn't accommodate a circle but two concentric rings with the high table in the middle raised on a low stage could be squeezed-in. Again the ignorance of the Black Team and their experience when formal order of precedence was discarded in Melbun, led them to do things their own way. They wouldn't know how places in a jealously guarded hierarchy should be allocated but with a circular arrangement ranks and ages could be mingled. The novelty was shocking for a moment then relished. Everyone had somebody they could see who shared or watched the afternoon's trials which made them temporary equals. Youngsters were careful to stay respectful amongst their elders but also knew this was their day as well. The older elders took time to be nice to these strange youngsters as this was a once in a lifetime curiosity.

There were unoccupied spaces for Rachel, Maggie, John and James at the high table. When they appeared as servers this caused confusion for a second or two but then it began to dawn on the Lanconians that 'service', the words of the young girl made a 'Lady Earl!' actually meant real service. The Black Team servants smiled and chatted as they worked. One or two didn't understand but the rest realised that this was hospitality of the person.

It was always going to be impossible to excel with the food. Even with the resources of the Duke's household, ingenuity and money there was no time to prepare anything spectacular. Johnas had been specially tasked with managing the loan of staff and equipment from other lords. That had given him an excuse to visit for a practical purpose rather than leisure. The Black Team's experience of kitchens made them useful in encouraging overworked servants to work together and do their best.

As the Black Team served guests they had met during the afternoon they shockingly talked respectfully as equals. Servants had never spoken like this before in Lanconia! Most of the guests saw the Black Team were determined to show they were well behaved and dutiful as well as blood-thirsty killers. The adults wondered if this cadet school thing would be just right for their children. The teenagers saw the respect the Black Team commanded even as they performed lowly duties. There wasn't a ship big enough to carry all those that would volunteer in a moment to join the cadet school.

The political cloud of the Dukedoms of Avel and Orfleur conspiring to overwhelm other interests was clearly going to bring a flood. Many wondered how to make the most of the new situation. Was it really too late to do anything or should they start making friends? None of the lords of the Church had been invited today, no doubt they would be furious. Some whispered it wouldn't hurt for some of the churchmen to be relieved of their huge estates as that would mean spoils for the rest. Hadn't the Duchess given the King of Briton the backbone to stand up to an overly powerful Church. Perhaps the same would happen here? Personal opportunities were emerging from the mist covering the new political landscape, but for every opportunity there would be traps. The race was on!

Jane sat next to the King and Johnas was next to the Queen. The King's sons were also present. Paulanne as the nominal hostess was not yet confident or able to tell stories in the way that Al and Jane could. The others made a point of complimenting her when possible even for things they knew she hadn't been responsible for. Al realised how lucky he'd been to have the patience of the Taylor brothers and something really useful to do. Now he needed to show he wasn't an idiot without pushing himself forward as the only expert on Briton's foreign affairs. Perhaps James was their real ambassador while he was the clerk and messenger? Anyway, they were a team.

Mister Jim was seated on the outer ring of tables within sight of Lord de Raqueronne. Towards the end of the feast one of the guards they'd brought from Orfleur gave him a whispered message. He was told to whisper it to Lord de Raqueronne and John but otherwise keep the news quiet. So the Briton Ambassador had been killed. Presumably he was no longer useful to somebody. Or a liability. Or was it an uninformed attack on a prominent Briton to spoil the banquet? He wondered who would have ordered it but no names came to mind. Lord de Raqueronne had the same thoughts but knew of a few suspects.

Servants removed the tables. Johnas stood alone on the centre stage and spoke. "Thank you again for coming." He bowed to the King and Queen. "We have hired the best band for dancing in Arlesene – or so they tell us! Will you try dancing all together around the centre in a circle instead of your lines. That way everyone can join in. The dancing master has a trumpet to call the steps for us all. My guests from Briton will join us in a few minutes – I'm sure you don't need me to tell you they have another surprise."

The dancing master and band took the middle stage and announced the simple starting dance. The King led Paulanne out to start the ring of couples. Johnas and the Queen began the avalanche and soon they were away. After three dances iced refreshments were brought and the band mysteriously left the stage to be replaced by Maggie with Cello and Al with a drum. The battle of the sexes mock fight from Orfleur was repeated with the same stunning effect. After the final applause had died down the Black Team with Johnas and Paulanne linked arms and bowed with huge smiles.

Jane said "We will be on the road tomorrow. Two of us ran away from our families to join the cadets. If you're tempted then please don't this time. I promise you'll get a chance soon when we can look after you properly. Farewell and may God look kindly over you."

The Queen passed along the line kissing each one. The King said "Give our greetings to your Lord and Lady. We will come personally as soon as it can be arranged. God speed you all."

As it was really too hot for dancing after a busy afternoon a few tumblers and jugglers were brought in and guests began to make excuses and drift away after thanking their hosts. The King and Queen had made arrangements to stay for the night. After a while a score of teenagers were left enjoying unusual freedom. Rachel and James asked them what they'd thought about the day. Even the bits they'd struggled with and

made fools of themselves were now happy memories they would never forget. Without exception they wanted to go to Bartonbry. Rachel pointed out that the Black Team had worked incredibly hard for months, fought for their lives, seen horrible things and made firm friends amongst the most powerful in the land before thinking of setting foot on a ship. "Our plan was to visit just to get away from our confused lives but – promise you won't tell anyone – the King had given them twenty pounds each to get the trouble-mongers out of his way for a month but today must have cost a thousand. We will pay it back one day by making money by trading with your very selves. You see we also learn business at cadet school. See if you can't learn to speak some British. When I'm back here deciding who can come to cadet school that's one of the things I'll test you on to see how hard you work at learning for yourself. Italian also."

James said "There are good reasons we can't let you stay here the night and we are all really tired and we have to be on the road tomorrow. Remember what Jane said about not running away – Not this time. So we must say goodbye for now and thank your for coming."

Now the tiredness hit them. It was all they could do to congratulate Rachel in whispers. One more hurdle first thing tomorrow for Jane to get leave of absence from the King and then they could relax all day on the river.

7 Leaving Arlesene

Jane asked to see the King in private. Maggie asked the servants to parade and took Johnas to see them. Rachel organised the road party. James had left to see Lord de Raqueronne. John was quietly getting the boat ready for instant departure and collecting letters for Melbun from merchants. Al and Paulanne sat in one of the gardens wondering what the next months meant for them.

"Please Sir" said Jane "You have honoured me beyond any expectation. I meant every word I said yesterday about serving you faithfully. Will you permit me to get permission from my King to serve you. I promise to return as soon as I am allowed."

"I see you are dutiful, strong, clever and wise. I wish I could say that about all my earls. We must let you grow up a bit more yet and we must find you a dukedom – or even a Kingdom! – for you to command."

"I am sorry we have made people worry that Avel and Orfleur were conspiring to combine and sweep through Lanconia. We truly came here with nothing but curiosity on our minds. We wondered if we might hear of a prince for our very lonely Duchess but never thought it might upset anyone."

"I am told that Johnas has failed to meet your standard."

"At first Sir he was as wet as everyone said but we showed him how to dry out. I promised the Duke I would take him in hand and see what I could do."

"He's certainly improved. You're a witch."

"Please don't use that word Sir. I know you meant it well but it's the word the churchmen like to hear most. They tried to murder Minda more than once and wrap their plots with devil-worship and black-arts to give them an appearance of good faith."

"Oh I see. You have done well with Johnas however you managed it."

"We all worked at it Sir. That's how we do things. Can I ask something in private Sir? I wish to know your view so I may conduct myself accordingly."

"Go on."

"We have been made very welcome by Orfleur. Like you I have seen the need to have a strong base to command. I had thought to marry the Duke himself and get ahead as soon as possible. Or I could marry Johnas and wait for my turn. If I could get permission from my King and Duchess would you give me yours?"

"I see you are a bold fighter who isn't afraid to state a worrisome case. Will you wait until I have spoken face to face with your Duchess?"

"I asked so I could be told. So yes I will do as you tell me. Hey! That's a very clever answer Sir."

"Are you being cheeky!"

"No Sir. When people try hard, have a good idea or admit a mistake I always give praise. Don't you like praise?"

"I get it all the time. You have no idea how much praise I get given by courtiers at all hours of the day."

"Well I must incur your displeasure by thanking you and your staff and officials for all they have done for us. When I come next time I will ask how I can help you. We have heard rumours of discontent in the nobles and peasants and our own King was a prisoner of his own indecision so it will not be a shock if you have weaknesses you think I might be able to help you with."

"I was hoping you would stay for longer but now perhaps it's better you take your honesty far away or else I would have you running my kingdom for me within a month!"

"Within a week Sir. I couldn't wait a whole month!"

"You're a witch my pretty little Earl. Thank you for coming and I hope we will be friends for ever."

"Give me a kiss!"

"Alright"

"Will you see those pear trees are sent around the kingdom. My geographer is busy telling your intelligencer who killed the Briton Ambassador yesterday evening."

"How do you know?"

"Easy. It was Rachel Sir."

"Now I know very well it wasn't! She was here with the rest of you."

"Good. If there's ever any nasty rumours you'll be able to put a stop to them. That's what I wanted to hear."

"Have you just made a fool of me?"

"No Sir. Your intelligencer will tell you the truth. It really was Rachel. As far as we know we have no accusers. We took care to see it was done in his residence which we are told is technically part of Briton, so we'll have to answer to our King. I don't think he'll have a problem. But we have a problem don't we? Who should be ambassador for Briton? Your pleasure or displeasure and arrangements to meet our Duchess must be sent properly. I could leave you Alefred as a temporary ambassador but I have no authority even though he is the Ambassador-at-home's son. Also it might be dangerous as we don't know who else had a knife ready for the Ambassador. He will come with us unless we hear the 'Votain's daughter' on our journey back home when he will return here immediately. I think he will return soon anyway as an assistant or on his own to be with Paulanne. He is one of those boys who has been shut up in schoolrooms and offices all his life. Fresh air and dark eyes mean the wide world to him."

"Thank you again Jane. Please come back as soon as you can. If you can organise a day like yesterday then I'm sure we can have as much fun straightening out my kingdom."

Rachel kissed him, hugged him and left with a bow and a smile. The King took a long time to face the new and interesting world. At least he was riding at the front of the host. Where this host had come from he didn't know but Jane felt like the best horse a rider ever had. He realised in words what he'd known by instinct. Jane would become Duchess of Orfleur not for her own prestige but as an archer picks the best arrow to make the best shot. He must go to Orfleur himself and then onwards to meet the Duchess of Avel. Would Minda make a good daughter-in-law for his second son? Jaques would have to start learning Briton and accounts today!

Maggie explained to Johnas that as they would no doubt be needing the services of these servants again it would be a really good idea to reward them with praise now as well as generosity from the chief steward later. She emphasised the Bartonbry way where servants were expected to think and take command of their own actions no matter how lowly they were. "Then it's up to us to notice their efforts and praise them so they may try harder next time or have the courage to say when things are going wrong so they may be fixed."

"So what do I have to do?"

"Just say thank you. Think of a dozen things you can praise then apologise for not mentioning everybody. Tell them the steward will have a reward for them later. Tell them that you'll be telling your father how hard they worked. I'll finish off."

So Johnas soon found himself talking direct to kitchen maids and gardeners! Beside him Maggie added her praise and asked their names and something about them such as 'how long have you worked here' or 'was that your idea?' or 'when I have a castle I will ask you be my ...'. Gradually some of this personal chat rubbed-off onto Johnas.

Maggie finished with "I could sleep a week after all the preparations, but even if I'd spent a year at it I could never have done it without all of you. I think you know how important peace and friendship between Lanconia and Briton is. You have done so much to help that cause. I know your harvest must be good or else people will starve so if Lanconia needs wheat this winter I will ask my King to send you ships as our last two harvests have been good." Geographer James and trader John had explained this when they were discussing rumours of unrest on the way here but she had no idea if such a thing was possible. Still, hope and rumour were better than their usual cargo of fear and rumour. Afterwards Maggie said "You did really well there Johnas. You have to build loyalty with praise and responsibility. Well done. Now what is your next task!"

Rachel really wanted to go with the road party and be ambushed. Yesterday had reawakened the demon of fighting. Instead she had to make do with taking the guards into her confidence. "I don't really think you're going to get attacked but if you do it will be bloody and even if you die there will be a war of revenge over it. Some of you know I bloodied my blade yesterday. That is still a deadly secret amongst us so when I say you'll be revenged you know I mean it. The best way to fight is with every ounce of your brain to get to your enemy then every ounce of your arms to slaughter him quickly then every ounce of your legs to run away. But better is to show you are too hard for your opponents and they will vanish faster than a lizard. The password is 'pear tree'. You have the plan in your head William. Is the first bit clear?"

"Yes miss."

"And the second bit?"

"Yes miss."

"Do you need my help? I guess we will leave within the hour."

"No miss. I have done as you said and split the guards into watches."

"Well done William. Do you know guards? When I first saw you I thought you were a good match for 'his bucket of pissness' Johnas. He's drying out and you have smartened-up no end. When I return later this year I shall ask specially for you men as I know I can trust you. I'm sorry

I don't have money for drink to give you on the road but I will be as sober as solid oak too. When we get back to Orfleur safely then I will be drunk and I hope you will join me!"

When James entered the outer office he was friendly enough to Wooly, Beetle and Hasty. Today he was calm and purposeful. "Gentlemen I have a serious confession to make. Will one of you write it down for me so your master may have it clear?" Hasty took the challenge and prepared a sheet and quills then looked at James expectantly. "Come on! You all know that if you deal with secrets you must at least start by making them secret. Where may we be private. I'm sorry Wooly and Beetle but I'm alive today because my secrets stayed secret. I know you mean well but torture happens and if it's a girl doing it she will take indecent pleasure."

"Come come Mister James. Don't be melodramatic." said Beetle.

James went to Beetle's desk and asked "Who did you sleep with last? What was her name? Come on! Did she have big breasts? Come on? Are you married?" Beetle went white and his jaw dropped. "I was about to put my hands round your throat to make my point but obviously I don't need to." What would Minda do? "Come on men. I made that up Beetle. I don't mean to threaten you except just then so you know how easily you would tell your deepest secrets. I'm truly sorry for that wild guess – but the first lesson you learn if you work with secrets is never have an embarrassing personal secret. Didn't they teach you that at school?"

"Er – No."

"I don't want to know your secrets but if I was an evil person I would and then I would ask you easy questions that couldn't really do any harm about your work. Then the secret that you'd given me harmless information – well not very important information – is a bigger secret which can only be covered up with bigger secrets. The end is very unhappy." James looked at all of them. "This is not my business. I don't think Beetle has anything to hide that you need to worry about. My secret is going to be told in a minute to Hasty in writing, so you see I lead by example. My secret is a really bad one which is why I have come straight away to have it put in writing so there may be no doubt I have confessed. Now do I shake you by the throat or the hand Mister Beetle?"

"The hand please Mister James."

Helen emerged from her hiding place! James blushed. "Helen!"

"Gentlemen clerks I am James' private secret am I not?"

James didn't quite know but said "Yes" anyway. He was getting fed-up with more games after days of tension and needed two days of rest on a boat as soon as he could get away from here. He tried again to be more polite. "Your ladyship! I would run away with you to Italy today but Rachel would follow me and teach me a lesson I could never forget. Please! I must confess important secrets to Hasty then let us share a few moments together before I must leave you and your country with much sadness in my heart."

A small room with a table and two chairs was given to Hasty and James. "I'm sorry about all that Mister Hasty. I had hoped to be away by now."

"You're a very good teacher Mister James. I trust you."

"I have to trust you whether I like it or not. Let us hope you're honest because honest beats well-meaning."

"Oh yes I see. Little lies to smooth things are still dishonest."

"Well done! Make sure you tell Wooly and Beetle. I think they know."

"Mister James I can tell you they were acting. They know very well."

"Even better. Make sure you tell them anyway. It's good to be reminded."

"It's good to have an apprentice who is so forthright. We have heard lots about your Black Team of course and may I say on behalf of all of us we were deeply touched by your sympathy regarding our colleague Jean Espice. We all knew him. His reports were thought to be fanciful until we heard more. He did really well."

"Please don't remind me of him or I will cry. Can I confess?"

"I am ready."

"We killed the Briton Ambassador yesterday evening. That is the Black Team. We decided it would be too difficult to take him back as a prisoner so rather than leave him here as a buried splinter to fill with puss we chose to kill him. He would have been executed back at Melbun anyway."

"And by international law the ambassador's residence is Briton soil."

"You know or guess the story then."

"We asked why would somebody stab him in the throat through a feather pillow? It was Helen who said it would catch the blood. So it must have been someone who had cut throats before and someone who didn't want blood on them. We looked at your files and only Rachel was a throat-slasher."

"That's right it was Rachel. She is a murderess."

"How did you do it?"

"That's what I came here to tell you so you could tell your King the truth. Jane is telling him the fact and I am telling you the detail."

"You are cleverer than you know but continue."

"Everybody assumed that Rachel and myself were at the castle from the end of the games to the battle of the sexes tableau. Four empty places at the top table meant four servers. Actually we left long before. We now have some really loyal guards from Orfleur. Three came with us. We disguised ourselves as servants on a mission to find more wine and candles. Our intelligence – boys from the docks – told us the Ambassador was at home so we walked in through the back, tortured him then killed him, then returned to the banquet. That's all."

"Who tortured him?"

"She did."

"Did you get anything?"

"No. She was enjoying the pain too much as a starter for the inevitable end. I wasn't prepared for her cold rage. It wasn't nice."

"Would you have done it differently?"

"Yes. Told him there was a chance he would live but we would give him one minute to think and one minute to speak and he would have to take the consequences."

"And she ruined it?"

"She went there to be revenged on Jean. I don't understand women! They are normally meek but when roused to seek blood they won't have anything less. If I was torturing you then what reason would I have to kill you?"

"I might call the King's guard to take you to be tried."

"And who would believe it was Rachel and me at the Ambassador's house when everyone saw us at the banquet."

"And on Briton's soil."

"Alefred has lots of knowledge but no idea of the world."

"Between us your Alefred has impressed everybody he's met. One day he will be an influential man."

"Thank you Mister Hasty. We've worked hard on him. He was as wet as Johnas when we left Melbun but our experience with Al gave us the courage to try making a real man out of Johnas."

"And it seems to be working. Now unless you have any more to tell me about yesterday I know the lady Helen is desperate to see you. Hmm. 'Desperate' is her eternal state. She wants men badly but can't bring herself to desert her father. She is of course his apprentice. We have the names of all her – er – nighttime companions but don't expect a woman to tell us men her secrets. So that's secret James. Please give her hope even if you can't make her happy. I shouldn't tell you this as you're really a spy for a foreign country."

"No I'm not! We are on the same side. Your master explained to me. Between us we stop wars. I thought of that when Rachel was indulging herself cutting-off the Ambassador's cock. How was that going to stop a war Hasty?"

"I wondered that too. It had to be a woman but they are devious and spring from nowhere."

"Or someone who wants you to believe that. I come from the docks where it's not nice."

"Ah yes. Thank you for giving us two new recruits. The boys you sent to spy on the Ambassador are now better paid."

"Really?"

"Yes. Thank you."

"I must see them now."

"I'm not sure I can let you do that. They're ours now."

"Don't be stupid! I must let them know they're in good hands. I won their trust now I want them to trust you."

"Why do you care? They've done their job for you."

"Because if they're working for you then they're working for me! Remember we are on the same side. I need to know who is round the next corner with arrows and knives. Those boys and their friends might tell me."

"Excuse me for a minute James. I must consult with my master."

After ten minutes James was shown into Lord de Raqueronne's lounge. "James! See I have no crutches! I cannot tell you how much that means to me. I have never had a son that lived more than a week. I wish you were mine. We must talk."

"Alone or with witnesses it's your choice Sir. I am in a hurry."

"That's the trouble with you kids today. Always in a hurry."

"And the trouble with adults is they're not! Please Sir. My boat leaves soon."

"Boat?"

"Yes. Didn't you know we are escaping down river by boat."

"Oh. Good."

"What's the real danger Sir?"

"James listen! We all know there isn't a road without a bandit but as far as I know you'll be safe on the roads from revenge."

"And safer on the river."

"But not on the sea."

"How so?"

"Pirates."

"Do I ask at Orfleur or are the pirates in cahoots with Orfleur?"

"I don't know."

"I call on Helen to help me find out! It is less than a week each way. Can she be ready in ten minutes?"

"I don't!"

"/Yes!" Came a voice hidden behind furniture.

James calmed down. He must be organised and – er – what was that word? Suave! "Sir may I borrow your gorgeous daughter for a fortnight that she might help me fight pirates?"

Lord de Raqueronne knew he had no option. "Is that alright with you dear?" he called, but she had already gone to pack.

James said "Sir. I will look after her whatever comes. I cannot write but I'll get her to write to you every day. I overheard you and Hasty talking by putting my ear to the door – You must be more careful – No I cannot be your apprentice! What would your countrymen think if a foreigner was to be the next chief intelligencer? – I think you said nice things about me deliberately knowing I would hear but even if I am the best I cannot be your successor."

Hasty and Lord de Raqueronne looked at each other. Realisation dawned. "You're cleverer than we thought James" said Lord de Raqueronne. "We had forgotten about listening at doors. So that's why you're the best."

Hasty said "See! We do confess our embarrassing secrets."

What would Minda do? "We must look outwards! Who is doing what? Who hasn't mentioned something obvious? Who will be asking 'who got

to the Ambassador before we did? We made a mess of torturing him and got nothing – we didn't have much time but really it was my fault. I should have spoken to him as a man. I'm sorry we let you down."

This odd admission confused them. James wanted them confused and yet enthusiastic. "Sir. You know the King has recognised Jane as the Earl of Arlesene. I ask you straight – will you recognise me as one of your friends? I will swear to be your friend now. If your daughter tortures me I might be forced to marry her but whatever happens I will still be your friend."

"James. You were my friend from the first time you offered to get me those celery seeds. To actually get them and to be so good at my game of secrets is happiness beyond paradise. If you were Lanconian you would be the King's intelligencer."

"Now listen to me you old dreamers! I have to find intelligence in Italy. Who are my friends in Italy? I don't know. Who are your enemies in Italy. Possibly the very same. I will not swear loyalty to your King except to say if I find his intelligencers are false I will betray them and possibly show my contempt by using my virgin blade on those bastards."

They took a moment to understand this attack but it wasn't fatal. "Now James what I would like you to do/"

"/Stop! Tell your daughter then send her to the timber wharf in the guise of a washerwoman or servant in an hour's time. Send her baggage to the Duke's town house in the same time. But be quick! "

"You are in a hurry James."

"We have to get ahead of our enemies. I note you haven't given us a morsel about our enemies. Whatever the reason I will discover from the gorgeous Helen. Today's password is Robin. My sign will be by Helen or another who can write – You know their hands?"

"Yes."

"I will never use 'James' or 'James Taylor' but I may use J-M-S or like it. Hell! I will see the words East and West are used or the words North and South are used but never mixed. Will that do?"

Hasty said "You have given me a brilliant idea for contacting my agents but as you have taken it I cannot use it!"

"I am still breathing because I am being better than the rest of you intelligencers. Get your dock-boys to learn a bit of Briton. Then I will see they stay here gradually working their way into more responsible roles. I picked those boys because they had hope. Don't let them down while I'm away. What are the signs?"

Instantly Hasty replied "Robin today. Helen's handwriting. North and south or east and west but not mixed."

"Well done Hasty. I have met the man you know as Xavier and no others. I shall recommend he finds a Wooly, Beetle and Hasty of his own if he hasn't got them already. I'm new at this game."

They didn't believe him, and were anxious to find out how the Black Team had chartered a boat without the news getting to them.

John visited the boat owner. "My father says your cargo will be here at noon o'clock. He has a dozen guards to keep pursuit off the quay if that should be needed but he'll try to keep them away himself."

"Right Mister John." Immediately John slapped the boat owner across the face. "I am not Mister John! Remember? Now make things happen or I will burn the feet off your legs." The boat owner understood this. He'd heard about the bloodthirsty children from Briton but until one with a strange accent turned up he hadn't believed a word. He soon learned. Today he was going to be tested.

At the first merchant's house John stopped at all gossip was about the murder of the Ambassador. The news John was leaving in an hour's time for Melbun, Lostnock and Bartonbry made them concentrate on business. Within five minutes more merchants were arriving to join the gossip as they might have called it but really it was carefully expressed wishes for trade to be less volatile and less subject to the depredations of pirates. John listened carefully to these sentiments he'd heard twenty times before already. Oh gosh how jolly good it would be if the sky was full of barley-growing sun and not rain clouds! He could take their custom easily and have enough for plenty more! "Stop moaning. Why are you moaning to me? I am only a messenger. If you don't stop complaining I will go without your letters. Make sure they are at the Duke of Orfleur's town house by eleven o'clock. And here's some news for free. The next Briton ambassador will be a lot more honest than the last. There may be news in the next day but for now assume the Briton King will appoint an ambassador as soon as we get home – say two weeks."

Al and Paulanne had a lot to think about together. Al was clearly a high-flyer in the international community. He was a perfectly good catch for Paulanne but should she still aim instead at Johnas? It had been assumed he would be her eventual partner and so she would be Duchess of Orfleur? Now she knew a lot more that valuable places had high

entrance fees. One way to get to the top table was to be someone everyone wanted to know. She didn't have that fee but the Black Team did. Al had no such complicated thoughts. He just lusted after Paulanne and wondered how to own her.

Only the Black Team and the guard William knew of the plan to start by boat. The party for Orfleur gathered at the Duke's town house without James and John. Johnas, Paulanne and Mister Jim were briefed five minutes before the departure time. Johnas made Jane happy by asking who was to command the road party. "Good question. It shows you're thinking like a commander. We can discuss it on the boat."

"So you've dealt with it then?"

"Yes. Well done for making sure. Now get your night-bag and jump in the cart."

With a great deal of confusion (suggested by John) the baggage train left through the narrow streets on the way to Orfleur while one covered wagon left for the timber wharf. James and Helen were on board waiting for it. A whistle to the boat owner and the mooring ropes were loosened. At the last moment James gave the follow-me whistle and jumped aboard the barge to be followed by a cart-full of people. In less than a minute from the first person jumping off the cart the boat was a score of feet out in the river. Five minutes later a rowing boat met them in the stream and John with a satchel of messages was pulled on board.

It was peculiar to be stand still on a boat but yet the town was slipping past backwards. James introduced Helen as somebody like Al. She was a lot older than the others but still with the sparkle and eagerness of youth and the silkiness of a girl fancying her chances.

Jane called them together. "The Black Team know about boats on rivers. We have two days of rest. We've earned it! The captain must be obeyed like you'd obey me. It may be cramped and without comforts but it's a good way to travel. We have plenty of time because we're constantly on the move while the baggage train stops at inns."

John said. "We will have man-overboard practise straight after lunch. Tomorrow we will be working at ship-archery. I have borrowed a cross-bow. We are our own guards but really we're watching for accidents not bandits."

On the river

A lot of catching-up with journal writing was needed. Inevitably much was abbreviated or left out. Soon every passenger except Rachel had found a corner to sleep in or companion to doze with. She'd quickly made friends with the captain and was now acting learned. Technical terms had to be explained with mimes but she was in a fierce mood and would learn the names and purpose of every little thing. Later James stood beside her as she pulled and pushed on the steering oar as directed by the captain.

"Who is Helen? I can see you are friends."

"The intelligencer's daughter and apprentice. She is lonely like Minda. She also may help us find out about piracy. The intelligencer doesn't know whether it is supported by the Duke of Orfleur or not. If we can give her a job to do and help her she will feel useful and grateful for our assistance. It doesn't matter whether she does anything useful or not."

"You like her don't you James."

"I do but I have told her you'd chase me round the world with your knife if I was unfaithful to you."

There was a long silence then a shout from the captain to pay more attention to the steering! After this embarrassment Rachel said. "I like you James and what you said was very nice and loyal but I can't be fixed to a man yet. Jane can see her future so it's different for her. Maggie may be a killer but she and John will settle down together – she's that sort. But yesterday at the Ambassador's I saw I caused you pain. I don't think we're suited like Maggie and John."

"It's true. You're sharpening your sword each day while I'm trying to avoid trouble. You're the first girl I've ever cared for. I mean guarded when you were asleep and that sort of thing."

"I know what you mean." She smiled. They both smiled. Growing up turns today's excitements into fond memories. That happened now.

Rachel continued "It's a good thing. Like Jed did with the ambassadors and Jean Espice we are showing how we are friends who share life not hide secrets."

"Good point Rachel. Poor Jean. We still don't know who betrayed him or why they killed him. What good would it do anyone? Think about it. Whoever arranged it must have known it would put us on guard and start us looking into who was lurking in the shadows. Also it would give us a common cause with the Lanconian secret intelligencers."

"Maybe they killed him without thinking."

"Or for some very important reason that was worth the consequences."

"Or somebody with a knife wanted to prove what a good servant they were and acted as they thought best to get their master's approval."

"Could you be a friend to Helen for me Rachel? She must know more than we do. John and me could spend hours with Al and nobody worried but if I did the same with Helen everyone would leave me to it and assume it was romance."

"If you look after me James then I will look after her."

"If you weren't steering the boat I'd give you a little kiss. We must learn lessons from last night but I'll still be your loyal protector."

Jane explained the arrangements she'd made for the baggage party.

"You asked the right question Johnas. That made me so proud. Then you checked to see I wasn't bluffing. Well done. It shows how much you've learned in a couple of weeks. It was inside you all the time."

"I am following your every footstep Jane. You have shown me."

"Then who would you put in charge of the party Johnas?"

"There's nobody in authority to chose from."

"I made William commander."

"But he's just a guard!"

"If you were in charge would you perhaps say 'What would Jane do?'"

"If I had time."

"If you didn't you'd need to rely on the guard's training and spirit. We trained them on the way here and Rachel gave them spirit this morning."

"So you're saying that William will ask what would you do?"

"Exactly. He is no longer afraid to take responsibility. I have given him my trust and he has given a pledge of responsibility in return. Trust and responsibility are opposite faces of the same coin."

"But he has no rank. He's just like the other guards."

"But he has authority. My authority. He only has to say to someone 'stop that or I will tell Lady Jane' and the bad habit will be fixed."

"But he has no experience."

"He has some and he's the best we had. Tell me Johnas how do you get experienced people?"

"I don't understand."

"I'm making him experienced by giving him the job. At the end he will report his silly mistakes to me and I will smile. He will confess his worries to me and I will probably say I don't know the answer either but suggest something to do or someone to talk to. How else will he learn?"

"Oh I see. William and the others can get better by being left to get on with it."

"Exactly. Like your father has done with you. Well done Johnas. You may have to pay William a bit more but one good boat is better than five leaky ones."

"Please don't talk about leaky boats just now. What has boats got to do with it?"

"Have you ever been on the real sea Johnas?"

"Only in fishing boats round the coast and then it wasn't nice. I was sick!"

"Then you'll learn your answer when you've set foot in Briton."

"Jane? Do you think I might make a good match for the Duchess Minda in time?"

"Before you were a definite no. Now you are a 'maybe' – Except the King will veto any marriage or any ties between Avel and Orfleur until he has had a closer look. I spoke to him this morning on that very subject."

"Oh."

"Don't worry too much. These things take time and you need a bit of time to continue getting stronger."

Maggie and John were happily stroking and holding each other. "What do you think of the Lanconians John?"

"They're very military compared to us Britons. Their forts are kept in repair and there is no doubt that they have more war and send more men to fight than we do. In Briton the knight is looked on as a bit old-fashioned and going to fight is something that can be done like a dance or harvest is organised. It happens and people have fun."

"I know what you mean. Is that good or bad?"

"Fighting isn't nice is it. James said to me a few days ago that he would dedicate himself to avoiding wars. That's why he was keen to have the Briton Ambassador dealt with – So he couldn't stir up trouble when there was nobody to stop him."

"But what about the Briton merchants? Wouldn't they ask the King to do something?"

"Which king?"

"Both. We did it ourselves but we went to the royal officers and let our worries be known."

"I know you girls just knock on the door of royal palaces and ask to see the King and Queen but you're special. Everyone knows you are the envoys of Minda or another king. Snubbing you would be an insult to very powerful people."

"Jane and Rachel went to the King in Melbun like that."

"And were let in because they made a mistake and thought Jane was Minda herself."

"Don't be silly! The guards must have known who they really were and had a soft spot enough to let them in enough for more powerful people to realise they were harmless and good entertainment."

"You may be right dear. Do you realise we have the keys to the castles of four of the most important people in Europe. Our King, Minda, the Duke of Orfleur and now the King of Lanconia."

"That leaves Italy."

"James has been asking questions about Italy. It is not quite a whole kingdom but more like a lot of little kingdoms. The Italian Ambassador represents the most powerful princes together so they may pretend to Lanconia and Briton they are united."

"I want to see the places Allesandro talks of before I settle down."

"Do you really want to settle down Maggie?"

"Don't you John?"

"I've never thought of having anywhere to settle. I would like to go to Italy and then perhaps start trading. A Briton merchant in Arlesene said something to me. 'The Duchess would have the money to build ships and pay for cargoes and I would gain the profit.' I thought he was being rude but then I realised he was speaking the truth."

"Would you make a good merchant though John?"

"Yes I think so. I don't mind gambling."

"But do you know the game well enough to see where the advantage or trap is? I don't know – um – Suppose you buy a cargo in Arlesene which is poor quality but you didn't know it and when it gets to Melbun is treated as a joke. Not only would you lose money but the merchants at Melbun would see you were not to be trusted with commissions and the merchants in Arlesene would see you could be swindled. Everyone would laugh and nobody would trust you."

"I could learn."

"These merchants must have learned all the tricks over many years. Like we speak Lanconian badly and with an accent we are obviously strangers so you would be given wine and praise and false samples and then taken for a fool."

"Oh. Do you think so?"

"You must get advice first from somebody you can trust who knows about those things."

"I don't know anybody."

"Then find a teacher!"

"Oh Maggie. What would I'd do if you didn't talk sense to me. Will you write a note in your journal for me to talk about this with Minda when we get a chance."

"I see you employed a clerk in Arlesene. How do you know he wouldn't tell the world your business?"

"Of course I hoped he would and I hoped he might be asked to find out certain things."

"And what happened."

"He might have been honest."

"I don't believe it."

"Neither do I but I couldn't catch him out. But I think every baker in Arlesene is a possible suspect for smuggling messages."

"So you sowed false information by visiting lots of bakers in a hurry. What's the point of that?"

"Just confusion mostly but if a stealer of secrets is found not to have given very good information before then if he manages to steal a real secret it will be treated with scorn."

"You are clever John. You see how to distract and confuse."

"It's nothing. It's easy. All I do is tell people what they want to hear or show them what they want to see."

"How do you know what they want to see John?"

"Um. Like last night where we left four places at the high table. Everyone could see there were four missing and then they assumed all four of us were serving and that James and Rachel were mingling elsewhere. I admit we did make a few references to them to our guests as if they were about or would be passing in a minute. We knew they were lies but they didn't"

"Do you know I was more worried about getting found out last night than I was when killing on Black Friday. Funny isn't it?"

"Oh Maggie! Most people look at your cheery maid's face and think you can't be dishonest. That's the secret. Why would you be dishonest?"

"Everybody can tell I'm lying really. You can get away with it."

"No they can't. I was watching you. You just feel ashamed of lying. I'll teach you to be brazen."

"That would be wrong."

"Better than stabbing defenceless old people. – Oh No! I Didn't mean it Maggie. Forget I said it!" He embraced her. "A good lie saves a hundred lives. Talk to James – He's keen on diverting enemies from killing. My job is to see how to make money tomorrow and keep two ears open today."

Al and Paulanne orbited round each other without making contact. It was exhausting! Eventually Paulanne suggested they found something useful to do – Like learn to sail this boat. Paulanne approached Rachel who sent her to the captain. He agreed that today was the day ladies would steer his boat – But mind! This was not a game. The river looked gentle but it was early summer and there wasn't much water so they had to steer exactly at his command and not daydream. Al slipped away to write up his journal in more detail.

James had vanished long ago so Rachel tried many subjects with the captain. By asking about him and his family and his boating she soon had his confidence. "You haven't asked anything about me Kendron."

"Kendron! First name terms now?"

"Yes. I'm Rachel. That's how we call our friends in Bartonbry regardless of rank."

"You must call me 'Captain' at all times."

"Why captain?"

"Because in Lanconia we think first names are for friends. If I call for all hands to get the anchor ready I don't say please and thank you to my friends. They must do as told or we could all be wrecked."

"I understand captain. What do you do when you're asleep?"

"The boat is moored."

"Goodness. There's a decent early moon tonight. I was hoping we would make another three or four hours by moonlight."

"It could be done tonight but why when your night's lodgings at Saules have already been arranged."

Rachel whistled John's signature then hers. In less than half a minute a freshly-woken John was with them. "Sorry to disturb you John. Did you tell the captain we were stopping at a place called Saules?"

"No."

Rachel and John looked at the captain. Rachel asked "Who told you and who did you tell?"

"Er I don't know. It seemed to be common knowledge."

John said to Rachel. "I made no plans to stop at a particular place. Only a handful of people knew we were going by boat. Funny isn't it?"

They both stared at the captain. Rachel said. "We need the answer but we need you to navigate this river more. Pay attention to the flow and think. Who told you. It's important."

"Please miss. I can't remember."

"Thank you for telling us that captain. What can't you remember?"

"I can't remember the man who told me."

"So it was a man was it?"

John intervened. "Captain. If you anger this lady you will be floating face down in the water. She doesn't expect you to tell her everything at first asking – nobody does that. One of our colleagues was murdered recently so we want to know who shares our secrets. Give him a chance Rachel! Put your knife away! Pay attention to the river captain. We know how to re-float a grounded boat in the dark but everyone gets wet and bruised."

"Look I didn't mean any harm."

"He told you something. What was that?"

"Hold on!" said Rachel. She called "Helen!" then the to-me! whistle. After a while Al brought Helen to them. "The captain is going to describe someone. See if you know who it is."

"When?"

"This morning"

"What time?"

"About an half an hour before we left."

"Tall or short? Age?"

"Medium height. Middle age."

"Taller than you was he? Watch the river!" By now the whole Black Team had assembled. Rachel signalled Al, Maggie and Jane to keep guard. The two crew happened to have heavy bits of wood ready in case their captain was in real trouble. The Black Team's relentless training at Bartonbry not to all get sucked into the most interesting thing was still with Rachel at least. "Taller than you?"

"No."

"Slightly stooped?"

"Yes. A bit bent."

"Nervous?"

"Not really. In a hurry."

John said "Look captain, it would be much better if you tell us as much as you can remember. We have hours of time but why stretch tempers unnecessarily? Tell us first about him, then the message, then the money. "

"So you know about the money?"

"How much?"

"Thirty Livres."

It gradually became clear the mysterious person was almost certainly Beetle. He would have known the correct quay from James' visit to the office that morning. So why convince the captain that they should stop at Saules? Why pay him money to see it happened?

Rachel calmed the captain "Kendron – you have done us and your King a service. Don't worry. We're not going to execute you for treachery. Our lives depend on our friends – I shall call you Kendron. Now are you sure you only confirmed the boat hire and departure time?"

"Yes miss."

"I don't know what we will be doing tonight Kendron but if I get a chance I will have a drink and we'll sing songs together. You see we like to go on our own ways in secret without being spied on so this makes us nervous."

"He said he was a king's servant. I believed him."

"Look Kendron, you me and Paulanne will worry about getting this boat safely down the river and nothing else. Is that clear? The rest will worry about what happens after sunset."

What did it mean? James and Helen were pretty certain it was Beetle who had bribed the captain to berth the night at Saules. It was difficult to think what the treachery could be. Did he think he wouldn't be found out? He must have known he had to get to the quay and leave before Helen or else she would have recognised him. John had carefully led the merchants giving him messages to believe they were going by road not the timber wharf. So that made it more likely the betrayal had come from the Intelligencer's office. James asked "Helen? Did you tell anyone which quay?"

"No. I didn't tell my maid and that's the only person I could have told. You told the clerks yourself."

"So was Beetle acting on his own or the orders of others?" asked Jane.

John entered the discussion with open hands to calm the atmosphere. "I have a possible solution and a suggestion. Suppose Helen's father wants to do everything he can do to help us safely home. His only daughter – the daughter that means so much to him is rushing off into a violent world. James who he has so much to thank for and holds so much promise also? Would he not send Beetle down to the captain to see we were sheltered at a safe place on our first night, at a place where his other servants may watch over us?" They all saw there was logic in this even if it was just a guess. They wanted to believe it. Maggie put an arm around him, the orphan who knew about families. How lovely. "My suggestion is that instead of rushing down the river we stop and find out. We must protect Helen and Johnas of course."

Once it had been decided to stay overnight at Saules everyone had something to do. The boat's navigation was handed back to the crew. They debated who should be the general. It was decided that Jane was a good general and Rachel should be captain of fighting if there was to be swords and that Johnas was to be the most important person for civic purposes. Al and Paulanne were to be 'wandering ears' as Al could fight and Paulanne could listen. James suggested John should chaperone Helen while he would use Mister Jim for ears. That left Maggie and Kendron to look after each other. Helen and Kendron were indoctrinated in the important whistle calls. Their signatures would be a shouted 'H' or 'K'. The password was 'pear'.

Jane said "Everyone listen! We may be among friends or enemies or both. If the intelligencer feels the need to protect us then what is he trying to protect us against? I don't know but it must be something so we will protect ourselves every minute of darkness. Maggie you'll protect the boat. Helen and John you'll protect the escape. Paulanne and Al will relieve the others. Any questions?"

Maggie said "Shall we moor the boat at the quay or in the stream?"

John said "What if pursuit comes behind us on the river?"

Jane reacted instantly. "Captain? Can you drop anchor for an hour?"

"Yes miss. Saules is less than half an hour away."

"Do so! Well done John. We will catch our pursuers on the river if there are any. What was that about a crossbow? Let us practise now."

"Please Jane. You didn't answer my question. about mooring."

"Sorry Maggie. I don't know. See if you can moor so as to get us all on within five minutes but still be out of the reach of weapons. I can't be clearer."

"Thank you Jane. We'll do our best whatever it takes."

"We'll see you're well fed."

8 Saules split

Only a stone barge passed them. How strange that it wasn't loaded! Sure enough when they arrived at the little village of Saules it was tied up to the quay. Their boat tied-up behind the stone barge. Except that this was on a bigger river and had a ferry instead of a footbridge, and perhaps the Church was more prominent, this reminded the Black Team of Willows snoozing in the soft evening light. 'Geographer' James could now recognise how a place was laid out according to simple rules of convenience. Where the most people were there would be houses. Where there was lots of activity in one place there would be an open space. Where there was trade there were inns. Willows and Saules were cousins. Now he would have to find the trade, which inn should they stay at and what the people did at night when they hoped nobody else was watching. His mission for the night was to educate Mister Jim and Rachel on the truths beneath the surface.

When the others had gone ashore Maggie briefed Kendron to find the captain of the stone barge and explain politely that the Black Team didn't like being followed and that the stone barge would be leaving at eleven that night when there was about an hour of moon left to take them away safely.

"But they will object."

"Tell them they have no choice. The other girls have had a turn at sailing and I will have mine. Does the reputation of the Black Team mean nothing?"

"It's so strange. A moment ago this boat was full now we've arrived they have vanished!"

"Let us hope they all return. Listen to me Kendron. Our reputation is that we kill people. It's true but it's because others are abroad to kill us. That stone barge may be friendly – We hope so – or it may have brought assassins. What Jane didn't say was that if those on shore are hurt I am the one who will see the survivors safe away and then mount the revenge. There is only one way to do revenge Kendron – with blood, blood and more blood. Now go to the stone barge and tell them we're friendly but they have some explaining to do."

Saules was about three minutes walk from end to end. There were only two inns, the 'Ferry' and the 'Crown' on opposite sides of the square. Boats with nets drying on frames were drawn up onto the bit of the square which dipped into the river. After the end of a hot day, sheltered by high hills on either side of the river valley there wasn't much urgent activity. A few people passed the time of day or were inside doing minor chores. As the golden evening faded into warm shadows, happy idle mischief borne of a dusty day of sweat began to emerge. Al and Paulanne sat close to each other disguised by a frame of hanging nets. They watched and saw the way a pair of arguing peasants would form then depart together to find something to drink. Other couples were obviously illicit by the intensity of their isolated meeting even if it was so short. A person collected others on some mission by knocking on doors.

A gipsy called at houses wishing well, offering fresh herbs and hoping for money. Al was fascinated! He whispered to Helen. "There's something wrong about that woman. What is it?" Helen couldn't see anything wrong so Al assumed he must be imagining too much. Still he kept on watching. Eventually he woke up! Stupid! He hadn't been asleep but he had been dozing with an arm around Paulanne assuming the world turned for him! "Shh! I know there's something wrong about that gipsy lady. I'm//Look! Following the gipsy in the shadows. Very badly. You go and talk to the gipsy innocently and I'll take the follower. You remember the whistles? Go when you're ready."

Two shadows emerged from the tangle of boats and nets. Without haste they aimed at their prey in the sparse moonlight. Helen towards the

gipsy girl and Al just ahead of the follower. Al got the shock of his life when the follower whispered "Mister Al!" He guessed the voice was one of their Orfleur guards. "What's your name?"

"Yaen Sir. Will sent me."

"What are you doing here Yean?"

"We got orders from the Duke Sir."

Al was doubtful. The road party was supposed to be miles away! Nobody should know they were here! "What is the password?"

"Robin."

"Go and tell William he has been fooled by false orders. He is in more danger than we are. Who is the gipsy?"

"William told me to follow her and warn you about her."

"Well done. There are more enemies than you know. Tell William if he's in danger we can escape with his party as well by water. Is that clear?"

"Yes Sir."

"Be very careful. Very very careful – do you understand?"

Al hurried to catch Paulanne and the gipsy but there was no sign of them. God! Sick emptiness! How did the guard know the password! Rather than look on his own he ran across the square to the inn to raise the alarm. He didn't know where the other watchers and listeners were so he whistled low-high for danger in the hope that there were others about. Inside the inn he whistled danger again then found Jane racing downstairs with others appearing soon after. "Paulanne has disappeared! Possibly captured. William might be nearby having been given false orders to come here. I've sent his spy back to tell him we could leave by boat as he's in more danger than us."

"James and Al get back out there! Look out for a gipsy."

"She's the one who I sent Paulanne to talk to."

"Shit! She's deadly. Go with drawn knives and see if you can see anything. We'll be out in a minute."

"Mister Jim! Race to the boat and tell Maggie we're leaving on both boats soon." Rachel added "Also put Helen on board and get John here."

"Johnas! You'll take command of the other boat. Prepare it to receive the road party and leave under attack. Obey Maggie. Go!"

Jane turned round suddenly and grabbed Hasty by the throat. "If you are against us I will murder you. Go to the stone barge you came in and help Johnas. Your warning was too late."

Rachel was watching the square from a shadow by the doorway, crouched down so her darkness was less likely to be recognised. John raced up from the river to the inn and didn't see her so that was a good sign. What would Minda do? Count her strengths? Their lifeline was the river. Their defence delaying the enemy. They must be ready to leave together in their boat. The enemy might attack the boats. She ran to the waterside to organise the protection of the boats. She whispered the situation to Maggie.

Maggie called to Kendron. "You and I are going to take both these boats away from here. We expect to be under attack as we go so every second of speed and defence counts. Help Johnas get the other boat ready to take twenty men and baggage. We will follow them. Send the captain to me."

"How can we delay the enemy Maggie?"

"Obstacles I suppose. Ropes and nets. Nets! From those fishing boats in the square. I'll trap this side of the square anyway."

Helen called from the other boat. "I can fight you know. Give me a bow."

"We don't have any. They're with the road team." said Rachel. "Your job is to keep safe. They've got Paulanne already!"

"We have a crossbow!" said Maggie. "Can you use that?"

"Yes."

"Good. Then your job is to defend this boat without stepping off it. If you see a gipsy woman kill her. Rachel can you defend the boats from the shore and I will help you but I will get Johnas to defend his boat. What a mess!"

"I'll do those nets."

Johnas was only a few paces away. "You heard what I said to Helen. Do not step ashore for a moment. Rub mud on your face and take off your fine jacket. Get your crew to work for you as we did in the lessons. Good luck."

Next was the captain of the stone barge. "It's up to you if you untie slowly and die in a hail storm of arrows or not. Do you understand? If the boats are split up then anchor half a mile down stream and wait for our bodies to float to you."

"Yes miss."

"Steal what you need to get men and baggage aboard."

"They can just walk on."

"Good. So you'll give them poles to push off with."

Hasty and Mister Jim arranged the orderly evacuation of the inn. His three armed assistants were prowling beside Jane, John and James. Rachel and Maggie kept to the square. At least they hadn't found a body but each minute that passed seemed a waste of time. Where were the road party. Was it a hoax? Al thought he recognised the guard but he should have found out where William was. Jane called them together.

"I have a plan. Is it a good one?"

"We get the road party on the boats and they leave but we stay secretly."

"Good and bad." said Rachel. "It depends on the enemy. If there are lots of troops we can't hide but if there are only a dozen we might survive."

"Why stay?" asked John. "If they have Paulanne then she will be guarded much too well for us."

"You're right James. We need reinforcements. Hasty's men you'll be needed as rearguard. Go to the church steps and wait for my call. We should save some horses for messengers. Where is William and the road party!"

"Call him with whistling."

"A whistle's no good. We need a drum."

James said "I'll find a way." and went to find something to hit the bottom of a boat with.

Al said "It's my fault I'm very sorry. Should I not stay behind to be exchanged for Paulanne?"

"No. And nobody is blaming you. Keep in the shadows everyone and let our men pass into the square while we attack any pursuers. Rachel has obstacles."

James started beating what could be heard as low-high then low-high-high. The square was soon full of people wanting to know what was going on. John stood on an upturned boat and shouted. "A gipsy woman has captured a high-born lady. There is a reward of five Livres for the capture of the gipsy and return of the lady. We fear there is much worse evil about. Quick! Get your weapons and be ready."

Nothing happened. Questions and more questions as the village became curious then confused then resentful.

Maggie raced to Jane. "The moon will be gone behind the valley sides in a few minutes. We need it to find our way out into the main stream."

"I don't know what to do Maggie!"

"What would Minda do? – Run away."

"Yes. I know – defiantly! Give a whistle when the boats are untied and we will run and jump on." Jane stood on the upturned boat to address the villagers. "The Black Team will return and be revenged on anyone who had even a mote of thought for helping the enemies of Orfleur. The Gipsy must die. Get your Lord to arm and be ready to help Orfleur. Blood must flow!"

Maggie's low-high-high whistle signalled a rush to the boats. The lights of the confused villagers milling on the square gradually slipped behind.

They had hardly caught the stream before the moon plunged behind the bluff of the river's bend and they were floating on a lake of total darkness with only the top of the steep far side of the valley visible. They could hear the water around them. Maggie asked Kendron if they could tie the boats together and anchor.

"We already have a line miss."

"Well done Captain. See you do have some brains. Now can we anchor?"

"Leave it to us captains Miss. We don't want to show lamps as enemies on the shore might know our place."

"Oh I see. I was wondering." Maggie called quietly to both boats.

"Everybody be silent until we are anchored. Help in whispers." In the quiet everyone had tumbled thoughts. How had they done? What should they have done instead? What was the current situation. Who has captured Paulanne? What had happened to the road party? What were their strengths? Where were they weak? What was their personal mission for the next few hours?

When they came to a halt and Maggie got the sign that the boats were secure she told Jane and said "About four hours to first light. Shall I stay as admiral?"

"Yes please. You have done really well. Help Johnas for me."

Jane called quietly "We will give three silent cheers to all our boatmen." Three breathed cheers and gentle slaps on the back. "You'll be paid in gold and wine but now rest. Rachel and Hasty's men will mount a guard. The rest will talk to find what we do now."

Council of war

John had learned from Maggie and made it his job to be reassuring. "Jane. You made difficult decisions tonight. I think you're a worthy general."

"Thank you John. I know Minda and Brand are always telling us to run away but somehow it feels wrong."

James said "You did right. We can't fight traps in the dark. Can I ask Mister Hasty to explain what he knows?"

"Yes but first let me say one thing. We may be running away and appear to be going down river to our ally in Orfleur but we could return to Arlesene." Deception was John's speciality so he gently found Jane's hand and squeezed it in recognition of a clever idea.

Mister Hasty wasn't so hasty now. James introduced him. "Hasty is the name I use for this gentleman who Helen and I have trusted and works in the Intelligencer's office. He chased us in the stone barge to help us against treachery. One of the servants in his office is too untrustworthy to live, but we don't know which one."

"I do now." said Hasty. "It's Beetle. The gipsy woman is one of Beetle's men."

Al exclaimed "I knew there was something wrong about her!"

"At the inn I had a conference with Jane and James about the man who bribed the captain to stop at Saules. Whoever it was that came to the quay he was not there on the official business of our office. It has to be the one you call 'Beetle'. Time was short or else he would have sent somebody else."

James asked "So why did you follow by boat?"

"The boss asked me to. He said he wanted Helen looked after by someone who knew the dangers."

"Good. So what are the dangers?"

"Um. I wish I knew what was happening James."

"I didn't ask you what was happening but what were the dangers."

"Oh. I should know by now James doesn't give up until he gets his answer. Listen everybody – The Boss says James is going to be the brightest sun in secret ways in his lifetime."

"Listen everybody! Hasty is about to go swimming face down in the river unless he stops wasting my time."

"Oh. Er. Yes. What are the dangers?" James stayed silent. This was beginner's stuff. "First the/"

"/How many dangers Hasty?"

"Er. I don't know."

"But you started counting! I will wait until you tell me how many then you can list them."

To James this was a duel where he was concentrating on every weakness and advantage, keeping up the pressure, guessing what Hasty would do and moving for the next thrust or feint. To Hasty this was a confusion of happiness. Confusion that he'd never been stretched so much before, and happiness that this lad was so good. To the onlookers it was one of those moments recognised as special in a lifetime. To Helen it was heart-stopping.

"Firstly the everyday dangers of the road. Secondly the dangers of being associated with the Black Team who attract the attention of every enthusiastic penniless rebel who is offered a few pennies and thirdly those who have reasons to hate the King's secret agents."

"You didn't tell me how many but that will do Hasty. I have told you before I have to trust you – like it or not. You don't speak like a guilty man to me. You didn't mention the danger that Helen might be stolen overseas to leave her father very lonely."

Immediately Hasty replied "The Boss knows if you and Helen find yourselves as soul-partners you wouldn't dream of forgetting him." There was a moment's silence. "He sent me to look after you not Helen."

"That's what he may have said but she's the jewel of his heart."

"You're wrong James. He might need Helen to sweeten his old age but he said to me that Lanconia needs you not Helen. He said straight to me – begging your pardon miss – we know why and what he said – he said if I had a choice of saving you or Helen it was to be you. You James every time."

"Huh! That's because I'm a boy and she's a girl." James had been taken off-guard. "He's like so many men who assume girls are sappy baby-babblers."

Helen said "Come here James." ... "My father told me the same. I put it down to armouring himself against sending agents out who might never come. You knew Jean as a friend – So did I – What a lovely man. It was my idea to send him to Briton. See! We know our soldiers will die so my father has tried to harden his heart to news of my death years ago. But your death would not just be something horribly sad that tears us apart but a disaster for keeping kingdoms at peace."

"But I'm not an agent."

"You are now. And as Hasty says – You're the best. You're our friend. Like Bartonbry made a friend of poor Jean in full knowledge of his true spying mission so Bartonbry could show its friendliness to the world so you're the one person with the understanding of our world of secrets we trust to bring our kingdoms to kissing. Lanconia needs you more than it needs me."

James was defeated. A minute ago he was the commander of what happened but now he was a servant who had to serve two masters. No! Three if you included Helen. All he could manage for a parting shot was "Well both of us are safe for now but what's going on!"

John said "Mister Jim usually has something sensible to say. Can you think of anything now?"

"Yes I can actually. I may be old but did you notice how the villagers were neither helpful or hostile? Shall I tell you what that means?"

"Yes please." Said Jane.

"It means nobody had prepared them for a fight where they had to take sides. I think Hasty and his men were first to arrive then us then the gipsy and the follower. Was the road party close by or was it a hoax? No! Let's leave that bit for a moment. If you're going to have a battle then you tell all your supporters and their supporters and their supporters down to the last babe in arms that you're the good folk come to deal with the evil ones. So what does that mean? It means that Saules wasn't prepared as a battlefield."

Jane interrupted "We're trained to aim for surprise battles and avoid pitched ones. That's why it felt wrong to run away! Thank you Mister Jim."

"As I was saying – The forces against you were mostly imaginary. As the Black Team know very well that's exactly how they should be! Your power is your reputation – throat-slitting fear. Tonight you only saw two of the enemy. You were a hero Al! You spotted them as imposters and stopped them reaching the citadel of the inn. Thanks to you they only

got away with a single hostage. That's all I have to say except how lucky I am to have such smart young people looking after me."

"Thank you Mister Jim.

Jane thanked him "That's a useful bit of information. Now we must think of Paulanne."

Johnas said "Shall I say a prayer for her?"

"Yes."

"Dear Lord. Please keep Paulanne safe until we can protect her ourselves. Um— Sorry. That's all I can think of."

"Amen."

"You have it right" said Maggie. "We cannot worry about something we cannot do anything about."

James added "Maggie means we put all our efforts into our response not her danger."

Jane said "Mister Hasty and Mister Jim probably know more about hostage-taking than we do. What can you tell us gentlemen?"

Kendron spoke up "Hostage-taking happens at sea too."

Hasty said "I think you were lured here for some other reason. They have won a pawn when perhaps they hoped for a queen."

Mister Jim said "Let us assume they took her alive or else we would have a body so what can they do with her? Question her about us and our plans then ransom her. They have no other use for her."

James said "Yes they do. They can use her as bait in a trap."

Hasty said "James is right. Now please listen. We have a rule in the secret office. We don't rush to the aid of our captured men. We may ransom or revenge them but never try to free them by force."

Jane whistled Rachel's signature and in a few moments Rachel joined them. "Did you hear that?"

"Yes. Why Mister Hasty?"

"The enemy will either trap us or have strength to hurt us."

"So Paulanne is on her own."

"No. Other ways will be found to get her released but it will be by secret diplomacy not swords."

"So how can we use it to our advantage said Al." Everyone looked at him in shock, then the logic sank in. "Isn't that what you learn at fighting school?"

Jane said "Yes I suppose so. It's just brutal."

Hasty said "That's the world we live in. You killed the Briton Ambassador only last night remember? Let's not pretend. I can tell you something you have already been told. Our enemies – there may be more than one – are not well prepared. Your speed has made it difficult for them to organise."

James said "When you said they had a pawn and not a queen I wonder if that queen was Helen?"

"Or King? Johnas or you perhaps James."

"If this is really is Beetle's plot then he might be wanting to be the next intelligencer or be being paid by someone who does. Either of us would be a blow to the Boss."

"Dead or alive." whispered Helen.

John said "Assume the man Al met was bribed to desert the road party and the real party is still on the road. We cannot aid them. We cannot aid Paulanne directly. We need more forces and more knowledge of our enemies. Where do we get that Jane?"

"The only places I know are Orfleur and Arlesene. Mister Hasty should go back to Arlesene to carry his knowledge of Beetle. Our rotten Ambassador was in Arlesene. There are more friendly and powerful people in Arlesene than Orfleur. The King won't like his summer spoiled by the evil we've uncovered but it threatens him too. Against that we have been instructed to keep out of trouble. What do we do?"

John said "We keep out of trouble at Arlesene." There was a murmur of approval.

Race to Arlesene

Now the immediate plan had been decided the execution needed sorting out. The Black Team thought how to throw off pursuit. The obvious thing was to send the boats downstream as if carrying them to Orfleur. Everyone knew that's where they were going. Their original escape plan had envisaged two days on the river then three by road. It would be believable if they drifted past their rendezvous with the road party after their scare at Saules and continued by the river. James pointed out that they couldn't keep their presence in Arlesene secret so they only had to wrong-foot their enemies for long enough to ride to Arlesene. In the end it was decided that the safest way was to ride on the west bank even if it was longer than the main road on the east. The weather was fine so the

roads should be fast. They would send the boats downstream to land at their rendezvous as planned to meet the road party. They debated who should go with the boats and who back to Arlesene. They split their oldsters so that Mister Jim went north to the rendezvous and then Orfleur. The stark conclusion was that Jane and Johnas should go with the boats. Jane asked Hasty if they could have his armed men.

Jane quietly asked Helen privately which party she wanted to join. Her answer was she would rather be with James whichever way he was going. She wanted to see what it was like to lurk and fear and stalk. "In Arlesene you'll be a prisoner in your own house or our house until you have uncovered the true plot. If you come with me you will be an ambassador of the King and see for yourself the spells it takes to drive a lord to war. James must go to Arlesene."

"I would rather go with James."

"You know how the secret office has hearts of iron so when men are lost it is only a line in a ledger? I'm asking you to let James go now and come with me. I know it's hard."

"I feel lost."

"We're all a little lost. Come and find if Johnas will make a good duke or a cloth puppet. We will be returning to Arlesene in shining armour. Some of the credit for bringing the Duke to the service of the King will come to you."

"You must be my general not my heart. I am sorry to have been such a sappy girl."

"Girls do lots of things the boys can't. I'll show you. I'm sure James will miss you too."

Getting the Arlesene party ashore in the pitch dark was a feat of bravery, quick-thinking, team-work and strength. Everyone got wet but with any luck there was nobody around to hear the swearing. As Jane helped Maggie over the side she whispered "Hasty enemy." The boats were pushed off the shoal and continued their decoy journey to Orfleur. They decided to get some sleep then steal horses.

John said to Hasty. "We like to have an uncle to guide us in many things. Today you're that man like Mister Jim was before. When you're retired we will come and visit like dutiful children. You're not our leader but you have wisdom and our leader knows she doesn't."

"Who is the leader?"

"Maggie. She will get us to Arlesene even if there is an imperial army in the way."

"Why not Rachel? She's the fighting one."

"Between ourselves Hasty we do not quite trust Rachel to think of anything else but fighting. If we need to fight then Rachel will be a good leader but there's more to our journey than fighting so Maggie will take the lead."

"Why is it always one of the girls who lead? What's wrong with the boys?"

"The boys are happy to be the soldiers if the girls will be the generals."

Hasty said "I need my sleep. Let me sleep. I am old."

"You're safe with us Mister Hasty. When you wake I will demand a first name from you. You know that's our style."

"I do. It is Henry – but I have a wish to be known as Hasty. Spoil an old man."

Despite Mister Hasty saying it would be alright, they dare not openly ask at a manor for help as they needed to be mounted and ready to escape if there was a general reward for their capture. The stealing of horses, even if payment was left, was still stealing. John and James were the acknowledged thieves of the Black Team but for the first time in their lives they found the act of stealing criminal rather than clever. Stealing six horses would not remain secret for more than a few minutes. They calculated that they must stay ahead of pursuit by an hour to be safe. That meant the news of the first theft mustn't get about before an hour and then when they changed horses in the next suitable town they needed to be half an hour away from any unsuspecting enemies. They would just have to risk it. Luckily they knew that there was a legend of the Black Team floating about and a few knife-throws would convince the victims to keep quiet for an hour. James handed a gold coin over as well, but he suspected that any such payment would be denied. The cool scents of the dewy dawn captured James. This was lovely quiet productive country just a day's ride from Arlesene. He could settle here with Helen.

The Black Team were on a lovely training exercise full of problems requiring coordination and cooperation. Maggie passed on Jane's warning and they took it in turns to watch Hasty. They had three opportunities to re-hire horses without a minute's delay while the others collected supplies and falsely answered the inevitable questions. They

had clear summer roads with speed to help them keep out of trouble. They had their training to spot dangerous places and deal with ambushes. Mister Hasty complained of tiredness and couldn't they rest? Maggie insisted they continued and he seemed to manage. They would arrive at the gates of Arlesene before dusk to camp at the Duke's town house or why not the King's castle? As everyone would hear rumour of their arrival anyway there was no point in making a secret of it. John had an idea. He and Maggie raced to the Duke's castle and recruited four youngsters and four older servants to appear as something other than servants and join them on horses as if they were the full party that had left yesterday. Maggie was seduced by the magic of Arlesene. Hadn't Jane and Rachel invited themselves into the Briton King's castle! She would try the same.

At the town gate when the escapees from Saules joined the false members from the Duke's castle Maggie instructed them to gallop as fast as they could straight to the King's castle instead of the Duke's townhouse. James and Al knew the way so follow them. She and Rachel would bring up the rear. Hasty would start the negotiations at the gate. Everyone would smile!

They didn't have much delay at the gatehouse but the guards were alert. Maggie instructed everyone to dismount and lay every weapon on the ground. The dust of the road vouched for their story of a day's riding. At the inner gate Maggie instructed everyone to sit down with back against the castle wall and rest. She demanded water or wine from the guard while Hasty was being dealt with by official challenges. Hasty called to James and left the others outside. Strangely Maggie still had her knife! But her smile was more powerful and it was less than five minutes before wine was brought and two minutes later iced water! Either somebody had learned lessons of hospitality from Bartonbry or they were being made to wait for a properly respectful reception.

During the next half hour Rachel stood up to stay awake and the others who had done the whole distance fell asleep leaning against the stone walls warmed by the setting sun. The Queen herself came out to see the sleeping army from Briton. "Servant. Fetch my minstrels! I want them to see this. Who is protecting my kingdom best? These stone walls or the sleepers laid against them."

Rachel replied "Your highness your walls never sleep."

"But my walls don't fight!"

Rachel walked slowly towards the Queen and without the slightest ceremony in the most natural way they embraced. In her tiredness half of Rachel was playing a game and the other half was following the easiest course. Rachel whispered "Our commander is asleep over there at the end."

"She's a worthy commander and you're a worthy guard. Is that Jane?"

"No my lady. Jane has continued with Johnas and Helen to Orfleur to rouse the Duke. I hope they're alright as our enemies know that route. Oh! Please that's a secret."

"Your Jane is doing the brave things a general must do – A fine example to our other Earls."

9 Castle guests

The next morning was like any other lovely summer morning. Golden haze streamed through huge glazed windows onto the silk bed-clothes covering the soft bed! The Black Team were guests of honour. They had never been attended to by servants better dressed than they were. John and Rachel knew about the impenetrable wall between servers and served that existed in Lanconia but nevertheless climbed over them in their own ways. They had discovered that as foreigners they were allowed to be different. Al and James prepared themselves as best they could for a long day of meetings. James would try to make sense of the intelligence situation and Al try to make sense of the political one. Maggie and Rachel decided they should be as gentle and lady-like as they could.

"What's it like being a princess Maggie?"

"La! Doest though not know dearest?"

"La! But where is my lap-dog?"

Ten years of friendship, six months of being in the Black Team after running away together, Black Friday, and the last three weeks of concentration dissolved into a cascade of giggling and laughter. "La! Do you know dearest I shall have to have my slippers lengthened." "The silk on this dressing gown is a disgrace I shall have the weavers flogged before lunch." "I know! Look at the state of my nails! The shame is too much! I will shut myself away in a turret until a suitor climbs my hair to make love to me." "La! I shouldn't bother – Suitors these days just fetch

a ladder." "How common!" Surrounded by perfect luxury as the last joyous minutes of their girlhood tumbled into the past it cleaned away the sludge of dark memories.

Al discovered that there were theories but no answers. He concluded that in the same way that Beetle was too close to the Intelligencer to be recognised as a cuckoo so some councillors must be flitting amongst shadows under his nose. The mysterious challenge by the three councillors on their arrival hadn't been dealt with yet.

James's first mission, encouraged by John, was to speak son-to-father in a reassuring way to Lord de Raqueronne. "Should I call him Frank do you think?" asked James.

"I don't know. Ask him. I saw he was walking normally last night. He must owe you a lot."

"Shall I tell him I want to marry Helen."

"You told me you wanted to settle down at Couraen where we stole the horses. Tell him that."

"Why?"

"Because he would like to do the same. He will wish he was as bold as you and do everything he can for you."

"But isn't he already enough in my debt. Shouldn't I save that as a card for another time?"

"He's already on your side. You don't need to pay more. Just share your good fortune between you. One day you may get gout. Another thing James. We must leave soon. We have no value to anybody except as hostages."

"So why must we leave soon?"

"If the Black Team is in public it does bold Black Team things. If we wait for our enemies to appear then we do it out of sight."

"You're our deceiver John. Why?"

"Because we can be anybody's nightmare if they don't know where we are. Think. Somebody thought it worth trying to trap us or capture us or kill us or steal us at Saules. We must be important if others are trying to do that to us but we know we're just children of kingdoms being sent out to play."

"I think we're grown up now."

"Getting that way. Even if we are we can still appear as children to others to good advantage. Innocent, enthusiastic, energetic, silly."

"What good does that do?"

"When we show we're not they are impressed and that gives us time to fool them more."

"You sound like you know what you're talking about brother."

"You sound like you've been doing intelligencing for a dozen years James."

"After the betrayals for a penny and armour of silence over dishonesty on the quays of Melbun the same is easy to see here."

"Lucky was very clever to find us wasn't he. You know that to Lucky we are now his sons?"

"I suppose we must be John."

"Everyone needs children James."

"Do they?"

"That's what I have been trying to tell you."

"I'd better go. What is your job today John?"

"I will rest. My job is to be reserve – strength for later. Carefully watch the back door. – That sort of thing."

"Good luck. We have to get out of here alive. Shall we go by river again?"

"We could. Even if we go by road I'll make arrangements to go by river to confuse everyone."

Al felt alone and now with real responsibility on his shoulders. He knew the Black Team would help him but at the moment he didn't know the battlefield. One little thing he knew was that Paulanne would probably be offered for ransom but everything about it would be devious. He tried to forget her, after all she was only a random Earl's daughter who happened to be at Orfleur who smiled at him. He must follow Mister Hasty's rule of hardening his heart to captured men. He went cold! None of the Black Team had made a single comment about him and Paulanne. None had sneered, advised a devious development. Surely friends should help you? The clouds of his thought cleared. Of course they were letting him do things his own way. They must trust him! He was one of them at last! He went cold again. Now he was responsible for them all! Oh the punch of that thought. Now he realised why the girls were so smoothly strong and the boys so smoothly keen, camouflaging their best efforts. Even though he didn't know what

today's meetings would bring his body filled with pride. Every word would have to be thought about. He should have a clerk to take notes! Hmm He'd have to take his own notes. He might need to show he wasn't a child and knew some important people and things – Oh dear! That was treacherous territory as others must know a lot more. Aha! He would ask questions as if he knew the answers. That was a cute trick.

Hasty slept soundly with a guard inside and one outside his temporary room in the castle. He'd been buffeted by a hundred unanswerable questions from the Boss and council. Unanswerable because there were too many possibilities or because they were secret.

James wondered if he should go straight to the Intelligencer's office or offer to attend should he be commanded to do so. He decided it would be the most polite, dutiful and helpful thing to wait until called. Beetle had been arrested. Hasty explained to James that there was too much confusion for anything sensible to be done. James pointed out that the Black Team were a force that could work in the shadows. Hasty replied that they wouldn't be allowed outside the castle without personal bodyguards from the King's guard. James asked if he could have a private interview with Wooly.

"Why?"

"I want to know what he thinks and reassure him that slight errors can be quickly forgotten. Our Minda often takes enemies and makes them devoted friends. I would like to see if the personal touch can work. After all he must know how much 'the Boss' thinks of me. If he does have a conflict of loyalties then I'd like to expose it and lead him to safety on our side."

"Leave it to me."

"Is it really true that we don't know our enemies Hasty?"

"I think it's like this. There are quite a few possibilities but no reason to point the finger at anyone in particular."

"Beetle or one of us or William in charge of the road party were the only ones that knew we were going by river."

Except for Al I can vouch that none of the Black Team would let the secret out by mistake. I can vouch that Al would have told me honestly if he had been careless because I asked him. Mister Jim, Johnas and Paulanne hadn't been told. William was the only weak link we have to trust. I think he respected us enough to guard the secret but we know how easy it is to be careless."

"So that leaves William and the intelligence office. I didn't know you were going by boat until you told us. That means Wooly, Beetle, me, Helen and the Boss now knew. Beetle left the office as soon as it became clear Helen was going with you. He knew which quay and how long he'd got."

"Were you suspicious?"

"No. Not one bit. But I did ask the Boss if we shouldn't send a safety mission after you. He hesitated but agreed that there were too many eggs in one basket."

"Thank you Hasty. It's nice to think that people think enough of us to send their top people to look after us. So I will rest as I fear tonight may be long and dark."

"Why do you think that James?"

"The Black Team's enemies are not sleeping so neither will we."

James went first to John. "I know why Jane thinks Hasty is an enemy. He knew we were going down the river but why did he stop at Saules? When we left we hadn't decided ourselves where or even whether to stop. Only Beetle knew we would stop there."

"Obvious! Well done Jane! We should all have seen it!"

"What do we do?"

"Talk with the others."

The Black Team was soon assembled in the most private chamber they could find. The conclusion that at Beetle and Hasty were both involved in the plot was at least a step forward.

James said "That means it could be the official policy to capture or otherwise destroy us. I feel Lord de Raqueronne wouldn't betray us. He wouldn't have let Helen come with us if he was planning our downfall."

John said "I should have seen it. It was all too convenient and too comforting to have the nice Mister Hasty."

Rachel said "I know you all think I have murder at the top of my mind so I will say now that I will be happy to do the deed when the time is right. But this is not the right time. What do we do?"

Maggie said "His game is trust. That is his trump card. We must make it difficult for any plan of his to reach us. Nobody will sleep in their beds tonight. John and Rachel are already getting on with the servants – well done – We might need them in an emergency."

Al asked "Where does Lord de Raqueronne stand? Why hasn't he come to talk to us himself?"

James said "Hasty has been the intermediary. I thought it best to wait until I was called out of respect at a time of crisis."

Maggie said "We have at least two bad apples in the intelligence office and at least three bad councillors. We can only guess who they are but know nothing of their plans."

John said "We may only have one bad apple in the intelligence office. I have an idea. Beetle may be innocent. Hasty may have pretended to be him at the quay. He would only need to have a funny fixed neck and we would jump to the conclusion it was Beetle. But we don't have any witnesses. Kendron is miles away."

James said "I've asked Hasty if I can see Wooly alone. Perhaps I should force my way in without him?"

"Can we distract Hasty?" asked John. "Say you've had an invitation to Lord de Raqueronne's house for an hour's time and hope that Hasty rushes off there to see him first."

Rachel said "Tell Lord de Raqueronne first so he keeps him there. We have to trust somebody."

Al said "No we don't. We don't have to trust anybody."

"Alright. We can test Lord de Raqueronne." said Rachel.

"How do we get a message to him if he's at home?"

Maggie said "Rachel and me will go for a little relaxation to see some of our new friends in the town. We will play the silly girls and be ignored until too late. Why don't we all have lunch at Lord de Raqueronne's?"

"You're wicked!" said John. "James and me will try to interview Beetle and Wooly while Hasty is distracted then follow for half noon."

"What about me?" Said Al.

Maggie said "You go straight to the King and tell him we think we may have found the real poison in the intelligence office but please to keep a silent watch until Lord de Raqueronne gives the word. Tell him we will work on what the councillors were up to. Tell him the Earl of Arlesene is with us in spirit and of course that in time the Duke of Orfleur will be bringing troops to support him. Remind him that Briton, Orfleur and himself are now a family who will stick together come what may."

"But I'm not an ambassador."

"You are!" Maggie said. "You're a steady voice of support when everything the King hears must be contradictory and fringed with

suspicion. He knows you speak from the heart. He knows we are working for him. He has heard about Avel. He has seen our powers to make games and murders happen. He won't be in any doubt that you mean what you say."

"If you get a chance tell the Queen that Rachel who she spoke to last night at sunset will attend on her as soon as commanded. If there's a hesitation tell her I'm best kept out of trouble, house-trained and know lots of rude songs."

Maggie said "No! We're here as guests with knives not game-playing kids."

"Oh. Sorry Maggie. You're right. I must grow up."

Via the servants they sent the essential messages. Ten minutes later the King's chamberlain himself attended and quizzed them on their messages. They knew that when the King's chamberlain himself took an interest this was important.

"Please Sir. We have reason to believe we know where the intelligence office is betrayed. So we cannot trust Mister Hasty because he may be involved. He must not know."

"Right! I see! Thank you. You are most straight with me."

Rachel said "Do you have a brother we can take back to our King? He needs better servants. Time is pressing."

"Er – Thank you Miss for the compliment."

Al said "She knows what she's talking about and means it. I've spent half my life in the King's castle at Melbun and you'll be most unwelcome there as you would show the self-important courtiers how to serve the King properly." Al bowed.

"Will you come with me Sir?" said the Chamberlain to Al.

Interviews

Two minutes later Al was in a private room with the King. "Your highness – How may I be of service?"

"I hope you will be of service to our Kingdom and Briton for many years Alefred. You start at a difficult moment. I see you are unarmed. No Sir. I'm sorry Sir we have removed our knives from our boots to give that impression but I will slowly remove my knife from down the back of my neck and lay it aside."

"Go on. I must see this." Al began reaching back with his left hand awkwardly then in a second reached back with his right hand and pulled out his Avel blade and held it ready to strike for no more than an instant before dropping it. He looked straight into the eyes of the King. The silence was short but sufficient to convey two important messages.

"Al – I am impressed with your skill, bravery and intelligence."

"Jane is better than me in all of those. You spotted it. She will make you a good servant Sir."

"Thank you. You'll have to do until she returns."

"I am your servant Sir. Our team could have raced to the coast and away but we returned to deal with the rot."

"Oh. Um. So you did. I forget you take masters as you see fit."

"No Sir. We pledged our loyalty. Jane wouldn't have left you to deal with a bunch of confused children. She's gone to bully the Duke of Orfleur to bring an army to support you against an unknown foe which will take people from the harvesting which is so important. She's sent us back to support you."

"Hmm. It's very confusing. You seem to have scratched an itch which has turned into a sore."

"Please Sir. We may have found the traitors in the intelligence office but we have no way to know what part those three anti-Briton or anti-Avel councillors played. I know they must think themselves strong so if you have a plan with which we or our lords can help please say."

"You have put your finger on that sore point Al. Hmm. Unhappy nobles have become more unhappy almost to the point of being enemies."

"Please Sir. Our Lady Minda has a way of turning enemies into loyal friends. Some must die and others become forgiven and become cautious servants."

There was quite a long silence. "Does your Jane, my Earl of Arlesene, have that skill."

"I don't know Sir. Please Sir I have never yet met the Lady Minda. By all accounts she would frolic here as we have. She is only eighteen years old Sir. You know how Jane is growing to become a general of purpose. Minda has by the histories I've been told already reached that stage but Briton is not really a warring nation. Her attention is on getting by trade what she can't get by war."

"That's a funny way of putting it Al."

"I cannot speak for her but trade and money is her passion."

"Money never won a battle."

"Yes it did Sir. Every one. Who pays the wages of the soldiers."

"Oh yes."

"Who pays the carters? Who pays the Intelligencers. Ah yes Sir. Will you allow James and John to question the clerks of the intelligence office in private? That will help them determine if Lord de Raqueronne is true or false."

"Not torture?"

"No Sir. We would put the girls to do that. If you have heard reports of what happened to the Briton Ambassador it wasn't nice."

"Why?"

"Pardon Sir? Why what?"

"Why would your girl –/"

"/Rachel."

"Yes Rachel. Why would she be so horrible just to kill a man."

"I don't know. Ask her. I'm not sure she knows. If she does it may be something a father should talk to her about. Please Sir we are far from home. Far from our families. We are our only friends and sometimes the lure of violence might be too much."

"The Queen was impressed with her yesterday evening."

"Sir. How old are we? Sixteen turning seventeen. Rachel herself is seventeen in two days time. We are growing up but as you said at the beginning we have a lot before us."

"I see what you're saying."

"Please Sir. You didn't answer my first question. How may I be of service. Or how may we be of service."

"By being ready by my side."

"We will be at your side without the word 'Votain's daughter' but with it we will override obstacles."

"Alefred Ruggleston you must listen to me. Lanconia has enemies outside who help enemies inside. I know you're friends with Italy. They're my enemies."

"Sir. I speak only for the Black Team who have pledged our support because I am not an ambassador for anybody. The Black Team will be by your side."

"What if your King orders you to hate me?"

"We will firstly say he is stupid and... ..we might get him to change his mind. If that didn't work we would tell you that we were ordered to hate you. The chances are we – Oh I don't know! Can we concentrate on today's problems Sir?"

John and James were waiting in a windowless room when Wooly was shown in. James introduced John. "Wooly. I hope you don't mind calling you Wooly – I mean it well – This is my brother John. You know we come from criminal poverty on the quays of Melbun. That was six months ago. Can I ask where do you come from?"

"A well-to-do merchant's family in Arlesene that gave me a good education but no ways to preferment and my older brother would inherit the business. While I was good at detail he was the one who could make money. I secretly hate money I don't know how it works."

"Why do you tell us your weaknesses?" asked John.

"I suppose because I know today is the day we find who our real friends are. You'll be the best intelligencer ever James if you live. Your work will be done long after I have lost my teeth and hair."

"My work is today Wooly. Of course you're being scrutinised but not by me. I think you're loyal. Are you loyal to Helen or me?"

"I think / Oh! Good question James. I know what you mean and meant. I am loyal to the office and the Boss and you and Helen."

"Which of Beetle or Hasty is the traitor?"

"Or both." added John.

"I'd trust both of them with my life."

"One or both is a traitor. We know that thing."

"I'm sorry boys. I know Beetle has been arrested but I don't believe it."

"Is he your friend?" asked John.

"Yes. We don't have much to do with each other outside the office but I'd say he was a friend."

"If I told you I knew he was innocent what would you say?"

"Hmm. I've questioned many people in my time James so I see the catches in your question but I would say I agreed with you and where did that leave us?"

John asked "Can you describe the atmosphere in the office when you heard we were going by water?"

"Hmm – Personally I wondered two things. The first impressed me more which was I hadn't heard a whisper of your plan. I would have expected to hear something. The second was wondering if you had people working for you we didn't know about. For example murdering the Ambassador was a reckless act for two people and a couple of guards. You judged the politics correctly and left the right message in people's minds."

"What do you mean by 'judge the politics' please?"

"When Jane told the King he couldn't really do anything about it as she honestly admitted to doing a bad deed for the better good. He could hardly arrest her the day after making her an Earl."

"Women seem to have that way of trapping men don't they."

"Yours do!" Wooly grinned. The boys grinned back. "Did you really just walk in and start stabbing?"

"Yes. John our master of deception made it possible so Rachel and myself did our best to make it happen by the most direct method. The sleight-of-hand had already been done at the banquet."

"Why so brutal?"

"Rachel said later it was to serve as an example. I think she wanted to keep in practise."

"When the knowledge gets around it was her and your team there will be consequences."

John said "Fear is her weapon. She uses it for all of us. Friendship is ours. We use it for our families, lords and countries."

James said "We must continue to treat you as a suspect until the position is clearer. You'll possibly see us being very friendly with those we know to be traitors – I'm sure you know why. Can you think of any way to help us help you?"

"It's difficult. I am a negative witness. I can't swear to things I haven't seen."

"Most people can! What happened next at the office?"

"Um. You have given us a lot of work and then the Ambassador's death needed investigating. We had been wondering what protection you might need on the road back to Orfleur. Various people had said various things at your games which needed recording. We had a long day of knotting threads together ahead of us when you arrived. I was pleased Helen went with you. I have used her in the past and I gave her a password and descriptions of some people to watch out for. That was all except to ask her to look after you James."

"What about the others?"

"In the next hour both Beetle and Hasty went about outside business. I don't know what it was but it must have been caused by your departure. Personally I wanted to leave you to make your own way. I knew you'd look after Helen and she would be eyes and ears enough for our office. She knows the traps and danger areas so what more was required?"

"Thank you Wooly. We'll ask the others that question."

John added "So you know, our plan is to have Beetle released. Do you worry about that?"

"No. Oh yes! If he is innocent then somebody has tried to implicate him in a plot by impersonating him on the quay. If so then the same person might find another way to mortally harm him."

"Good point. Or that person's friends."

John asked "What in Christ's kingdom is going on! We're talking here as if we're on a picnic not a hunt for a traitor among us."

Wooly replied "It's the way of intelligencers that we don't get excited or angry."

"Yes you do! You must! Now if you were in charge what would you do next?"

"Trap Hasty."

"How?"

"I don't know."

James said "Wouldn't you be straining every muscle to find out who is behind the treachery? Someone doing bad things to us or Helen. Councillors who are confident enough to try to block Avel and Briton! Who brought the Ambassador to disgrace? Did he have a part to play in another plot? Who is paying! Answer!"

"You're right. We're not very good. We have let things develop slowly so we didn't notice."

"By three this afternoon I want explanations and suggestions. We are lurching with the Boss. Neither Hasty or Beetle is to be allowed into your office without you hearing the Boss say so from his own mouth."

John added "James has told me what a quietly nice person you are. We have no reason to suspect you more than the others but there is a traitor in your office. There will be a guard inside and outside your office to protect you and the office against you trying to hide anything. Our lady Minda has a way of turning erring servants who have made bad mistakes but aren't really evil into reliable and respected men who soon

get promoted with more responsibilities. You know our Rachel will stab you without a thought except for the worry of getting blood on her clothes. If you have a confession then please don't let it be late."

"You make a good case for confessing John but I have a completely clean conscience."

"Even about the men you sent away that never came back?"

"You're a bastard!"

"I think today we need a few more bastards and a few less clerks."

"You're a bastard. That's what I hate about this job. I will confess to despair at what happened to Jean Espice."

"Well then do something about it! You can revenge him and uncover his killers and their paymasters if you try."

"I suppose so but/"

"/What's been done already?"

"Hasty has been looking into that."

"We'll ask him. Hmm. How did he get that job?"

"How do you mean?"

"Did he volunteer to do it."

Wooly thought "Yes. He made a big thing and swore revenge and said he would leave no stone unturned."

"What words did he use?"

"I will revenge him. No stone shall be unturned."

"Would you have expected some preliminary results of that by now?"

"Now you mention it I suppose some picture should be forming."

"But nothing has?"

"No."

"See if you can find out something from his notes will you. If there's anything not right send a message to the Boss."

Wooly said "Are we done for now?"

"I thinks so thank you." said James.

"You have been excellent interrogators boys. When we have spare moments I will tell you why. For now I suspect Beetle will have nothing to tell you and Hasty will need watching. Does he have two guards?"

"No! You're right!"

Beetle's wasn't expecting to be interviewed by the boys.

"It's you! How did you get here?"

"You're arrested because someone matching your description bribed a river captain to stop at Saules."

"That was me. What did I do wrong?"

"Good question Mister Beetle."

John said "James does not mean ill by calling you 'Beetle'. If it offends we will defer to your wish."

"It's a horrible name!"

James said "I'm sorry Mister err – but when I asked before I had no answer. What would you have us use?"

"Terence Espice"

"Any relation to our good friend Jean?"

"He was my step brother. Ten years younger than me."

James said "He was a really good friend to us and our comrades. We will never forget him."

John said "We must untangle the Espice family. We have already met people claiming to be sons and uncles."

"It's not pleasant but I will tell you as I know I paid the captain but don't know why I'm arrested as a result."

"Sorry Terence it's simple. Somebody bribed the captain to stop for the night at a place of danger."

"It was me but I thought I was sending you to a place of safety."

"Who's idea was it?"

"The Boss'."

"How do you know?"

"Hasty as you call him said so."

"Did you speak to the Boss before going on your mission to the quay?"

"No."

"Who gave you the money?"

"Hasty. He said it was the Boss's own money so there wouldn't be a record in the accounts."

John asked "Are the accounts well kept Terence?"

"Absolutely."

James asked "Did you have any other mission for Hasty or yourself?"

"No. I wanted to return to my desk."

"Why didn't Hasty do it himself?"

"Good question."

"We met the gipsy. Is he a man or a woman?"

"Man – mostly. A very strange person."

"We want all the honest intelligencers working every hour of the day and the one or two that are traitorous – well um – not free to do what they want. Why did Hasty have the job of investigating the death of your step brother and not you?"

"He volunteered to do so as not to distress me."

"And what happened?"

"Er – Nothing yet."

"We've interviewed Wooly on this matter. Can you remember the words Hasty used when volunteering?"

"Um. Revenge will be mine. No pebble will be left unturned."

"Hasty told us the gipsy man-woman was a special agent of yours."

"I have used him-her many times."

"Did you bribe any guards of our party?"

"No. Why would I?"

"I don't know why either. It was just a question. The Duke's secretary, we call him Mister Jim, is going ahead with Helen and Jane and Johnas to Orfleur."

Terence held his hand up. "Gentlemen. Don't play games with me. If you tell me your secrets then I know I am doomed. I am innocent but doomed."

"Why aren't you angry?"

"It's not the way of intelligencers."

"Not even when men you send out don't come back?"

"You bastard! Bastard! Stop torturing me."

John said "Why has the intelligencer's office got so – er – comfortable? You have deaths and devious councillors but your office routine goes on steadily."

"It's the only way to do it."

"Right then tell us how you'll deal with Paulanne being captured by the gipsy and one of our guards?"

"Tell me what happened. I know I played a part but beyond being handed the money and passing it to the captain I know nothing else except it was supposed to be for your safety."

When the story of Saules had been described to Beetle there was a thoughtful silence. Eventually he gave his opinion. "You were wrong to walk into the trap but right to spring it so the trappers might be seen. You had the option to stay out of trouble but deliberately chose it. Why?"

"Your King needs to know who his enemies are. Your office is not very good at getting that sorted out. Since the time we arrived we found falseness with the Espice family and then he was murdered. Then the Ambassador was drunk and probably being paid or blackmailed by others. What about the three councillors who tried to shoo us away? Many urgent questions and even now no answers."

"I think I know the answers."

John said "Have you told anybody?"

"Two days ago I thought I could see the whole picture faintly. I didn't sleep much the night before. I told Hasty that I thought I was getting close but needed to do more work. Then you arrived and it was chaos. I managed to get my report finished ready to give to the Boss a few minutes before I was arrested."

"Good man!" said James. "Is that report in the open in your office so Hasty or Wooly could see it?"

"Yes. It's on my desk."

James said "We have a simple rule that silly mistakes may be punished but immediately forgiven. Honesty is the only policy our lady Avel will allow. We will leave you here with an extra guard on the door to protect you and also to protect you we will tell the world what a horrible person you are. I think you're true and John does too. If you were released then whoever put you here would want you silenced another way."

John said "We are the Black Team and you may be released to do a lot more work in a few hours. We have our own picture. Please think how deeply Hasty is involved in treachery. He has failed with your step-brother to start with. We have to go and see the Boss now."

James said "We are looking after you. Be patient. We've got the office guarded."

John said "Don't forget a few silly sins to be confessed will ease your conscience and easily be forgiven."

Harrowing the intelligence office

On the way to Lord de Raqueronne's house John and James discovered that Beetle's dossier wasn't on his desk and Wooly claimed no knowledge of it.

"How about this James? If Beetle is telling the truth then he must be murdered by whoever is hiding the dossier. We can use him to bait a trap. If he is freed this evening and goes to his home we can wait for attackers."

"Lord de Raqueronne may be one of the guilty ones so we must keep our plans secret from him."

"We'll think of something else to distract them."

"By them do you mean him and Hasty?"

"Everyone!"

"We told Hasty we would be about tonight. We could say we'll target the docks and track down the mysterious Espice family."

"Fine by me but we need something definite to give ourselves a plan and our enemies a way to watch us or attack us."

"We'll have to ask the girls. They're good at dropping hints as if they are special favours."

Lord de Raqueronne had been warned that the Black Team were coming to see him. He asked Hasty why but Hasty didn't have a definite answer except to emphasise the trouble that Terence had got them into with the capture of Paulanne. "I can't believe Terence would do that."

"It's the facts. Ask them what happened." said Hasty.

"I'm glad Helen is safe."

"So we believe."

"I don't think the Earl of Arlesene will be in any mood to take chances. She's proved to be doughty and clever. The kings and leading dukes have chosen well. As Duchess of Orfleur she will put sparkle into the northern dukedoms. If they have guaranteed peace from Briton they can send men to fight in Italy."

"Or send men to depose the King. Can we trust them? Her mission is to bring an army to Arlesene as soon as possible. It could be a plot to lull us into letting our guard down with children's games and charm, not forgetting they conveniently got rid of the Briton Ambassador. The Duke and certain Briton reinforcements could be on their way already."

"No. They would not move until the harvest is in. That could be two months yet. If the harvest is poor again many more people will starve and that means suffering, death, riots and everything else – it would be madness for the Duke of Orfleur to put that at risk by taking men out of the fields for two months of campaigning. People are already starving as it is.

"If they have promises of food from Briton which has had good harvests they might try it." Said Hasty.

"Our spies would have heard something."

"We didn't hear about going by boat until James told us. We didn't know who killed the Ambassador until Jane told the King. The Black Team are always one step ahead of us."

"We are always one step behind them. We are one step behind all our enemies. I've had complaints. Perhaps my clerks are not very efficient."

"Sir! That's not a nice thing to say. It may be that Terence has been betraying us for a long time."

"Yes! You could be right. Find the evidence against him while I have a quiet lunch with important people who will soon be even more important."

Maggie and Rachel were shown into Lord de Raqueronne's parlour. Maggie started. "We have taken the liberty of inviting ourselves to lunch with you Sir because there's something wrong in Lanconia and you're not having much success dealing with it. That's why we were sent back. Jane and Helen are going to bring fighting men under the Duke's banner to stand on the Earl's bridge and ask who passes to prove themselves."

"So I've heard. It's good to know my daughter is safe with Jane but there won't be an army coming from Orfleur yet. The Duke can't take men from the vital harvest."

"Jane said she knew a way." bluffed Rachel. "But in the meantime your office was at the centre of a plot to capture Paulanne and perhaps worse. The Queen has sent us here to see if you're capable and honest or should retire."

"With respect it is none of your business ladies."

"With respect we trusted you with our safety and the safety of your daughter when we were foolish. Paulanne will be ransomed for a sum but they were probably after Helen. Had you thought of that?"

"It's worrying."

"For us and her. If you can't keep her safe then perhaps her own father is getting too old for the job."

"You ladies are like my Helen. You have a direct logic that cuts."

"You know our mission. We are honest with you Sir. We have no wish to see a good man disgraced."

"Or a good man murdered." added Maggie "Jean Espice was a good man murdered. Now we wonder if the treachery that killed him is the same treachery that found us in Saules. The password used came from the intelligence office."

"Beetle has been discovered. Thanks to you. You were the ones who spotted him at the quay."

"Did you send him?"

"No. He went of his own accord."

"Where did he get the money from?"

"I don't know."

Rachel looked at Maggie in a theatrical but meaningful way so that Lord de Raqueronne could see the next blow coming slowly. "James asked me to ask you. He say it's one of the first things you should have investigated."

"The one you call Hasty is doing that."

"Why him not you? Mister Hasty could be a traitor."

"He's my oldest and most trusted servant."

"So if you were out of the way he would get more responsibility. Have you thought of that?"

"No. He would never betray like that. He's always volunteering for important jobs needing hard work. He's the salt of the earth."

"Or he's the hasty miller."

"Hasty miller?"

"Sorry Sir. It's a phrase we have for someone who tries to do too much at once and gets nothing done. Like a miller who heaps his stone with corn that gets rolled into a pudding-mess."

"Oh I see. Thank you Rachel."

A message arrived to say Al was dining with the Ambassador-at-home and that John and James would arrive as soon as they had dealt with the people following them.

John and James were enjoying causing confusion. They didn't have the means to trap their followers but they had twenty minutes or so to spend visiting and revisiting four bakers in turn, introducing themselves politely then asking for odd things like 'did they have four and a half buns of gold' then winking and palming a small coin to the baker. They soon got round the circuit and had to interrupt one of the latecomer followers with "We've changed our order. Can you deliver on Thursday at half past ten?" with the transfer of a coin that was theatrically secret for the benefit of the spy. On the final round they purchased four small loaves but did 'eney-meny-miny-mo' and plenty of odd gestures to pick the ones they wanted. At the finish they stood in the middle of the street and called "Will all of the people following the Black Team come here!" Two out of four sheepishly came up. They were directed to bring the other two.

John said "Do you see we have fun in Briton. You were only doing your jobs. We are now going to the house of Lord de Raqueronne for lunch. These loaves are for your lunch. Tell your masters that if any lays a finger on you for being detected you are to come to us and we will lay a finger or two upon them. Is that clear?" By now a crowd had gathered and those who knew about the mad and bad Britons were explaining to the others.

James addressed the crowd "Good people of Arlesene – we hope you enjoyed our entertainment. You all know there is something serious going on and so does the King who I was speaking with earlier this morning. Ask these four people spying on us. We are the ones looking for the fleas who try to share your beds. If you find a flea deal with it – If you can't deal with it then tell the Sheriff. The Earl of Arlesene has gone to bring an army of Lanconians back to her town so all the fleas may be cracked."

On the way to the intelligencer's house John said to James "You know that was a declaration of war?"

"Um Yes I suppose so. If the Lanconians won't get the rats from the cellars then we will."

"Ha! You did well to kill the Ambassador. We've shown we can kill our own rats. Rachel showed how we do it. That must be food for thought."

"Who knows it John? Jane told the King and we told the intelligencer's office. Nobody else should know."

"Interesting isn't it." They grinned. This was fun, they had blades and knew how to use them.

"Ah James. Is John not with you?"

"He's gone to see the Ambassador-at-home with important information. He says sorry but he knows his duty."

"And your duty James?"

"Is here Sir. With the father of my wife one day." James looked guiltily at Rachel.

"Frank knows you were once in my power but have been released."

Deep down James wasn't sure about this but took it as a 'follow-me'.

"Rachel is a dear sister but I would have Helen as a wife. Er Frank. We call our friends like that in Bartonbry Sir."

"You're the best son-in-law I could ask for James."

A servant entered with whispered intelligence for Lord de Raqueronne. By bits his face turned from happy-serious to a proper smile then a full-body-grin. When the servant had gone he laughed out loud. "You're an imp and a half James." Frank explained to the girls the pantomime in the market square with the bakers.

James said "Sir! Please listen. We're grown up now. That was a declaration of war against the fleas biting your nation. It may be funny to you but underneath the Black Team is so serious it expects to kill tonight. I mean it Sir."

"What about my clerks?"

"I will say about your office – That means you and Helen as well Sir – It does not work very well. We think we have found one or more traitors. We know a lot but not the whole. Do we know who paid Beetle?"

"No"

"Who have you sent to find out?"

"Nobody yet."

"Oh good. Thank goodness for that!"

"Er – Why Thank goodness?"

"Because whoever you sent wouldn't find the answer and so would be wasting our time."

"They wouldn't! Our accounts are immaculate."

"Frank! That money came from our enemy's accounts not yours. Unless you paid for it with your own money?"

"No of course not."

"We will send Mister Hasty to find out though to see what answer he brings."

At that moment the man himself arrived very angry. "I am not allowed into my own office Boss!"

James answered. "On my orders. I am acting on the King's orders. Go and ask the King if you doubt me. You're under suspicion too Mister Hasty."

"Boss! How can I do my job without being allowed to work in my office?" "James?"

"Sir. I have reason to believe that Mister Hasty is not completely honest. I am certain he will never again be trusted by the Black Team or Avel or Briton. He is your servant and today I am the King's servant by direct command. You must have been told. Anyway I am here to interfere as much as needed to deal with the dithering in the intelligence office. I can understand Mister Hasty being upset at being a suspect but it's the same for all four of you."

"Terence has been found out red-handed! What's the problem?" said Hasty.

"He didn't betray Paul Espice is one problem. How far have you got with that investigation."

"Tell us." said Rachel.

"He was our first Lanconian friend and we miss him" said Maggie.

"Er. Nothing definite."

James said "You have dozens of leads to follow but not a drop of progress. That makes me very suspicious. I have my eye on you. That's why you can't visit the office. Does that explain it?"

"No. That's just your child's opinion."

"Luckily for you Mister Hasty the Black Team doesn't wait for something to happen. We make things happen. The situation will be resolved soon. Why not go home and read a dossier in peace. Wooly is minding the office."

"Wooly could be the one betraying secrets."

"So he could Hasty." admitted James without concern. "So you're happy to cast a slur on somebody you know to be honest?"

"No. No more than you're casting a slur on me."

"But I can prove that you have been dishonest. It's easy. Our lady of Avel says to let everyone confess to bad deeds so that they may be forgiven. You must have heard that. Its how we work."

Rachel said "There are no guarantees of forgiveness but the rewards for those who truly repent are worthwhile."

"I have nothing to repent."

"Except but you do" said James. "That's why you should go home and rest and think carefully."

"You're bluffing."

"I like it when I hear that from a prisoner."

"What! I'm not a prisoner."

"You're Mister Hasty. And someone with your experience should know that the words 'You're bluffing' are an admission of guilt. – Isn't that right Frank?"

"Yes. I'm trying to keep up."

"They have insinuated lots but shown nothing Boss."

"Yes the Black Team do that don't they. It's what I like about them. In the circumstances I order you to go home and remain under self-imposed house arrest for the rest of the day. Go on! Now!"

After Hasty had gone Lord de Raqueronne looked at them in that thoughtful way which demands silence. "You were sent here with explicit orders to keep out of trouble. You have caused trouble and now return to play with it like cat with a mouse. I am fascinated by your nerve." He paused but the Black Team knew when to stay silent. "Hmm. You have kicked me out of bed. Ha! James I owe you much for your suggestion. The pain of gout has dulled my wits." He stopped again but James waited patiently. "You say you have come back to help me but so far all I have seen is boastful words."

Maggie answered "Frank – How can we discover and dispatch enemies in a few hours when you have been trying for years."

"You found out Terence."

"He is innocent." Said James. "We didn't say he should be arrested. Who did?"

"I can't remember. Yesterday is a blur."

"Oh please Frank said Maggie. Please don't lose your strength now. We know you know so why sulk in a dead-end alley that stinks of everything bad?"

"I really can't remember. Helen was my memory. She made me repeat everything to her then I would let it drift and wait for her prompting."

Maggie said "I think I understand. As you had crutches to help with your gout so she was your memory-crutch."

"I suppose so."

"Now she's not by your side you are lost. She was waiting for you to lead and you were waiting for her to push and so you nodded-through the work of the clerks."

"I suppose so. I kept going for her sake."

Maggie said "I wonder if the reason she stayed by your side was for your sake?"

James said "I see too. I am sorry. A son might have been more forceful. Helen will fly free and if we can keep her safe this next month she will have a fine future one way or the other."

Rachel said "We will see you get a dignified retirement. You know our blades are sharp but our hearts are soft."

Maggie said "To business! Frank! You're not a useless wreck yet. We assume your good intentions and private pain means you have been used by others without you knowing. We plan to find the worm or worms in your office without your knowing. Is that a good plan Frank?"

Lord de Raqueronne sat back and looked at them. "In a while I will visit the King and confess to him and tell him my fears for the treachery in my office and resign. I have failed."

"No you won't!" Said Maggie. "Not only will everyone know but the good men in the office will be stymied in their efforts to deal with the evil. At this time we can't have a fight to take your job as the wrong man may get it and we need more than best efforts to catch our enemies amongst us."

Rachel said "You're not a useless old man, just one who has lost his confidence through being so used to relying on others. At this time you can rely on us."

"But you can't rely on me." said Frank sadly. "I know."

James said "That is true. See! You really do have a clear picture of the situation. We have a plan. We must prepare as we have a long night ahead of us."

Maggie said "The password will be 'star' and the counterword 'white'. You are not to tell another soul. All messages from us will have that in one way. Any without, especially those using 'robin' are false. How many guards do you want?"

"Er Guards? You're putting me under arrest?"

Rachel said "We can't guard you ourselves so you need protection from the King's men. By tomorrow there may be accounts that can only be settled in blood. Helen is safe but you're not."

"I don't know. Three?"

"Six then. We want our enemies to know how important you are. Make it ten."

James said "Eight at most. Six is better. We have to train them and we don't have enough time as it is."

"Alright six and we'll let it be known it's really ten. Can you give us a request to the King to that effect now. James has a lot to do. I will train the guards to be useful."

"Now then Miss Rachel, there is no need to patronise me. I think I can organise guards in my household."

"So tell me Frank which of your household servants have been corrupted? We all know the answer isn't none."

"Oh do we?"

"We do. Sir please listen! I like killing people to see them realise their last mistake was fatal and feel the blood gush and tearing pain. That's a pinnacle of power. Do you know what the other side of that coin is? It is making sure nobody walks into this house by the back door, chats to the servants, walks up the stairs, cuts you down you with a kick to the belly then tortures you to death with a dagger to see what happens. It happened to the Briton Ambassador and there is nobody that learns a new trick as fast as a criminal. As our Lady says 'ask yourself why you're still breathing'."

"My household are all loyal."

"No they're not." bluffed James looking into the eyes of the intelligencer.

"In Lanconia all servants have a price – Quite a small one. Money buys service but not loyalty. Demands buy service but breed hatred. Your kitchen door could be wide open for a few coins... ..But tonight the assassins should be elsewhere but they will be about. Why do you think Hasty is allowed freedom when we are certain he's corrupt?"

"I don't know. I'm trying to catch up with you."

"Because he's no use to us in a cell. He has crimes to cover-up which will need help to deal with perhaps. Or he may find he has some explaining to do to his masters. Either way he is a tell-tale for other plotters."

Maggie flashed the follow-me sign to Rachel and said to the intelligencer "Do you have a personal weapon?"

Rachel added "I will see your guards help you practise with one."

James said "Please Sir do you remember the password and counterword?"

"Oh yes 'star' and 'silver' "

"Star' and 'white!' John and me were followed round the market square by four spies just now. That's four different enemies. If you can't get the difference between 'white' and 'silver' then there are four enemies out there who will make sure you never see tomorrow's dawn."

On the way back to the castle with their six guards Maggie whistled 'stop' then 'no danger'. "Guards we thank you for looking after us today. Rachel here needs guards for the man we just saw. Those guards will be trained by her specially but must want to do the duty."

Rachel added "We don't know your names yet. We have been too busy but I see you! and you! should have been sworn at by your commander this morning as your buckle tails are loose and you're unshaven and you're not looking around. In Bartonbry people take pride in doing their job well. We have to chastise them for trying too hard. One day in a hundred you may need two swords five shields and eyes that see round corners but mostly doing your best because that's just as easy as being a turd in the sewer of life is what we expect. Remember that the more time we spend avoiding trouble the more time you have to pretend with practise fighting."

James said "Tonight will be one of those one in a hundred nights. We have mere handful of hours to train twenty men. You know full well who we are. We know how to kill in the night. This night could one of those dawnless nights for our enemies. I have to see the King now and get some sleep. The girls have probably killed as many as you combined and I will let you compare scores later. But please guards – please listen to me – these girls can kill but they can also be killed. Your job is not to help them kill but to stop them being attacked."

Maggie said "Guards – where we come from we trust our guards. That's what James was trying to say. Can we trust you?"

The guards murmured approval but looked at each other. Eventually a spokesman emerged. "Yes miss Margaret."

"Call me Maggie." She smiled contagiously. "I'll be calling you by your first names and you can teach Rachel some Lanconian swear words – She's been desperately waiting a week already!"

Amongst the smiles Rachel said "And I'll teach you some/ /Attention! None of you were on guard! The three of us have been watching but you were dreaming! That's why I'll be learning some swear words this afternoon – Because you won't ever be allowed to do that again and get away with it. I'm going to make sure you live to see next week!"

"Whether you like it or not." added James with a wry smile.

The spokesman said "We have all been on many campaigns in Italy."

"And you have all failed to guard us just now." said Maggie gently. "We live today because yesterday we lived today. Do you see? A reputation is nothing if your throat is cut. A great man yesterday can be an idiot today. We didn't want to but Rachel and myself cut the throats of two dozing sentries last year."

"I did. I like killing." followed Rachel after Maggie's fantasy.

James interrupted "Time is short men. You know what it's like when women get talking – they never stop! Can we continue Maggie?"

The Ambassador at home had taken special care to prepare for lunch with Alefred. There were so many strands to this knot. Firstly he had informally written to Al's father to congratulate him on a worthy son with so much cautious wisdom. Secondly he liked the idea of innocent friendship making a seedbed for the future. He hoped his daughters would soon be welcomed in Briton and be received with similar favour. Thirdly everything he heard about Briton indicated that there was a great mood for trade and peace. The Duchess of Avel was clearly the star to follow. She was young, single, horribly ugly, lonely, rich and determined to succeed. She'd already shown how she could command a king and break the Church. Such a promise of power would have waves of enemies. Now they were nibbling at her youngsters, soon they would be finding ways to attack her at home. His job was to get the best for Lanconia. The King should meet her and decide for himself. The Black Team had done a good job of framing the friendship between the two Kingdoms as youths finding friends rather than enemies. He calculated how soon the King and Duchess could possibly meet. It would have to be on Lanconian soil and Orfleur would claim the right to host it. Two months at the earliest. Now what would be the desired outcome? He didn't quite know.

What about the southern councillors who had tried to block the Black Team? Who exactly did they represent? The King had put-off dealing with them. Time would be needed to squeeze them into a more north-friendly attitude. The Archbishop had expressed a number of general concerns and particular crimes about the Duchess. It was difficult to stay impartial when the King and Ambassador-at-home were delighted with the idea of whipping the Church like it had been in Briton thanks to the Duchess. Why was there no ransom demand for Paulanne? It was a bit worrying. The treachery in the intelligence office explained a lot but

not everything. He'd known the Briton Ambassador was broken and let the Lanconian Ambassador in Melbun know as an unreliable intermediary was a danger to them all. A response from the Ambassador and presumably an official communication from Briton should be here any day now. The news that the Black Team were the ones that killed him was difficult to credit but made sense, from what he'd heard it was the sort of thing they would do. Had they received secret orders? Who else knew it was the Black Team? He would have to ask the intelligencer.

Alefred brought John with him. "Two of you! My pleasure gentlemen."

Al replied "Please Sir John Taylor was the one who arranged the deception at the banquet. He's here with your leave as he has a few ideas about who is stealing the King's peace."

"You did well to discover Terences' treachery and even better to come back to deal with it."

Al said "We know a lot more than that Sir, and tonight we hope to learn more still. Will we start with our plan?"

"Please do. I like your direct approach to business."

"Thank you Sir. You're a good listener. Our plan is to return to Briton as soon as we know our friends here are safe. We know the King and yourself find it convenient for us to be your hunting dogs. It's what we're trained for. Our service to your King is to flush your enemies into the open so that you can deal with them as you wish. It's our way of repaying your friendship."

John added "We dealt with the Briton Ambassador because you couldn't but so long as nobody attacks us we won't be using violence against your enemies."

Lord Robert said "That's a very fair plan boys. How do I know you're not deceiving me John?"

"Every day we spend here is one more chance to spoil the friendships we have made with plots and killings. Myself and James were followed by four spies this morning in the market. That looks like we're outnumbered and when that happens we run away."

Al said "But we have been commanded by Jane Earl of Arlesene to support you so that's why we're here to share our knowledge."

"Also we need to get to the bottom of who has kidnapped Paulanne and what their real intention was. Her capture is a trail to be followed. The

murder of your servant and our friend Jean Espice is another trail that has been allowed to go cold." said John.

"So boys – you're saying that you believe there is hidden turmoil which those of us at court have ignored and that you who are not squeamish will show the darker side of plotting so we may act accordingly."

Al said "If you're strong then you should be ready confront your enemies. If you're weak then we will distract them enough for you to catch them one at a time."

John said "We will stand by your side whatever."

"Suppose the various factions had come to a truce and your arrival disturbed the peace? That looks like meddling in other people's affairs."

Al replied "If it takes only six children from Briton to upset your peace it was very fragile and we all know that sort of peace is nothing more than a truce while parties gather more support."

"Alefred – You are a very convincing ambassador. I have written to your father telling him to be very proud of you. It's the King's policy to make close ties with Briton based on the boldness of your team and the strength of your Duchess. I was testing you. The King's opponents are not well organised or financed. I have many good reasons to see you sent home safely but there is a bit of truth in your analysis and you have shown your mastery of treachery in the intelligencer's office so as you cleverly put it I will let you be the dogs that flush the game for me and the King."

John said "Please may I ask a private question Sir?"

"Yes John."

"I understand there was a council meeting last night which Mister Hasty reported was inconclusive. We have found confusion and worse in the intelligence office but how is it that the King's council is so confused also?"

Al showed John the 'I am following you' sign. "John has never been at court Sir. He is used to the way the Black Team works where we discuss then agree then act."

"Oh I see. Thank you Alefred. It's complicated with so many views John."

"What I meant was have you yourself got a few firm supporters or many friends who will fade away when needed?"

"Now that's a good question."

"And Sir do you have a few definite personal enemies who wish to have your job."

Still showing the hand sign Al said "Sir I am sorry for John to pry. As I say he has never been to court to see the tangle of politics."

"Well since you're so polite I should say that there is a stropo fellow – the Duke de Harzel who likes to gain advantage and never fails to make simplistic points that attract the support of shallow people and take a lot of denying in detail. He is telling everyone how evil you bishop-killers are and you're trying to lure our children to Briton as hostages. He is one of the three councillors that tried to block you."

Al said "Our Lady Minda says 'follow the money'. Is he paying or is somebody paying him?"

"I don't know."

John asked "You don't know whether his wealth is real or borrowed do you?"

"I have never thought John. I assume it's real wealth. You do ask good questions. – Both of you."

John continued "So this rat with a loud mouth has ambition. Of course he does. So what is it and how does he intend to achieve it? I don't know the first answer but the second is easy. – By any means possible. – So let us assume that he at least knows about two of our enemies. Perhaps the Church and treason in the intelligence office. But those are costs not rewards. If you can think of his next steps then please let us know as it will help us trap him."

Al asked "Does he have any hot-headed close associates? If so we need to watch them. We are making sure the intelligencer is properly guarded. James and Rachel simply walked in the kitchen door of the Briton Ambassador's house and in two minutes were torturing him then escaped unseen. If I was you I'd assume at least one of your household staff was corrupt for a few cents or blackmail and borrow two armed guards for the next week for you person."

"Come come! You're being too dramatic Alefred."

"Criminals learn very quickly. If I was likely to get your job then why should I wait when it might cost me only ten or Livres to assassinate you? I would be mad to wait."

"We don't go round assassinating people in Lanconia!"

"Let's hope it stays like that Sir. I only said the facts which anyone can see for themselves."

Lord Robert changed the subject "What do you know about the Intelligence office?"

John answered "Our colleagues are discovering more as we speak but the key fact is that Beetle – Terence – is definitely innocent of treachery. What will happen if he is released Sir?"

"I don't know. Continue."

"Whoever wanted him arrested and then in course of time executed would know two things. Firstly that we knew some of the real story. Anyone who knows us will expect us to find out more and guess even more. Secondly they will know that Beetle knows who the false accusers are and will say so and perhaps also knows a great deal more. So that means Beetle will be dead by morning unless he's looked after. We will look after him if you'll see he is freed without secrecy at dusk."

"Oh ho! There are two ways I can see this. Firstly your treacherous servant Beetle is about to be spirited out of the country by you. Or secondly you're using him as bait in a trap."

Al said "Please let's not start suspecting our true friends again. I know you have to be suspicious as a job but if there is one tiny item where you have found us wanting in trust then please say so."

"You're right. I am getting nervous in my old age."

"You're right to question everything Sir." said John. "We have answers you can test but others may not. We do want to bait a trap with him. That is why Sir you must not keep it a secret that he is released. Please keep our part secret though and please – whatever you do – don't let anyone know it was us who killed the Briton Ambassador. We will be working in the dark. We know how the moon flies tonight and will use her slight light and then wait."

A servant came with a whispered message. "That was a messenger from the Intelligencer's. You are to be trusted."

"How do you know the message is genuine Sir? We could have arranged it."

"Now it's your turn to doubt trust when we should be acting!"

"We are alive because we doubted." said Al.

"Whenever we get a message we want to hear it puts us on guard." said John. "That's how deception works. You see or hear what you want to hear and are fatally caught. I don't think that message was 'we are to be trusted' Sir. I will not demand anything but just say our team us will sleep this afternoon so we may be awake tonight. Tomorrow we hope to have a secret session with you Sir where with any luck certain things may be clarified."

The Ambassador-at-home didn't answer for a while. Al and John knew the value of silence. Eventually he said. "That message really did say you were to be trusted. As you say it could be false – False in two ways. Not from Frank or Frank himself is false."

"Or confused." said John.

"He says Terence should be released."

John corrected him "The message says Terence should be released."

"Alright! Anyway why are you arguing against exactly what you asked me to do?"

John replied "So you're rightly suspicious. In the next few hours and days there may be many messages and people who are false. The most honest men are easiest to deceive."

Al said "Please there is one more thing. Jane has gone to bring the Duke of Orfleur with whatever force he thinks fit. I'm sure it will be sent quickly and he will wish he had wings to be by the King's side. We know getting the harvest is more important but he will do something. I have thought that this means our enemies have only a few days to act or else they will be up against very determined man who know his way round Lanconian politics and brings a fighting force with him intending to use it. We should find ways to frighten those that have to act before two hundred men and a duke with a mission arrives. If Jane stands by your King as I know she will – her pledge means everything to her – then the Duke will too. We need our enemies to break from cover before they're properly prepared. We mustn't give them time to have a conference."

Lord Robert said "I see it. Your Jane is really clever. If you hadn't stopped at Saules we would never have found the treachery in the intelligence office."

John said "She hasn't planned any of this. We truly came here to get away from our poisoned past for a few weeks and see how we might start in business. We met friends and made the most of our opportunities. We knew there was something not right and it must affect our friends so we went to Saules with our eyes open to find out who was plotting. We didn't wake up to the real danger until the last second. Yes Sir Jane is clever. The password for tonight is 'star' with counterword 'white'. Do not use any other as they're broken.

That afternoon the Black Team asked for a secret meeting with the castle Chamberlain. Maggie explained. "Sir I'm sure you know where we have been this morning and who we have lunched with. You'll know that were are about serious business and hope you can trust us further.

We have three requests which we ask you to consider carefully. First could you arrange say ten guards to go with Rachel to the Intelligencer's in ones and twos so we may protect him tonight. Second could you help our boys to be smuggled out of the castle as servants so they may trap the King's enemies. Third as you may have guessed there might be violence tonight. Can you arrange John, James and Al to be accompanied by a couple or three quiet and reliable close fighters."

James said "Sir, we must work in secret as there is treachery, but we don't wish to hide ourselves from our allies. We tell you these things because we hope you'll not tell anyone who doesn't need to know."

Rachel said "Maggie and me will be safely under your lock and key this evening."

"Thank you ladies and gentlemen. I have to take advice but will return soon."

After only five minutes a servant arrived with the news that all three requests would be approved but the details were being sorted out. In the meantime the shambles of the intelligence office was discussed and what the next intelligence and political issues were. The Duke de Harzel was an obvious suspect. Rachel said "We want Beetle's attackers alive so they can tell us who is paying them."

Rachel and Maggie had paid attention to lessons at Bartonbry about weapons, fighting and violence as demonstrated by Lucky and Brand. The girls had run away to join the Duchess' cadet school for that very reason. Since joining Rachel had found another excitement: Teasing men. Now she was making sure the guards in the intelligencer's house were alert to the real dangers. She primed a maid-servant to carry a basket of linen from outside, through the kitchen up the stairs and into Frank's parlour. Rachel's knife was at the bottom of the basket. After this lesson she explained how she'd walked in to the Briton Ambassador's house to kill him. Tonight's password is 'star' with reply 'white'. We want to capture any attackers so may I suggest you arrange for some of you to be men servants with your weapons hidden. I suggest a knife and wooden club. The club will stay propped out of sight but ready to hand as you pretend to wake from drinking too much beer. I will pair you off to practise mock entrances and challenges. Rachel praised them and said they would have a peaceful night but nobody without the password – not even the King or Sheriff or anyone who couldn't give the password was to be allowed two paces inside the house. Not even his servants. Not even the Black Team. They were to ignore shouts of 'fire'

or mysterious orders to return to the castle unless they had the password. If their guard commander came he was to be arrested if he didn't give the password. "Men, you see we have some funny ways in Briton. Tonight I am a prisoner in the castle. When the danger is over I will buy you all a drink and teach you rude Briton songs but now we must stay away from unshuttered windows."

"Miss? Unshuttered window?" Asked one guard.

"Firstly somebody could shoot through the window against the light. Secondly I want to try this. Will one of you find me a horse we can borrow for five minutes..."

Outside in the street Rachel had the horse held while she stood on its back then wedged her knife into the crack between beam and brickwork. A little wriggling and use of the corner to wedge herself she was able to reach the window bars on the first floor. From there it was straightforward for a strong gymnastic girl to stand on the ledge and squeeze inside. She ran down the stairs and back out to the guards still standing in the street. "What are you waiting for? Somebody fetch my knife then I'll leave you to your job."

Waiting in the night

Beetle lived on his own in respectable lodgings. A servant boy and then two more arrived at the back door. Later a merchant and his assistant were admitted at the front. The woman who lived downstairs was offered the option of staying to greet Beetle or she would be given money to stay the night away if she didn't say a word to anyone.

"Is he alright?"

"Yes" said James. "Stay if you care for him and see for yourself. We expect him within the hour."

"He didn't come back last night!"

"I know. That's why we're here. He has enemies. Has anybody called looking for him?"

"Um – A boy with a message."

"Did he leave a message?"

"No. He said he'd try elsewhere."

James thought. "Let him in if he comes again. I think he may be friendly."

"What's this about friendly? You're expecting unfriendly visitors aren't you?"

"Yes. Terence will tell you himself what can be told. Our job is to see he is still alive at sunrise."

"Murder!"

"He might be if we are not here."

"You're a foreigner! I shall call the watch."

"Wait until you have spoken to Terence. He will tell you we are his friends."

"How do I know you are not the ones killing him?"

"Because if we were we wouldn't let you get in our way would we? You'd be tied up as we waited. We've brought our own food. No need to worry lady."

At dusk Terence was marched to his door by four castle guards. Inside he was amazed to see the Black Team boys. After explanations came the introductions. The 'merchant and assistant' were father and son who had been at the games-day. Lord Jajeuer and his son who were both keen fighters. The father had lots of experience in battle while the son had practised every sort of personal combat. Having introduced themselves as Denis senior and Denis junior the boys decided this was too confusing. James named them Densen and Denjun.

John explained the plan. "Densen and Denjun we are here because Terence is in deadly danger. We think that somebody will be wanting to kill him. You're the bait Terence. The Dens are the teeth of the trap. We are armed and know how to use our knives but we will keep them sheathed until we have no alternative. This is a matter for Lanconia."

"So why are you here?" Asked Densen.

Al replied "This way if the danger is in the castle they will get the girls but not us. If we are attacked in strength then the girls should be safe."

"Why would we be attacked in strength?"

"If any enemy knows we are here. We are exposing traitors. Terence didn't know we would be here but some others do. If they send only one or two assassins for Terence then we know our friends in the castle are true."

Densen said "I guess we're in for a long night."

James said "We've tried to force our opponents to act immediately but you're right Sir. We must be comfortable and rest but not all asleep together."

Densen said "I could tell you of times I was in Italy."

"I'd like to hear that Sir" said James "but can we organise tonight's defence and food first."

"Good man! Well said!"

James said "Sir. Your experience is so much more than ours. Will you be in charge. I want to hear about Italy but I too am hungry and will need sleep."

Arrangements were only half complete when there was a knock at the street door. Utter silence! James elbowed Terence "Hold on. Who is it?"

"Richard."

"Oh Richard hold on!"

James grabbed Terence "Who is Richard!"

"Wooly."

"Stay here! Its Wooly. Dens get your crossbows ready. I'll open the door."

James was careful to draw the door bolts so as not to get caught exposed in the opening as it was pushed open. Lucky had shown them that trick long ago. Bless you Lucky! The door was opened a few inches then a foot still with James hidden behind it. Bless you Lucky!

Eventually Wooly's voice came from outside. "May I come in Terence?" James pulled the door back a bit more hoping that the Dens would remember the importance of capturing the enemy. "It's me. Richard. Is everything alright?"

James pulled the door right back on himself and called "Wooly enter! It is James behind the door. Enter and show yourself."

Terence called "It's alright Dick. I'm with friends. Come in if you're a friend."

Wooly delayed then slowly entered showing his hands. "Did you want to stay the night with me and my wife Terence?"

James slammed the door immediately behind Wooly and pressed him up against the wall. In a few seconds Wooly's harmlessness was proved. His small dagger was removed and his obvious distress and confusion at being manhandled spoke for themselves. James said "We are expecting

assassins. The Black Team will entertain our friends one day but now remember there are two crossbows from the darkened doorways trained on you."

"Is Terence alright?"

"Yes. Terence! Show yourself."

"Here I am friend. I'm sorry for these men but I think they know their job."

"I'm so pleased to see you Terence. Your report has disappeared from your desk."

"Laughlin!"

"He's the only other one."

John's voice from a shadow said "Or Frank."

Wooly said "It's not me and it isn't Terence."

Al said "How did you learn Beetle – sorry Terence had been released and was coming home."

The Boss told me.

"Nobody else?"

"No."

"So you came round to invite him to your home after his shock."

"Yes."

"To plot against Hasty?"

"Yes."

"You admit it?"

"Hasty as you call him is bad for our office and the one who said Terence was the betrayer. I was sceptical but when you're so close to each other you don't spot the signs an outsider can. Terence and myself will never trust the one you call Hasty ever again."

John said "How are you protected tonight Wooly?"

A foot-guard.

James said "If one of the Dens will accompany me I will stay the night as guard for you Wooly. Three here should be enough."

Castle councils

At the castle that evening the girls were allowed to frolic with the chamberlain for a while then summoned to the queen's presence for a

gentle interrogation that went far beyond pleasantries to become an exploration of politics and personalities across nations. The girls made sure they were clever and careful. The Queen asked them directly what it was like to kill. Maggie reluctantly described the mechanics and then horror of her killings. Rachel took over with the choreography of the slaughter in the private parlour of the inn at Trexton. She said "I like killing. I'm beginning to get good at it."

The Queen said "Can you leave it alone or do you wake up in the middle of the night wondering who you could kill next?"

"That's a good question my lady. I do wake up in the night thinking how to make my technique better but not hunting for victims."

"Doesn't it worry you that the men you kill may have wives and children?"

"Many wives can find better husbands My Lady. The death of a stupid man is not worth tears."

"Could you not love a stupid man?"

A cold flush went through the girls assuming the Queen was obliquely referring to the King. Maggie replied. Give a stupid man a small holding and tell him he'll starve if he doesn't grow food but give him a weapon and he thinks he is a god. A stupid man with a weapon will die from it."

Rachel added "A stupid man is one who doesn't consult his wife and listen."

The Queen asked "You have interesting sayings in Briton."

"Those are not sayings My Lady." Said Rachel. "Those are Maggie's and my thoughts. If you have a stupid man then command him to obey you. My mother told me that."

The girls were asked to follow a footman. They were shown into a room with a large table surrounded by a score of nobles and covered in papers. Some of the men rose politely and gave a little bow. Others were cold. The King invited them to sit at the table. "Councillors I wish to show you Rachel and Margaret. It's through their loyalty that the treachery in the intelligence office has been exposed. They must return to Briton soon but I would like to thank them in your presence for their service. Thank you ladies."

Maggie replied "Your highness is our friend by your kind deeds. Britons are suspicious of foreigners but on our return home we will bring your great nobility to the attention of our lords and ladies."

"And we can't wait to host you and your countrymen sir. As we arranged the games at the Duke of Orfleur's estate so we will invite you to our Lady's estate for sports and pleasantries. But please give us a few weeks!"

There were smiles round the table but one man asked "Our country has more important things to do than indulge the frivolities of children. Isn't that so Grellis?"

"Oh yes Harzel."

"Now these Britons have stumbled across Lord de Raqueronne's inept management they should leave us to clear up the mess."

Rachel stared at him and said in a quiet voice "Please continue Lord Harzel." This simple intervention was unmistakably the velvet voice of power. The council was instantly electrified. Each man knew what it was like to be accused by a woman of an unspecified crime. This girl had indicated that Harzel had something else he needed to answer for but hadn't given a clue what. This was Harzel's problem. His enemies were thrilled at such a quick stab.

"You think you can go round murdering ambassadors as you like. You should be in jail!" There were gasps round the table.

Rachel still stared at Harzel and replied in the same slow soft voice.

"What a strange accusation? Did he not get murdered when we were at the banquet? Many of you were there too and saw us."

Maggie added "We may be girls and you may be a lord but your slander is a stain on your country's manners that leaves a nasty taste."

"I know it's true. You deceived the banqueters."

Rachel reused her previous thrust. "Please continue Lord Harzel." She might as well have given him a spade to dig his own grave.

"My informants tell you that James and yourself killed him."

"How did we do that pray?"

"You yourself tortured him to death while your guests thought you were serving."

"You must be keen to believe stories about us. Why? Who on earth told you?"

"Don't deny it!"

Rachel said "Do you hear me denying it? Who told you?"

"None of your business!"

"Oh but it is. Shall I explain everything to the others Lord Harzel? Would you like that?" Everyone knew that somehow a noose was about to be

tightened and the victim was Harzel. The tension focussed on a sweating Harzel. "Would you like that?"

"Yes! Confess your crimes murderess."

Rachel looked round the table then admitted in a matter of fact voice. "It's true what Harzel says. It was me who killed the Briton Ambassador. Nobody from Lanconia could lawfully do it so we had to as he was a liability to the friendship of nations as your Ambassador-at-home will tell you. Our King will pardon our crime of necessity. Now you all know the truth but let me ask you all a question. How did Harzel know? Who told him?"

"I have my sources."

"In the intelligence office aren't they?"

"No."

"But yes Harzel! Only the King and the clerks in the Intelligence office knew. So either the King told you or one or more of the clerks in the Intelligence office is in your pay. Shall we ask the King?"

"Not me."

Maggie went for the kill. "You want the Intelligence office for yourself and discredit it by bribing the clerks. When your country needs a shield you destroy it for your own gain."

"These are mere girls! They're dreaming."

"Remind me who dreamed so much she tortured the Briton Ambassador to death?"

The King intervened. "That will do! Harzel you have betrayed our office and Kingdom for your own ends. I will be lenient with you. You'll confess to my head gaoler and his tortures. If I was cruel I would let the girls at you. Guards! Take him away!"

The King addressed the council "These bold girls have served us well. The days of Briton and Lanconia as spiteful neighbours are over."

"With respect Sir?"

"Yes Archbishop?"

"I cannot accept the Briton's mis-treatment of the Church."

"I can. By royal command I will see that the Church's granaries are reduced to that needed for your own use. I won't have hoarding when our subjects are starving. Taking a tithe of farm produce is tantamount to starving some peasants to death. Go back to your councils and make it happen. If I'm obstructed I will make a very public example."

Maggie said "Sir?"

"Yes Margaret."

"A one-tenth tithe is five weeks of food."

A councillor who could see the new strength and direction of the political wind said "The Church has huge estates of its own Sir. Why does it need yet more tax from peasants?"

The King wished he had the woman's knack of wrong-footing people as demonstrated earlier by Rachel. He had to settle for a 'look' at the Archbishop.

"Sir! I protest."

Rachel intervened "If your wife and child were dying would you not sell your jewels?"

"Really! It's not like that!" Rachel looked round the table. Her treatment of Harzel left nobody in any doubt who had the moral certainty and who had been brutally crushed. "You haven't heard the last of this!"

Again Rachel used the velvet noose whisper. "Please continue Archbishop." He even looked as if he was being strangled! The councillors were horrified and excited. These weren't girls but the King's she-bears! Nobody had seen a smile from them but all were entranced.

"You're witches!"

Maggie and Rachel knew about witchcraft accusations. "We are aren't we." said Maggie with a smile. "Any woman who gets in your way you call a witch. You're as bad as Harzel who spreads evil stories. Now what was it we haven't heard the last of?"

"You'll hear soon enough!"

"I'd like to hear now if it isn't too much trouble." Again the spectators were enthralled by the absolute cold-blooded killing instinct of the girls. How could they be so cruel and relentless?

"The authority of the Church is not for you to question."

"Is that it?" said Maggie dismissively. "Is that all we'll hear about?"

"You mock the Church at your peril."

"I'm going to hell anyway." said Rachel "So what peril have you got for me?"

The King intervened "I think that's enough. We have affairs of state to deal with. Archbishop I think you must decide between staying in Lanconia and accepting my authority or exile by noon tomorrow."

The girls knew when their master was pulling on their leashes. Maggie said "May we retire Your Highness? We are tired."

"Yes thank you again."

As they left Rachel turned and gave a big wink and smile to the whole room.

"You tart!" Said Maggie.

"Sorry mum!" Said Rachel.

It was only that morning they'd left their girlhood behind. Some remnants remained! Back in their chamber they couldn't believe they had broken two important men in a few minutes and the King was obviously pleased. If being at court was this easy then they should do it more often! What about the boys? Nerves and reaction to their fighting in the King's council made them shiver. Rachel suddenly remembered Maggie's collapse after Black Friday and hugged her. "If the boys get hurt then we'll be carrying their memory back to Briton on a gold standard."

"No Rachel. You and I will avenge them and we'll leave our memory here in blood."

"They'll be alright. They've got help and it's only assassins they're up against."

"Lucky could defeat them Rachel."

"Not if he didn't know they were there. Nobody should know Beetle is protected. They should go for him first. I think Hasty will try to sneak into Frank's house as a trusted servant. I warned the guards specially."

"I wish Jane was here. She's good at being a general. I'm supposed to be leading but I don't know what to do."

"Don't worry Maggie. Why don't we leave tomorrow morning first thing? There's not much more we can do is there?"

"We should say goodbye to the King. He was really nice to us tonight."

"We served him really well. Let's see if we can get twenty livres off him as compensation for missing out on trade with our twenty pounds our King gave us."

"You are cheeky Rachel."

"I know." They collapsed together in happy thoughts of being saucy.

Death in the night

James and Denjun took a couple of minutes to arrange their defence arrangements for accompanying Wooly back to his house. It was hardly worth it as Wooly only lived a minute away. Nevertheless this set them up for working together. Denjun was a bit older than James but the games day had impressed on him the power of team-work. He'd seen the Black Team do it, practised it, watched others and then heard many stories. James wasn't in the mood for theatrical impressions. He was here as back-up.

Wooly and his wife were comfortably off and appeared contented. Mrs Wooly had not heard of James until he entered with her husband. James noted this and judged it to be the truth. That was a mark in Wooly's favour. After the seriousness of the situation had been impressed on Mrs Wooly and after her hospitality had been accepted subject to the absolute necessity to catch any 'creepers' as James called them, James sent Denjun and Wooly on a tour of the house to scheme defence. James would survey for himself later but a warm parlour with a 'mother' was a natural resting place for him. "I don't know your name Mrs Wooly."

"Harringot."

"I meant I didn't know your first name Mrs Harringot. I didn't know your surname either as I'm a man of secrets. In Bartonbry we like first names for our friends. I'm James Taylor an orphan from the docks of Melbun."

"Then I'm Marline. Pleased to meet you. Thank you for looking after Terence."

"You're my friend Marline and I look after all my friends. Tonight you're safe."

"Why? What's going to happen."

"Nothing I hope. But if it did it would be fatal for your husband – er Richard."

"Dick."

"The intelligence office is like a boat with a leak. The trouble is that somebody is bailing water in. They might be angry with those bailing water out. That's why we're here."

"So you think Dick is innocent?"

"I think he is my friend. He may have some small crimes to admit to. Our lady Avel of Bartonbry has a way of forgiving foolish sins so the honest heart may beat freely again. She has given me that gift. Dick

says he has no sins to confess and I have no reason to doubt that but if he has then they cannot be forgotten until they're discovered."

"What's going to happen to the intelligence office?"

"I think your husband is honest and knows how to do his job. You can easily work out the rest. If we are protecting Terence then that leaves the clerk we call Hasty and the intelligencer himself. We are working for the best to keep the rats out. I cannot tell you more but if we have our way Dick and Beetle will have a job."

"Beetle?"

"Sorry Terence. I called him Beetle like I called your husband Wooly when they refused to give their names. You see the way Beetle doesn't twist his neck like the rest of us."

"Wooly. That's a nice name. Dick has always had curly hair. Beetle isn't nice."

"I had to think of something quickly and was beginning to lose my temper."

"I suppose it was their fault for not giving their names."

"Not really. It was a good plan. It made me show the sort of person I was. In the world of secrets you need to find out about people quickly."

"I like you James. My children never lived past seven."

"I like you too Marline. I hope to return to Arlesene many times. I don't feel comfortable in castles and palaces, somehow I feel like I'm an imposter and any moment I'll be discovered and turfed out. I feel safe and at home here."

"Dick said Helen has eyes for a young man from Briton. Is that you? Did you know?"

"Yes we had a day together. I'd like to settle down with her in a place called Couraen it's just lovely. But I have to earn it!"

"Lord de Raqueronne would give a dowry if you saved his office."

"I am not quite seventeen. The future comes too quick!"

"Let's hope we are there to enjoy it."

"Yes Marline. It's less than a month since we left Briton's shores and each day I seem to have lived more than I ever lived in my whole life before."

Dick and Denjen returned. Denjen gave James the thumbs-up. James asked "Does Dick know the password? Does he know what to do with enemies? Does he know where he will be sleeping tonight?"

"Er – No."

"That's alright Denjen. You have obviously looked at defence in detail. Now you need to see the man himself is prepared. Then we can eat and then we'll let our hosts sleep while we wait for nobody."

Beetle was not used to having guests. He was prevented from sending out for cooked food except for himself as it would be a clue that a number of people were there, hence they's brought their own food. John, and from a long time ago Densen were used to eating bread and cold meat washed down with water. John made it clear that defence was down to Densen but that Al and himself were armed and would run towards danger if they knew what they could do. Beetle was a bit confused.

Beetle went to bed complaining of a headache and cramps. Downstairs, by the light of a single candle, Densen talked to the boys about campaigning in Italy. He was keen for Denjun to be attached as a side-knight to a noble in Briton. Eventually Al volunteered to take first watch while the others slept. Densen said he would expect an attack before midnight so they would all stay awake until then. The house was never quiet. The cool of the night after the heat of the day caused the timbers to creak. Outside there would be scuffling or erratic drunks. Beetle's bedroom was deathly silent.

At the Intelligencer's house the guards were interested by the novelty of having to take responsibility in a strange environment. They were experimenting with trying to adapt rigid routine guarding while guessing how to please both the castle commander and Lady Rachel. Hasty arrived at the back door perfectly relaxed and managed to get through the kitchen before being quickly pinioned and disarmed. He gave the 'robin' password to get free but that didn't work. When he tried to complain the chief guard explained that the first sound he made would result in a very hard punch to the stomach and more pain after that. Hasty was white. He knew what happened to people called to answer questions. He whispered "Please can I see the intelligencer?"

"He knows you're here. I expect he's giving you time to make your mind up."

"Make my mind up?"

"Lady Rachel says you should decide whether you are stronger than her. She says we can all watch but if it gets too much for us we can go outside." The logic of this oozed over Hasty. Now he was green.

Eventually he was escorted to the Intelligencer's office. "What have you got to say Laughlin?"

"You have it all wrong. I've been doing the job of two men at the office and now you let Terence free and arrest me! Tell me what I've done wrong."

"Tell me where Terence's report went."

"What report?"

"Tell me where you were on the night Jean Espice was killed?"

"I was – Er which night was that?"

"Laughlin you have taken money to betray my trust. I don't like that – Especially after all these years. You should die but Lady Maggie says in Briton they have had worse crimes repented and saved the souls of valuable servants who were temporarily misled. She says the clerk of secrets now serving the Lady Avel once tried to poison her and now she trusts him with everything. What do you think of that?"

"I often have dealings with criminals Boss. You know we have to in our job. Sometimes those dealings get very complicated and – um – not very nice. I have always tried my best."

"Why did you come here tonight?"

"To tell you news Boss."

"Go on."

"An agent tells me the new Briton ambassador will be arriving tomorrow."

"What do you think of James?"

"Um. He's very clever."

"Would he make a good match for Helen do you think?"

"Definitely Boss."

"Do you like him?"

"Yes. He's a very nice young man."

"What would you do to help him?"

"Whatever I can Boss. Er – We don't have a lot of time or budget at the moment Sir."

"If I gave you time and budget you could help him to your full ability then?"

Hasty knew very well this was a trap but couldn't avoid it. "Yes Boss. As soon as I'm fit."

"You're fit enough for this particular mission Laughlin."

"If you say so Boss."

"You'll be of great service to the happiness of James and save yourself a lot of pain if you confess. That's all. Guards! No food. No visitors. No clothes – He's not going to hang himself – At least not until I'm ready."

Frank sent two guards to Terence's lodgings with the right password and a request to come to Hasty's house. When they arrived at Terence's they broke the unquiet peace but the password and a couple of questions about Rachel gave them safe entrance. Al went to wake Terence but soon called out he was ill or dead! John stayed with drawn knife in the hallway while the others went to look. No pulse came back the report.

"Guards to me!" called John. They ran back down the stairs drawing their short swords. "The three of us have failed in our mission to protect that man tonight. I want you both to examine the body for wounds. In this house we are all three innocent but please see what you can see for yourself. Take your time. When you come back I want you to teach me the worst swear words you know."

"Al! Densen!" called John. They joined him in the hallway as the guards looked at the body. "We've failed."

Al said "No wounds. How were we to know he would be poisoned?"

John said "I've been trained. I've had lessons in expecting the unexpected. I'm supposed to be the expert. It's my fault. It's obvious. Why was I so stupid. I wanted to hear Densen's war stories and forgot about looking after Terence."

Densen said "I was in charge of defence tonight. It's my fault."

Al said "Sir. You are a noble gentleman for saying that but we don't hold you at fault. Each of us should have seen it for himself. For the rest of my life if I hear of a headache I will think of poison."

John said "Sir. We are not used to deadly setbacks. I don't know if I'm angry or furious. I know I'm to blame."

"Good" said Densen. "We're all to blame now let's fight the next battle. We have two more tonight. My son and your brother need looking after and we need to deal with the Intelligencer's request. As your commander I will send you Al with one guard to the other clerk's house

and I will send you John to meet the intelligencer. I will stay here as long as I have to. I'm relying on you to get guards to relieve me."

"Yes Sir" said Al.

"Yes Sir" said John.

After the boys with a guard each had gone Densen sat in the bedroom chair next to the silent body on the bed and tried to make sense of this new way of death, this new way of using boys in the dark, whether his son should get caught in this horrible business and who he should talk to about it now he no longer had a wife. A fleeting picture of the Briton girls at the games day passed through his mind and kept coming back. Lady Ann Jerouma had been sweet to him. He would seek her out and ask her to love him and bathe his worries.

Al was relieved that everyone was still breathing in Wooly's house. The occupants were shocked and dismayed when they heard the news of Terence's death.

Al said "James you're our intelligencer. You should go to see Frank and I will stay here. Now we know there is death about I will deal with it here."

James said to Denjun "In ordinary times your duty should be to your father. We have to pass Beetles' house so why do we not call and ask where you should attend?"

Al said "These doors will be well barred until we get the true password. I will mince anyone who dares to come down the chimney. You two go."

John said "Denjun is in my safekeeping. I would leave him here."

Denjun cried "You can't. We should work together watching each other's backs."

"Good man. I'll take you and look after your back. Come on. Let's go."

After they left Wooly, Mrs Wooly and Al looked at each other. Mrs Wooly said "I hope they'll be alright."

"Me too" said Wooly.

Al said. "I'm sorry to be a splinter in your lives. Do you wish to talk and hear who I am or would you and my guard look fierce?"

Mrs Wooly said "Our parlour will be a sad place tonight but for now we will not sleep. Dick! you show the guard the house defence and I will try and wipe the grave-dust from this young man. It could have been you."

At Hasty's house the guards removed every scrap of paper but there was no sign of Beetle's report. John had a whispered conference with the Lord de Raqueronne. News came of the girls' success at the King's council meeting. After a while the house was left deserted and dark until daylight as everyone returned to their places of safety.

Within two minutes of the departure of the Intelligencer and the guards the house started making odd sounds. It was pitch black except for a thin blade of silver moonlight cutting across the room. "See I told you!" "It's the fifth floorboard." "Quick" "What's the hurry? Stay calm." "We've got to be far away by dawn." "Stop being silly! We don't have to be anywhere." "If they've got Laughlin and know Terence is dead then someone will suspect us." "Are you sure you counted correctly? Ah yes. Here it comes. Lend me your knife to lever this board." "I don't want to be picked-up tomorrow morning! I'm going to disappear for a few days at least." "Stop worrying. I've found something. This feels like a report." "I'll strike a light to see if it's the one." "No! Are you stupid! We'll take everything we can find. Aha this feels like a purse with coins in it. I'll keep that. Now what's this? You've got longer arms. You reach in – no over my way more. Can you feel that?" "Oeugh! Ar. Yes I have it." "Good man. Hand it out then feel round for anything else." "There's nothing else." "Come on then. We'll put the board back and go."

As they left the bedroom the dark was pierced with a scream and confusion then another half scream half gurgle. James had judged an upward stab between the buttocks should cripple one of them and Denjun at the bottom of the stairs would have his sword ready at neck height for the other. James smashed his prone victim where the head must be with the hilt of his knife. A detached grunt gave him hope for ten seconds of peace. He yelled to Denjun "Only two of them."

"I got one."

"Get a light! My one may be alive."

"Not mine!"

"Get a light Denjun!" James whistled the 'to me!' and from the back yard came John and Densen with a lamp shining ahead on a stick.

"Son!"

"Father!"

James said "I'm pretty sure there were only two. The one at the top is living. Someone come with me."

Denjen volunteered "Me. I'll do it."

"Stop!" Said Densen. The boys stopped.

"I'll do it."

"Right then" said an annoyed James. "You and John go." "Disarm him gently as his bowels must be badly torn. Go!"

A few moments and lots of painful groans later the one at the top of the stairs had been disarmed and pulled down to the hall. By now the full party of guards was in attendance. James called to Densen. "You're in charge! Get all these people doing something useful before I kill somebody."

Densen was about to protest at being spoken to so abruptly but he realised the sense and saw the effects of shock on James' face. Densen then made a very efficient job of checking the house and searching the two men.

"Very well done John." said the Intelligencer. "And well done to you James and young Dennis. We have the report and these two. We should soon find out who they are."

"How?" said James.

John interrupted before the Intelligencer could reply. "Sorry – but I wonder who knows we have Hasty and these two. Can we clear up and wait for others to be trapped if we keep this secret?"

"Nothing is a secret. One of the guards will tell his friend and so it goes on."

"Are these the guards Rachel trained this afternoon?"

"Yes."

"Then please bring them to me. We must try."

In a minute the guards were in the passageway and lining the stairs. "Well done men. You have obeyed orders even if they were strange. We all rely on each one of us to watch our backs. I will tell Lady Rachel when I see her and I'm sure she will be pleased. Now I guess you were chosen for this duty because the castle commander knew you were a bit special but the Intelligencer here thinks you can't keep a secret. I say you can. Which is it men?" One or two 'I can's came then a chorus of 'me too's. "Good. We need to keep what's happened tonight secret for a while – say two or three days. Please say you had some false alarms and it made a nice change but not a word about what happened in this house."

Densen drew his sword "I promise to slay any whisperer!"

James said "No you won't! I know how hard it is to keep secrets. Sometimes they slip out despite best efforts and these good men already know we are playing for deadly stakes. Rachel owes them a drink – and I can tell you chaps an evening of drunken songs with her won't be forgotten in a hurry."

Al and the guard kept watch at Wooly's house until relieved by two fresh guards who knew the correct password.

"We're glad to see you." said Al. "There is great danger. Do not let anyone in or out. Not at all. Watch the back door and keep the front bolted. We will send word – and the password don't forget – what is to be done. The people here are not under arrest but they cannot leave until we know they are properly guarded. Ask them to be patient – They're asleep now. I will be asleep as soon as I have reported to the castle my day has been long and trying. Have you heard of Lady Rachel?" Yes they had. "Well she expects you to be steady and careful and use your brains. Our enemies are cunning and have killed under our noses tonight so don't be fooled by anyone without the right password however honest or humble they seem. Do you understand."

"Yes Sir."

"Any questions?"

"Er. No Sir."

"Good. I know Lady Rachel has promised to reward you. I will leave that to her but the Kingdom is relying on you now to look after this house. Just you two. On your own. Whatever it takes you must give. I'll see you're relieved..."

"Thank you Sir."

"...Or revenged."

"Oh."

"Yes men there really is death about tonight and you really must be as sharp as your blades."

Back at the castle Al thanked his guard. "You have done your duty tonight Martin. My colleagues will teach you a few more things about shadows. We go into shadows while you bring lamps."

"You're young Sir. What is your short life to you? Us older ones have more to lose."

"Anyway we're still breathing and now we have to see that household stays breathing until the end of the week. Let's get that organised with the commander then we can rest."

Examining the entrails

John, James and the Dens went to the Den's town-house and slept the rest of the night and a bit of the day as well. At breakfast Densen was still the formal lord and others just boys but the Britons knew they had been key to the night's main achievement and felt old. Denjun was conscious that he'd killed a man for good reason for the first time in his life but it was so unlike what he'd expected – in the dark, no trumpets, no lances and shields just a simple sword point waiting for a man to run onto. He'd been so surprised by the obvious he hadn't cried a challenge or flourished a favour. Blowing a kiss for your sweetheart in the stands was something that came back to him that morning and he blushed with shame at his childish ideas. Denjun felt he was now joining with the men even if he didn't really know the rules.

The King received a message from Lord de Raqueronne that listed the facts on four lines then 'High praise to Black Team boys.' then 'High praise for guards on loan from castle. In good humour they demand Lady Rachel buy them ale and sing rough songs with them.' Then 'working hard on tying crimes to those responsible for commissioning them. Report at noon. Don't let Black Team go yet.'

Densen reported to the King. "You owe a lot to the Briton boys Sir. I've seen the way they inspire trust for myself but they're still very young and I would like to protect them for you on their way home. They seem to have arts of seeing and getting others to attend that I want for myself as if I was a teenager again."

"I know exactly what you mean Dennis. Last night in council the Briton girls broke Harzel and the Archbishop for me. They seemed to me to be the most ruthless witches spinning silver nets to catch their prey. What must the Lady Avel be like! I can't wait to meet her."

"Shall I do that service for you Sir?"

"Please Dennis. The Ambassador warned me they charmed the Briton King and Queen so I wasn't completely surprised by their charm on me...
...But what of it? They have worth as well as charm. They have

friendship for the future. I couldn't sleep last night for thinking of all the good to come from these children. We must look after them and learn."

"Yes Sir. I would like my son to go with them. He joined-in very well last night."

"Oh wait! Can he keep his prick in his britches? At Melbun one of the Duchess' cadets was taken to bed by our Ambassador's wife and the Italian Ambassador's wife. We don't want that!"

"I don't know about him. I think he will be seduced as easily as any other young man. Hmm. Please Sir. Is that true? I mean our Ambassador's wife?"

"Yes. By all accounts he's a very nice young man. Penniless now he killed his father the Archbishop on the command of their King but the sort of honest dolt who spends all his time learning Lanconian just to please one of our spies he made friends with."

"But both wives!"

"In the same afternoon! That damn Duchess put the idea that all enemies should be equal friends into his head. Fancy that!"

"What harm was done?"

"It means we can't expect special favours and slights against the Italians. We have to compete on equal terms."

"Oh I see. But if I take the Britons back safely showing your great care and affection for them that would put Lanconia ahead in the race."

"Yes of course. But who matters in Briton seems to be more and more just one girl. I want her married to one of us I can trust. The Black Team tell me she is lonely and is afraid to get married as she'll lose control of her dukedom."

"We should persuade her that she can extend her influence her by a good marriage. Your cousin Ronald Sir?"

"I spend lots of my time looking at people and wondering what sort of person they are. I know straight away that you're a good guard for taking them back to Briton because you're of the age to be an uncle. Like me I suppose. But until I have met the lady for myself I can't tell if she is clever and determined to show it or has a soft spot for wealth or ambition to command armies or whatever."

"So Sir how shall you meet her?"

"The new Briton Ambassador should arrive today. I will ask him politely and then charge the children with the doing and you with making sure they get home to do the doing."

Having insisted they were to be woken if there was any real news of the boys, the girls slept with determination if not soundly. In their dreams they were commanding and ordering, sweeping long swords to bring men to their knees, tossing dice to decide the fate of courtiers, spinning thread to catch the deceitful and stabbing to cut down blatant opposition. The sun may have shone through the windows just as it did yesterday morning but now they knew they were the masts on which many sails were set. Yesterday they had been girls grown into women. Today they were women grown into mountain storms slicing across kingdoms. Yes they really had been at the King's council – It wasn't a dream – And yes they'd cut down two of them. They must leave! Every powerful man has a family to avenge him. They must go! 'Run away' was one of their first lessons. They would have to get leave from the King.

"Sir. We would like to leave for home." Said Maggie.

"By the fastest route." added Rachel.

"You must stay today while the events of last night are dealt with. But I promise you my dearest children and clever servants, so dear and so clever, that I have assigned a good man and his son to see you safe all the way back to your homes. Good and bad things happened last night – I will let others tell you. Now Lady Rachel you have caused a problem."

"Oh no I'm sorry Sir."

"Don't worry." The King smiled. "Even I can solve this. The guards you sent to the Intelligencer insist you buy them ale and sing songs with them. What am I to do?"

"Hmm. Well Sir. You're rich enough to buy them ale but do you know any rude songs?"

"I'm sorry. I forgot you're new to our language."

"Oh no Sir. I understood. I was being cheeky. I'm sorry. Of course I'll get drunk with them. I take it they've earned it. Soldiers demand things from frustration or satisfaction. Sir – If your guards have got the courage to demand such things then they have learned my lessons. In Bartonbry we expect servants to take responsibility and masters to chase them in good spirit when they do well to do better next time and make a reward. I would not wish you to roister with them as I have promised them I will, but a small sign from you will mean a lot to them."

"How do you mean."

"A smile. A word of praise. Something to bolster loyalty."

Maggie added "The loyalty that lasts through the cold night and seeping rain is not brought with money."

Rachel recognised the fluster "Money buys treachery"

"Loyalty of master to servant buys loyalty of servant to master."

"Sir you know we are loyal."

"Not just so much but to our utmost."

"If we weren't we would say."

"Softly but clearly."

The King stopped them. "How can you be loyal to two masters?"

"And a mistress."

"And our team."

"It's easy."

"We chose our friends."

"And make them close friends."

"And stalk our enemies."

"And trap them to be pets or crow-food."

"Hmm" The King wasn't used to this sort of fluster.

"We hope that's clear. You look confused."

"Shall we tell you again?"

"No. That'll do." The girls stayed silent but eager. By degrees the King's expression changed from frowning uncertainty into smiling resignation.

"What am I to do with you wenches!"

"Love us." Said Rachel opening her arms for a kiss.

"Banish us." Said Maggie acting a downcast sulk... ..Then relenting and taking her embrace.

"Don't start that again!"

"Please Sir –" said Maggie "It's fun amongst the three of us to pay for the days without fun."

"I have a good report from Lord de Raqueronne girls."

"At least he's alive." said Rachel.

Maggie said "He thinks he's a failure and he may be Sir. He wanted to come to you yesterday and resign. We stopped him as we guessed it wasn't a good time to put the office up for auction."

The King was silent for a while. "Thank you girls. And thank you for your display last night. Did you know those men were bad?"

Rachel said "We'd never met or heard of them before yesterday but it was you who caught them. We just led out hoping you were following."

Maggie said "Lanconian politics isn't our business Sir."

"Come here both of you. Let me kiss you again. I wish you were watching my councillors like eagles every day."

"There is another thing I must ask you girls" said the King. "Your Duchess the Lady Avel is lonely and keen for trade. I can't marry her or command the citizens of Lanconia to buy from Briton but I must see this exceptional woman for myself so we may pursue friendship in whatever form it takes. I wish to invite her in the next two months to Lanconia or if she wishes and your King approves also I would visit Briton to make friends. All this has happened because of you."

Rachel said "You are not to set foot outside Arlesene until all your enemies here have been dealt with!"

The King was about to object to this outrageous command when he realised the same cosh of 'woman's logic' was being used on him as it was on the others last night. "That's good sense."

His half-hearted response didn't fool Maggie. "We'll stay until you're safe."

That made it worse! How was he supposed to rule when these girls were fooling that he would be safe with them! "Maggie and Rachel! I don't need your help. I appreciate it and I like your youth and I love you both dearly but I have my own guards. I'm not in any danger."

"You are if Harzel and the Archbishop have powerful friends who can act together. If say Lord Harzel has to do as he's told by the people he owes money to – Italians perhaps – then it might be more than individuals trying to profit. Yesterday the boys were followed by four spies so who were their four masters? If they're allies against you then we may be able to use Harzel to cause confusion amongst your enemies – He won't be looking forward to a visit from Rachel. He knows her reputation."

Rachel said "We also have the strange matter of Paulanne's capture. We know Hasty was involved but who was the real target and who paid for it? We need her back of course. If we don't get her ourselves I expect the Duke of Orfleur will harrow the grounds of those he suspects. It won't be nice."

"Are you threatening me?"

"No Sir. I didn't mean anything like that. We must face the fact that powerful arrogant and greedy men used to fighting will test you if they get an excuse. When we find the 'who' then we can use the arrested men and perhaps others to break apart the allegiances of allies."

"You make it sound so simple Rachel."

"And it must be simpler for your enemies. They know who they are. I think – Sir – what's left of the intelligence office needs to be extremely well guarded until the danger is over."

John, James and Denjun saw the King shortly after the girls. They were hustled in. "Dennis! What have you been up to!"

"Er. Sorry Your Highness. I just held my sword up and he ran onto it."

"Well done. Now what have you been doing?"

"Er. I've been with the Briton boys Sir."

"Not where! What!"

John and James recognised these quick stabs and felt that it wasn't usual for Kings with grey beards to spit like this.

"I spent the evening looking after your servant Terence Espice. But um we failed."

"Who failed?"

"We all did Sir."

"That's unfortunate isn't it?"

"Yes Sir."

"That's what I said. Tell me something I don't know."

"He was poisoned. We were expecting force and missed poison Sir. I'm sorry."

"Then what?"

"I waited at the bottom of the stairs in ambush for two men hidden in the other intelligence clerk's house. I was covered in a cloak crumpled on a chair."

"Me too Sir, upstairs in the bedroom Sir." added James.

"Then what?"

"As John had guessed they came out when they thought everyone had left and fetched things from a secret place then James struck one at the top of the stairs and I got the one who flew down the stairs."

"Well done Dennis. Who was he?"

"I don't know. Sorry Sir."

John said "Sir. Dennis has never been out with us before. He did really well. Much better than we expected. It's all new to him."

The King said "Thank you John. I know how you make children into men. I am doing that now. Dennis! What happened last night?"

"I don't know much more Sir."

"Tell me what you do know. Your father has already told me good things about the Britons. What about you?"

"I can't think of anything else to tell you Sir."

"Were you brave?"

"Yes Sir. A bit. I stayed silent in my place and struck at the right moment."

"Good boy."

James held up his hand.

"Go on James."

"Sir. In all matters Dennis obeyed orders and put his comrades before his own welfare. He needs a week with us then he will be a petit-knight you can trust with your life at night. Let us have him for a month and he'll know the traps of daytime as well."

"Thank you James. Dennis – I'm told you've been christened Denjun by these foreigners – Why didn't I think of that?"

In the aggressive silence James gently raised his hand again.

"Alright James."

"Sir. We needed it so we could call on matters of life and death without confusion. You don't need split-second reactions Sir so you indulge your faithful servants and their sons with whatever name they have been given. It is your pleasure to please them."

The King looked long at James. "I've just been flustered by your girls and now I see you treat me as an equal likewise."

James said "Are you offended Sir?"

The King was caught. "No. There are times when rank is not something we should worry about."

John said "We don't know any other way Sir. Denjun concentrated on obeying orders to wait bravely at the bottom of the stairs in the pitch black trying to make sense of the muffled sounds coming from above and he did well acting for us all not following rigid orders. We walk in the

world waiting for whatever happens. We deal with anything from the slums of the quayside to the courts of Kings. The difference between him and us is he was there that moment to fight and we put him there and we're here."

"Oh?" Said the King having lost the thread.

"We're here with you."

"Beside you." said John.

"Enough! I've just had two girls taking it in turns to battle me. Your point is well made. I accept it."

Denjun realised he was an insignificant player. "Please Sir. Do you need me?"

"Please stay Dennis. We all have a lot to learn. What did Terence know that meant he had to be killed?"

The Taylors looked at Denjun as if they knew the answer and this was a simple test. "I'm sorry Sir. I don't know."

"Neither do we" said James "But we guess it could be simple hiding of his report or he knew something else or he had the courage to speak-up or perhaps it was a warning to others. I think Hasty must have a hand in it but what made him go so far as to murder his colleague of so many years? It must be something really bad or Hasty is hardened to callous death."

"How do I find out which boys?"

"Good question Sir" said John "but please don't forget it could be another agent entirely. Although if it is Hasty's doing that is convenient and what we want to believe but others must be involved and they could be acting independently."

The King looked carefully at John and then James. "James I've been told how you would make a good intelligencer for me. I have been told very good things. Obviously it can never be that a foreigner should have such an office. I will tell you now that you are forever welcome here and if Helen de Raqueronne wishes to marry you and you will make your home here then I will see you're comfortably settled. For the next few days you will stay out of sight but always at hand. Is that clear?"

"Yes Sir. We have a knot to untangle here then I would wish to return home. At any hour of the day I am at your command Sir."

Denjun took advantage of the King's good mood. "Please Sir might I see for myself what Briton is like?"

"Yes Dennis. Your father will go with you." Denjun's face fell. "Don't worry young man. I'm sure you'll be allowed out with these boys and their girls without your father."

Maggie addressed the team. "We are to stay out of trouble in the castle." "She's just remembered." joked Rachel. They laughed.

"We are to wait at the King's command. We should rest while we can. Rachel did well with the guards. The boys did well after their first setback. Al you started late with us but you did really well being the hard nut to crack at Wooly's which saved us worry while we had other things to do. I think that was the best use of your night. Now who else has anything to say?"

Al said. "Two – no three things. Thank you for your praise Maggie. All I did was do what I thought was best."

"You did it well and without flapping."

"Then there's the two things. I've been told there's a new Briton ambassador due to arrive today. I need to find out who he is. I should know him and he will know me. He too should get our help as soon as we can give it. Second – Last night while I was guarding I wondered if the two caught by James and Denjun were the two I saw in the square at Saules. Just a thought."

"Good thought Al. We'll ask if you can see the bodies."

John said "Al did it on his own. James and me had help."

"I had a King's guard with me who had been 'Rachelised'. He was a nice fellow. Um – I don't know how to say this John and James – This isn't to be rude to you – the very opposite. I found I could speak to this common man about common things. I learned that from you boys."

Rachel said "Well done Al but don't let anyone know that. We have to pretend to the powerful people that we are second only to the King in pride of position."

"I'm sorry. I've tried so hard to be useful I've forgotten my position."

Maggie said "Don't worry Al. We're all unknowns to the Lanconians but I tell you what! Why don't you boys spend an idle morning getting fashionable haircuts and trimmings and Rachel and me will spend the last of our money on fashions."

John said "I have an idea. Yes what you say is good but we have business to do also this afternoon. Maggie will you let me give you ten of my unspent trading pounds to treat yourself?"

"No John. We will cost the King ten times ten pounds. We will charge him real money for our service of the last two days and nights."

"And service to come I suspect. Hasty and Harzel need bending rather than breaking to get the most out of them. An interview with Rachel in lace and powder with a pearl-handled sword will tell them you could have them killed with the snap of your fingers without worrying about common things like blood. And they would know you had more power than they ever thought. They want power and wealth and there you are showing what they could have if they would only co-operate."

Rachel caught the drift but pearl-handled swords and perfume were swimming in a confusing dream. The team waited. "If someone tells me what we want to do with them then I will do my best. I like your plan John. It's what Maggie said to Al a moment ago. We have to be seen to be everyday powerful as well as stab in the dark."

James said "Frank knows he is days away from retirement. It must be sad for him without Helen. And it must be awkward for Wooly and the King. Um. Here is a thought. Maggie would you be a 'Helen' for him? He must be lonely."

"Excellent idea James. We are here to use our womanly charms. Don't be shy to ask. We know we can do things you boys can't. That's why we're make a good team."

Rachel said "I must fill my drinking bargain with the guards."

"That can be left as a promise Rachel." Said Maggie. "First we must bend or break our enemies."

"Spoilsport mum!" Everyone smiled. Maggie continued driving them "Come on men let's get our hair curled. We have lots of people to impress today. The new ambassador, our enemies and most of all our friends."

Al said "I was given a purse of jewels in case of emergencies by my father. If the girls can twist the King I have no objection but us boys might want to pay for ourselves."

Maggie said. "What! Al! You fool! Don't let anyone know. We must invent another way."

"Why?"

"Because if anyone knows you have wealth they will raise Paulanne's ransom. Give me the purse and I will see it came from the Queen and then you'll have all the credit you need for fancy things."

"It's sewn into my britches but I will let you have it as you are our leader but – um – Could I have a receipt? My father would kill me if he knew I'd just handed it over to you so we could curl our hair."

"Shant!" Everyone knew this was an act. "Oh alright. I suppose we must account for our lord's money. But remember we have no money of our own and it's only because we have such powerful friends that we are so well looked after."

John said "That's true Maggie. And I've just seen another truth. If I should I marry you – which I hope to do – I won't have a penny to my own name." He smiled and everyone else laughed.

The strict written and unwritten rules for dress were disregarded for the King's favourites. Rachel pointed out that if she was to have a pearl-handled sword then she needed a way to carry it, and as a leather shoulder belt was hardly fitting she should have a silk sash to take the weight. In a few hours silk sashes became the highest fashion. Once a silk sash had been decided upon then the rest of the costume needed adapting to compliment it. It was a relief for the court to distract itself from the current tensions by discussing clothes and impressing with faster adaptations and the ability to get quicker alterations than rivals. The Queen decided that she certainly should carry a sword on a sash to show the King who ruled the household with a smile. Ladies-in-waiting either thought of something to hang from a sash or wondered if there was a dressmaker who could create a sash that was clearly decorative and ideal for attaching their prettiest jewel to. Men of the court found out later what these strange developments were all about. Also the dressmaker's bills! All the Black Team had sashes in black with a single cross stripe of white. They lied to the clothiers that this was how they dressed in Briton and that the cross stripes showed their allegiance to the Duchess of Avel. As none of the Black Team carried swords, except of course the Avel-knives in their boot-pockets, they had to set about borrowing something. Rachel and Maggie asked the Queen for assistance while the boys asked Densen. Even John and James found that being treated like royalty, for that's what they were as good as now, was exciting in an 'about-time-too' sort of way. More than once the boys found themselves being demanding and abrupt.

There was one thing that the combined clothiers of Arlesene had no answer for and that was their boots. Though they were well worn none of the Black Team would ever have swapped their Avel-boots for court shoes. They could run away in boots and would be hobbling in shoes. If it offended the court they were prepared to leave within the hour. It

didn't occur until later that a really good outfit needed so much dismantling and packing that a sumpter horse could only carry two.

Late in the afternoon a perfectly shaved, coiffured and clothed Al was asked to attend to the Ambassador-at-home. As he entered the chamber it was clear that Lord Robert and the Briton Ambassador had been in cordial conversation. In a second, by a smile of recognition, he confirmed the identity of the new ambassador. Al bowed to both. There were many more seconds of adjustment to Al's appearance. Al stayed silent as he'd been taught.

"Who is this Al?"

"Ginger Gregory as he is known amongst us Britons Sir. 'Ginger' is being cheeky – I do that to show you we don't reach for our swords at simple things in Briton Sir – This is Lord Gregory Ecklark who has a town house in Bridge street Melbun, a son Andrew and a daughter who we call Dot or more properly Dorithy. With your permission Sir I would ask the Briton Ambassador how she is."

"Thank you Al." The Ambassador-at-home nodded to Lord Ginger as he now thought of him in the new way of cheeky names.

"Al! I see you have this new Bartonbry fashion for familiar names. Dot is fine and insisted on coming with me."

"Sir I would wish to see her soon. You don't know how busy I am! The busier I am the further I feel from home. The Black Team has tried to keep out of trouble but is always stopping to find yet more friendships and making deeper loyalties." Al addressed Lord Robert. "Sir this man is quite a military person. Just now he is unsure of the situation and on best behaviour but mostly he is one who good at standing firm and delivering what he promises. I cannot think of a better choice of ambassador at this time." Al addressed Ecklark. "Sir I have a lot to tell you. A lot has happened in a short time. There are two things you should know which I have no fear of telling you in front of the Ambassador-at-home. Firstly if Lanconia and Briton had disagreements those are in the past and my generation will see us become one family. Secondly there is at this very moment a small crisis as the Archbishop is banished or brought to heel and various private plots which may not be just personal ambition are exposed."

"They did it Lord Ginger. They forged friendship and forced the hand of plotters. There is no gold that can match their credit here."

Al said to the Ambassador-at-home "Everything I have to say to the Briton Ambassador I can do here – or if you will trust me Sir I will save your time and I will brief him in private?"

"I trust you Al. What was it you said? 'We would become families' Well here you are son of the Briton Ambassador-at-home in my house as a nephew or better. Lord Ginger I can tell you that we expect Britons to be friends and treat them as such. Your predecessor was murdered in circumstances nobody knows but we guess it was through being a corrupted in more than one way."

"I have spoken with his wife Sir" said Ecklark. "Well my wife spoke to her first and her story was discouraging. I have been told by Al's father to thank you for requesting a replacement. Between ourselves – as like you say a friend of the family – Al's father was slow to catch up for himself so I thank you for your service."

"In Briton you soon admit your mistakes. How is that?"

Al answered out of turn "A few do Sir. It's the new way. Many will not. Lord Ecklark was one of the first to support our King when there were malcontents threatening smoke wherever you looked a couple of months ago. Hey! Sorry Sir I have just had an important thought. At no time did anyone get worried that Lanconia was in harness with the rebels to join in trying to harass the King."

Lord Robert took a moment to understand this point. "Ah I see. If Lanconia had been banging it's shield you would have thought there was a threat from us from – er – around the corner? We know our kingdoms have been grumbling insults at each other from time to time and there has been no trust but as you see Lord Ginger//Ecklark there was no threat then and none today – as Al will tell you without having to worry about me listening – you have allies here."

Al added "That is true. We can't wait to get home to tell Briton how friendly the Lanconians are. Between us I suspect two of our number wish to settle here and be – um – Powerful in their way."

"What he means Lord Ecklark is that Jane Weston may become Duchess of Orfleur and if James Taylor should marry the Lord de Raqueronne's daughter he will become an ambassador of secrets. I think you know what I mean."

"Sir!" cried Al. "Do you know Jane has been made a petit-Earl. Like Jed. Earl of Arlesene so long as she stands on the bridge at least once a year?"

"Yes Al. News like that travels fast. I have a lot to discover but one thing I do understand is that you children have done well here by chance."

"It wasn't chance!"

"Yes it was Al and you know it. You were allowed to come to Lanconia to escape Briton and discover a strange country for yourselves provided you kept out of trouble. Instead you go making friends willy-nilly and people like the Ambassador and myself have to clear up the mess after you...
...I'm only joking. And I have another jest for you all tonight. It's not my choice but the Briton King insists. Will you send your commander Jane to my house."

"No Sir. She is nearing Orfleur. Our commander here is Maggie. There is only her Rachel, John, James and me here."

"Why didn't we meet them on the road?"

"They went by river."

"We should have guessed."

"We?"

"Er – oh – Dot and me."

"Will your wife be coming Sir?"

"I came quickly. She will follow at leisure."

It had been agreed that fear was a better inquisitor for the morning. Now the prisoners were brought together to a bare room with two chairs in the middle and a clerk' desk in the corner. After the prisoners were seated and left alone together for fifteen minutes James and Rachel entered. At the sight of Rachel in calm finery both the prisoners stood up without being ordered and bowed respectfully.

James said to Hasty "You know we are not stupid. You know I am reasonable and you know Rachel is cruel. You may not know that Rachel is so hard she can forgive anything but stupidity. Look at her. Do I need to tell you that her sword is for show? Would she think for a minute of getting a spot of blood on her clothes? You know this interview is a matter of life and death. We'll leave you now to think and talk."

Ten minutes later Rachel and James returned. Rachel stood in front of the prisoners. "Hasty – I shall call you that until the day you die because you have said you like the name. Have you been treated fairly?"

"Yes Lady Rachel."

"Good. What about you Lord Harzel. You have been grossly inconvenienced."

"It's true Lady Rachel but I have not been abused."

"That's good. Now listen men. We all know you are both masters and servants in plots. I have reports and guess more. It isn't pretty but perhaps there is a rope I could let into the holes you have dug for yourselves to help you climb out. I have that rope and will drop it in if you will catch hold of it. What do you say?"

Both men eagerly agreed to their only option. There was no way to avoid the brutal honesty of the Britons.

"Good. Well done men. I'm beginning to like you already. Lord Harzel do you have a wife and children?"

"Yes Lady Rachel."

"Tell me so I can tell them why you died... ...If that's necessary."

"Well miss. My wife is Carolane and two daughters Tarmia and Prim."

"How old are your daughters?"

"Six and four."

"Tell me about them."

"Tarmia is a tom-boy with a mop of black hair and blue eyes that grow at every new exciting thought."

"I know her! Cherish her. She will make the best builder of empires small or large."

"Prim is dark-eyed shy."

"With a smile?"

"Yes."

"If you die I will adopt her. A goddess to tempt the men!"

"Hasty. How about your family?"

"Begging your pardon I once had a wife but she was a shrew. I have no family."

"Oh I'm sorry to hear it. We must do something about that."

"Now Lord Harzel. I'm going to require you to put thoughts of your family aside while I ask you a few questions. Is that alright?"

"I confess. You have me."

"I don't want you daft man! I'm not trying to seduce you but unsex you from your distractions. If you're to be of use to the King we have to get you cleaned-up. The bribes and secret ties and bastards demanding money need to be dealt with so we can get you back."

"Get me back?"

"Back as a loyal servant to the King. Can you be a loyal servant to the King?"

"Yes Lady Rachel."

"Oh Good. Loyal servants are the only sort I allow to breathe."

"Breathe? ...Oh Sorry."

"So you decided – quite rightly I think – that the Kingdom might sink into arguments and starvation so an alternative had to be considered. Well done Harzel. The Kingdom of Lanconia needs people like you who are brave enough and foresighted enough put the Kingdom before the King. Am I right?"

"Oh yes Lady Rachel. Definitely."

"So technically – technically – you were plotting treason."

"I suppose it could be seen that way."

"It was. You were allowed some rope. As you know the situation has changed and Briton is your firm friend. Is there any reason to plot treason now?"

"No. Absolutely not."

"Good. Were you worried about me interrogating you?"

"Yes Lady Rachel."

"And I wasn't too hard was I?"

"No Lady Rachel."

"I'm still thinking of your children. Are you?"

"Oh yes!"

"Good. Because we will help you if you confess who is your master. I won't ask you to tell those things in front of clerk Hasty. He is a disposable tool. James will escort you back to your temporary accommodation."

"So then Hasty. It's just you and me. You can obstruct me or cooperate. I guess you can see the way the wind is blowing. We both know that you'll be lucky to get out of this alive. Death isn't nice is it."

"Miss//Lady Rachel I have interrogated many men. I am not in your class. Offering to adopt Harzel's child was so genuine I nearly cried myself. As you say miss it's death or truth."

"Death or some lies and some truths surely?"

"My will to defy you has gone."

"Good. Now what about your will to obey me?"

"I have no option."

"And your answer is?"

"I will obey."

"Good. See that wasn't too hard was it? I don't want you killed more than any other man. You're a bastard and it will be a while before I trust you but for now let us get along as growling dogs."

"No miss. I will say everything. I can't face the future where every tomorrow I will have to take the chance of lying to you."

"As you wish Hasty. That's an honest admission and I respect it. Hmm. Look Hasty. You know my reputation. You know how I like to torture men. Believe me I do like it. I like it very much – but deep down –very deep down – I'm a woman who hates that sort of thing. I don't know about you but I find torturing the truth out of people is like killing a horse-thief then asking the horse who its owner is."

"Definitely miss."

Banquet for Britons

The expected command came from the King to the Black Team to attend a banquet in honour of the Britons and the new Briton Ambassador. Before leaving their apartment Maggie paraded the team. "The King knows we've turned the prisoners. The Queen knows we've started a new sash fashion. Live up to your responsibilities. If we're good we may be allowed to go home tomorrow."

Al said "The Ambassador has brought his daughter with him. I don't know why but there must be a reason."

"There is. I was asked to visit him this afternoon. I nearly fainted when I was introduced to his daughter. It's Minda herself pretending."

It didn't take long for their happiness to fade. Suddenly their independence was in tatters as Minda would now be their commander. As the shock sank-in they became worried for a hundred reasons. Why was she doing this? What did she hope to achieve? Was it secret romance she wanted or something unknown and beyond them all?

Al said "I'm worried she'll try something fancy like she did with the King in Melbun at Christmas. Why can't she be normal like the rest of us?"

John said "It's worrying. She didn't dare meet us all. That shows she's nursing a secret plan. Unnecessary."

James said "Showing off."

Maggie said "I told her if we introduced a turnip seller to the King he would be gracious. I told her we could translate for her."

When the moment came for the new Briton Ambassador and his daughter to be presented a page wearing a black suit covered in embroidered white stars ran in, looked around then headed for the King and Queen. Little Arthur! James was standing close by the King as translator. Arthur slid to a halt. Made a theatre of uncrumpling a bit of paper in his hand and flattening out the creases to read it. Then after a quick glance around to command the audience to pay attention he began reading in passable Lanconian.

"Your great highness I have a message from the King of Briton. Please can he have his young adventurers back when you have finished with them. Please will you take in exchange Lord Gregory Ecklark as his ambassador. He has one more favour to ask Sir. Will you grant a dance to the Duchess of Avel."

While all attention had been on Arthur, Lord Ecklark and Minda had positioned themselves hand in hand in the entrance hall. He wore a dark green velvet tunic with lighter green sleeves and Avel boots polished to shine mirror-black. Then there was Minda with instantly recognisable eye-patch dwarfing him in a black gown covered in pearls and silver stars, white gloves and pleated sleeves puffing-up her already thick arms, shimmering gorget of tiny golden chains and of course her twisted mouth. Truly a pig-faced bear! It was ironic the whole court had spent the afternoon frantically chasing fashion while her outfit was stunning by it's lack of subtlety. It didn't matter how large the pearls on her dress were, she was still coarse! Everyone knew you didn't display your wealth so crudely. Subtlety was the grace which meant those without wealth could pretend their precious bit of lace wasn't switched between outfits and really came from the best lace towns.

The King indicated the presentation should continue. James and Maggie were used as interpreters. The awkwardness continued through the formal introductions. The new Ambassador's limited Lanconian was to be expected but he was going to be useful so worth encouraging. The Duchess however seemed bogged down and without a clear purpose. Maggie explained to the Queen that Minda had come to see Lanconia for herself with the King of Briton's blessing to make friends with the King.

Already Minda saw the Black Team had beaten her. Nevertheless now she was here perhaps there were immediate matters she could sort out.

Al and John stood beside the Ambassador-at-home.

Al said "At least she hasn't made any enemies through jealousy."

John said "Please Sir she looks pretty when dressed for hunting. She inspires loyalty."

"I was wondering boys. She has made you what you are – And very fine young men you look tonight – And brave men last night – Yet she appears to be an ox."

"I don't know Sir." Said John. "She appears wrong-footed tonight but that may be a disguise. You have heard of our tricky deceptions."

"Yes John. I think she wants to do business. I think she and you are working together."

"Sir!" Said Al. "The first we knew was half an hour ago. All our intentions to return home are in ruins. Now we must do as she tells us."

"I speak Briton so I will keep her company."

"Thank you Sir." said John. "She needs company."

Al said "And I trust you to talk to her without me being present!" They exchanged smiles at this private joke between equals.

As they went through to the banquet Minda was reunited with the Black Team for a moment. Suddenly and shockingly Minda was one of them. Unsuitably dressed and trying to catch-up. Their dear Lady Avel reduced to gathering crumbs from the courts of Europe. Decisions needed to be made in fractions of a second.

Rachel said "Lady. You're safe. We're safe. We have friendship here. The King has been dying to meet you."

John said "The Ambassador-at-home is a clever nice honest friend who speaks Briton. I will see you sit next to him at the meal."

"Thank you John. Let's do that. I have waited long and travelled far to be here so I will set about enjoying it. We will talk seriously tomorrow morning."

Due to Minda's deception it wasn't possible to reseate everyone so she ended on the second table. Maggie sat as most favoured guest on one side of the King and Lord Ecklark on the other. As the King sat first so

Maggie brushed a few specks off the shoulders of his coat as reflex without thinking about it. That made a private moment of shocking familiarity between them.

"I see you look after me from your heart Maggie."

"I don't know any other way Sir. You're easy to look after."

"How?"

"You listen."

"Ah. That's my wife's doing. She makes sure I know exactly what she thinks." Another private moment.

"Please Sir what age did you get married?"

"Twenty."

"Is that a good age?"

"I'm listening! You're asking me about marrying for yourself to see if I have a view."

"I admit Sir I wish I knew what was for the best. I don't want to make a mistake about such an important thing."

"We have a saying 'Marry young repent long.' First you should be man and woman not boy and girl. Second you need to decide how you will finance your family – That's a complicated subject. Third don't get into a feud with a mother-in-law. Fourth ask the King of Lanconia to be God-parent of your first child."

Maggie couldn't help her tears. She put her arms around his head and kissed him on the cheek in full view of everyone. Nobody else knew their secret but everyone saw the perfect family relationship. Minda was thrilled and jealous. The King was used to being the centre of attention but this was different. For a horrible fraction of a second he thought of smiling as if to shrug off this female weakness but then found a positive attitude.

"We will have a toast!" The hall went completely silent. In the seconds he thought quickly. "Each one of us in this hall – maid or wife – boy or man – servant or master – pledges their allegiance to the children of Briton as yet unborn."

This was met by quiet agreement signifying thought. The new Ambassador sitting on the King's other side stood up and bowed towards the King and Queen then raised his goblet. "Sir! I cannot stand here and not pledge the support of Briton to one so noble as yourself. I speak for my King. He speaks for each of the kingdom. A toast! To a marriage of Kingdoms."

This had a few stray ends but for a coarse Briton was probably the best he could manage so Lord Ecklark got the benefit of the doubt.

In the moment after this toast the Duchess of Avel stood up. Nobody could miss her! She held her goblet out. In Lanconian she said: "Marketing, friends, draught animals and forgetting."

James realised what she meant and jumped up. "Trade, friendship, comrades and leaving the past behind us." A little cheer greeted his boldness in catching the Duchess. After the toast he added on his own behalf "Thank you for your hostility – oh I mean hospitality!" He smiled and everyone understood it was a deliberate mistake. He got a big cheer for invention and nerve.

Maggie, still holding the King's hand woke up. "All you lovely people. I will not give you a toast – I will give you a promise. I promise to welcome you when you visit me as you have welcomed me here... ..With open arms and beating heart." She blew a kiss into the room. The reaction was uncertain then applause.

The King stood up and waited for silence. His rule was leave them in silence for as long as it took to get silence and add a bit for luck. "We have so much to thank the Duchess of Avel for. She's saved me a journey to Briton to meet her." This got the quiet laugh he was hoping for. "Yes it's true. You're the strength of Briton today and we are so lucky that you have chosen to come here whether invited or not. Lady! I am not pretty, my nose is bent, I still have a lance point in my shoulder that slows me, but for twenty years I have fought enemies on our borders. Never were beauty and strength the same thing. Your Black Team have shown me where I must do more. Our hearts beat as one. I give a toast to our visitor who is but a seedling here yet a mighty oak in Briton." This was a bit complicated everyone including the King himself! "A toast to strength over time."

Dancing followed the banquet. Maggie explained to the King how much dancing meant to Minda and why. "Please smile. She needs loving." Maggie taught him the Briton for 'I must know you better. Maggie says so.' "That should make her smile. She's lost Sir. Hold her hand. Even her bad hand." A lot of things became clear to the King. He consulted with the Queen.

Minda took the King's hand in hers and they were soon leading a dance. The King's slowly melting confusion met Minda's flooding enthusiasm.

Tail-enders in the dance dropped-out as this unique couple drove their progress across the floor with a force stronger than swirling floodwater. The musicians repeated twice to stretch the moment of pleasure at making new friends. When the dance came to a gentle end two of the most powerful people in Europe were gently applauded. Minda resisted the temptation to be saucy and the King could be polite and warm without being commonly familiar. Everyone realised this was a beautifully expressed symbolic moment.

James introduced Little Arthur to the King. "This is our mascot Sir. His talent is to have the wisdom of fools."

Arthur bowed almost in half. "Your Highness – Please look after her. She is lonely and shy."

The King recognised the trick of ambushing with charm that had been played on the Briton King at Christmas. He wouldn't fall in but he saw the sense. "What is your name young man?"

"Arthur Sir. They call me 'Little Arthur' because I am little."

"One day Little Arthur you will help me because I have become old and need the arms of strong men to help a doddering old man."

"If you dodder Sir then I will help."

There was a silence as the completeness of this answer flowed home. "I think you should see the Queen. She is over there." The King realised he'd been ambushed by the blunt loyalty. He was filled through with emotion.

Minda asked John to introduce her to a huge young man who she'd like to dance with. He had wavy blond hair framing a fresh face caught in surprise with raised eyebrows, pursed mouth and relaxed jaw – Until he smiled when mouth and cheeks spread under crinkled eyes to show the warmth of the whole man. The Duke of Troctenburg had plans of his own but soon he was delighted for the first time in his life dance with someone his own size. There was another dance and the Duke and the Duchess went at it again. This time they knew not to hold-back and at the end their sweat was happily shared. All Minda could manage was "A hidden heart is love at me". The duke understood enough.

"I speak some Briton lady."

"I am guarded by hidden. Not to escape. 'Duck' is password. Ambassadors hall. More dance?"

"I think the dancing is over."

"Musicians! Back! Again!" Bellowed Minda. The Duke looked around guiltily but was on his own in this strange situation. Through instant loyalty and paying attention Maggie and John, Rachel and James joined Minda and the Duke on the floor. Al might be young and unwise in the ways of love but he raced to the musicians and told them to slow down and add a few choruses. Good teamwork he thought later. They all appreciated his efforts.

Al remembered the King! He ran across. "Please Sir she's not normally like this. You can see he's the same size as her. Let them be happy for a night."

"I know how strong her servants are so I quake to your command."

"Sorry Sir?"

"I was jesting."

"It must have got lost in translation Sir."

"Anyhow I have sent half a dozen of Rachel's guards to look after the Ambassador's residence tonight."

The Queen whispered in his ear and then the guard commander was called over for more subtle instructions.

A couple of minutes later Rachel asked the King if the Black Team were to guard Minda or his own guards. He explained that the plan was for a detachment of his guards to protect the house but turn a blind eye if the Duke of Troctenburg made an entrance however unconventional.

"Don't be silly! Sorry Sir. I apologise. Ask the Duke himself to guard her. With his own body if necessary."

"Women! You make a clever suggestion my love. If I need a captain of guard of the ladies' bedchambers then I know who to appoint. You beat Harzel and Bishop Harold down last night so I should have expected it! I will see to it. Now go to your own beds."

"Yes Sir. Your word is our command. We will go now. But please Sir what happened to Little Arthur? He's a child away from home without any father or mother and needs looking after."

"The Queen caught him."

"Good night then Sir. Sweet dreams."

The King was truly ambushed by charm. And the girls were so cute in keeping their eyes on loose ends. They'd spotted Arthur was loose and

needed looking after. After a while the King decided the Queen knew what she was doing and anyway no harm could come.

Arthur's honest innocence was more of an act now than at Christmas but it was still convincing. "Please your Highness I'm just a page."

"The girls have told me all about you so I know who you are Little Arthur. You're two worlds of mischief in one boy's trousers."

"If you say so Your Highness. I'm a bit lost here. I can understand when you speak slowly and simply but it's not like being at home."

10 Keeping Minda out of trouble

The next morning Al went to see the Ambassador-at-home.

"I am guessing Sir that the Duchess has come on a whim and will enjoy pleasure more than politics. The Black Team offer their services to see your business with Briton gets done without too much distraction. We know she's keen on making money and meeting men. My father says she has made Briton sit up but she's walking in the moonless dark when it comes to money."

"Ahem – If she's walking in the dark then I wouldn't like to bump into her."

"Oh yes I see Sir she is a bit of a giant. The rest of the team have slept under hedges with her. Nobody creeps about Bartonbry at night anymore after she threw two poachers in a pond. Obviously common outlaws know to keep well away."

"You're confusing me Al."

"She was trained to be a hedgerow fighter. To deal with smugglers and other gangs by stealth and midnight-bravery. The games we held were a bit of that but at night of course."

"That reminds me Al. We ought to sort out this cadet school for Lanconians. The King is willing and will find a way of paying. I have

just had news that the Briton cadets returned together to Melbun for a great welcome. Uncertainties about their role in the killings at Lostnock were forgotten as all the parents had so much pride to see how their lazy boys were now determined men."

"Should I discuss that with Minda Sir? Or will you do so another way?"

"You really are obedient Al."

"I am a determined man! Determined to let you do your business without our interference. But there is one thing that may not be so welcome. I don't speak except for the Black Team but we are friends with Italy as well as Lanconia. It may be that the next cadet school is mixed Lanconians and Italians."

"Thank you for telling me that Al. I can see why that is the way Britons would like it to be. I cannot give any reply except the obvious one that we would prefer it was Lanconians only."

"May I suggest a good reason for encouraging Italians? You know from Arlesene that the sort of people who will send their children will be the less aggressive ones. Isn't that the sort of foreigners you would like to encourage?"

"I suppose so. I have already written to your father telling him how highly I think of you. I must do so again."

"I will tell him myself what a gentle man you are Sir. Can I suggest it may be a good idea not to let the Duchess know about Paulanne's capture. We won't tell her. If she gets angry she might spoil all the good work you're doing behind the scenes to get Paulanne back so we can leave with fond memories of Arlesene."

Lord Robert realised Al had just played a diplomatic ace of trumps.

"Another good idea. We don't want people losing their tempers. We've got enough with the bishops parading their hurts in public."

"We know how to deal with that Sir. Public ridicule and anger. Minda herself would do it but we must keep her out of trouble."

"Thank you Al. Once again you are a remarkable young man."

When Al had left Lord Robert summoned his clerk. "Are we doing anything to see this Paulanne is released?"

"I haven't been told Sir."

"We have to start even if we are late in the field."

"Yes Sir. Where?"

"How should I know! I'm getting too old for this job. I've just been bested by a boy of seventeen."

"With respect Sir the Britons may not know a cow from an ox when it comes to fashion but their heads have two of everything."

"You're right. I shouldn't feel bad – I wasn't half as clever as him at his age and he's going to be meeting important people in the next few months that I can't."

"Why not Sir? Why can't you go to Melbun or Rome?"

"I have to watch the fires at home like a woman."

At the Banquet last night Maggie and Rachel had arranged with the Italian Ambassador to make up for ignoring him so far by visiting him this morning. They realised their time should be spent making friends.

"Welcome ladies. You were so royal last night. The Duchess is your master no?"

Rachel replied half in Italian and half Lanconian. "Yes. We love her. She found us then taught us."

Maggie said "What are the fashions of Italy like Sir?"

"Oh. Um. Ladies wear... I admit it! Arlesene has the best dressed ladies I know."

"Shall we go there and trade then? The poor ladies of Italy need fine clothes! Do we need permission? Tell us."

"Ladies please! I know you didn't come to speak to me about skirts and lace."

Maggie said "I did but Rachel wants to fight."

"Yes Sir. I have decided that I want to kill men. I am told there is always fighting between Lanconia and Italy. How can I join in?" Al wasn't the only one of the Black Team who could play a diplomatic trump-card.

"Ride into Italy and you'll find the feuds, treacheries, power struggles between towns and hired mercenaries. You cannot miss them. Every province and town is looking to its own advantage."

"What would you recommend?"

An ace! "I recommend you stay away."

"But you said all those things. Sounds exciting!"

If only the Italian Ambassador had known of the Ambassador-at-home's interview with Al they would have shared a wry acknowledgement that the Black Team were far too inquisitive to be let out unsupervised. "Listen girls I don't want Britons getting involved in other people's fights. You should be making friends."

Rachel said "Exactly! That's what I have done already with our Italian teacher and the Ambassador and his wife at Melbun. They were charming although between you and me Donna and Geseppe were hardly a close couple."

Maggie said "It must be hard being alone in a strange and not too friendly country. I am sorry for you."

The other one played a king! "It's a strain."

Maggie said "Rachel was testing you. She does like killing men. Really she does."

Rachel said quietly "She saw me kill three men inside half a minute. Those were my first. Maggie hated it. I loved it. You didn't ask who's side I would fight for."

Queen! "No. Oh I thought you were being silly..." Rachel's body language made him change his mind in a second "...at first. Then I was more worried that this is battles between hundreds and thousands not jumping out of ditches for an ambush."

"What do you know about our hedgerow fighting?"

Jack! "I have heard about you." Oh no! He'd thrown away a good card to her jack. "I do have an interest as you can guess."

Maggie said "I am sorry Sir. Rachel is in a testing mood today. Until recently all we knew about foreigners was that they were smelly and untrustworthy. That is what everyone thinks. Then we were taught by an exiled Italian and thanks to his cleverness we all wanted to visit Italy. But we came to Lanconia instead as it was nearer and enough to start with. I must apologise for ignoring Italy while we have been in Arlesene but we have been busier than you know."

Ten! He didn't know how to carry on. "Girls I wish you would stay friends with Italy. It is not a kingdom but group of half-kingdoms and towns that rule themselves."

"I thought Rome was an empire?" said Maggie.

"It was many hundreds of years ago and perhaps this is the reaction. The fact remains that the Pope commands from Rome and most princes obey him but if they have spare money they employ a troop of mercenaries to destroy their rivals and take their lands and wealth for their own."

"That's horrible." Said Maggie.

"Yes. And you know you're called 'The Black Team' well there is a very unpleasant band of mercenaries led by a Briton called 'The White company'."

Rachel said "If what you say is true that means Britons are making money out of the misery of Italians."

"Yes."

"Right! Don't tell Minda yet but I will deal with that evil."

Joker! "You really mean that don't you Lady Rachel?"

"Yes I do. I will leave tonight if I must!"

"Rachel means that Sir. I guess her mission may really be a year or two in the making. Will you be our friend while we arrange that?"

Another ace of trumps! "I wish you well. You see there is a lot of money involved and that is better armour than the finest steel. You'll need a good plan."

Rachel said. "I cannot thank you enough Sir. I am seventeen now and growing up. You have shown me the target." Rachel paused then growled "Now answer Maggie's question!"

"Which one?"

"Will you be our friend?"

"Yes."

"Then we will be yours. We have heard politics in Italy can be deadly. If you need a haven then come to Bartonbry where you'll be safe and amongst friends."

"Allesandro is always complaining about the grey skies and wishes to be home again but we don't like to see people sad so we will find a way."

"Thank you girls. By the way those black sashes look really good on you. You couldn't come to Italy dressed like that because a mob would be outraged at your strange beauty."

"Aha! You Italian men know how to praise a woman."

"Please what is your mistress the Duchess of Avel doing here?"

"We don't know." Said Maggie.

"That's the truth." Said Rachel. "We only knew half an hour before everyone else. She is a power stronger and more perverse than lightning. If you get a chance be friends. She will test you – But I expect you knew that already."

"Will your team dine with me tonight?" At last he was beginning to get the upper hand.

Maggie said "I think we would like that very much Sir. If higher orders come then we will see you are invited with us as compensation. Does that answer?"

"Very fair."

"We are a family Sir. We don't bring or accept gifts except of love. We will be honoured to dine with your whole family."

"Including the infants" said Rachel. When the Ambassador looked confused she added "I told you the truth about killing men but I also like babies and infants and children. Will they not remember the day when two queens of Briton held them?"

Another ace of trumps!

James went to the Intelligencer.

"Welcome James."

"What of Paulanne?"

"We expect her back today."

"Do you wish to tell the details?"

"I should but I mustn't. You deserve to be told but it may be a canard and then we would be arguing in frustration."

James said "My plan is to race to Orfleur to catch Helen as soon as your troubles are over. What are your plans?"

"The King has told me I can stay in this office for three months."

"And then what?"

"I retire and somebody else takes over."

"Who?"

"I can't tell you. I don't know."

"After we got entangled in other people's affairs we thought it wise to escape abroad for a while. You're welcome at Bartonbry. If you wish to expose powerful people as a last act you have a safe haven until the danger has passed."

"Ha! Your team has challenged the Duke of Harzel which is bad enough and then put the Archbishop's head in a noose."

"The girls are good like that Sir. You know what women are like when they're suspicious. It won't be long before their man is begging to be punished to get it over with."

"You have no idea do you! Both of those men have dozens of supporters."

"But Sir remember the supporters obey their master and now Rachel has caught and turned Harzel his supporters are ours."

"Turned Harzel?"

"Even if she doesn't get him to come over to our side we can put it around that he is diligently betraying his supporters."

"But what about the Archbishop? He has thousands of supporters."

"When we know the real situation we will have the streets full of anti-bishop mobs if required. You see we've already thought about this. A violent demonstration by an angry mob will be required to pull the bow. Now the Duchess is here we have five ways to make that happen. The Church won't take our word for a threat so we have to make it real. People will get hurt."

"The King won't have riots in Arlesene."

"Yes he will – Like it or not. He will have one. The bishops won't give-in to the threats of us or even the King. A mob has the power to burn a cathedral to the ground if it wishes."

"We will be there Sir – Calming them down when it looks like enough people have been hurt."

"Do you really mean you'll incite a riot just so you can be heroes and calm it down?"

"No you don't understand. We incite the riot and when that has worked to convince the churchmen that riots really happen for whatever reason then we get the churchmen to retaliate with weapons. Then guess what happens."

"Oh no! I thought you were sensible boys – Men I could trust and now you're trying to bring bloodshed to the streets of Arlesene. This is wrong."

James said "It's right. I will tell you how. The King has told the Archbishop to obey his rule and open his granaries to feed the starving. We all know it won't happen. So what does the King do now? Does he admit defeat? That would be fatal. No he watches from afar as the mob in a surprise spontaneous gesture of support for the King and hatred for the greedy church go and lynch a few priests."

"You're mad."

"No Sir. I'm afraid."

"Afraid?"

"Yes Sir. Afraid that we won't be able to stop the crowds from doing more than token damage. If they get out of hand it won't look good. There will be copy-cat burnings of abbeys all around the Kingdom. Just because I lost my nerve."

"You can't go round starting riots."

"It's happening already. Lurking hatred is a cataract that pushes people over the edge before they know it."

"I will have you kept under close guard."

"As you wish Sir. The King needs public opinion to upset the Church. He knows that. It's cheap and risk-free for him. We will show him how to start a riot, ride it, and together we will finish it to the great satisfaction of the King and humiliation of the churchmen. After that nobody will be in any doubt what happens if the King's orders are not obeyed."

"I try to keep out of court politics James. You should be talking to the Council."

"John is explaining our plan to the King now. Remember it's just our plan – We can't make it happen – That's up to the King."

"Perhaps I'd better talk to him myself. Thank you James that will be all for now but don't go far."

"Sir there are two matters as well as Paulanne to investigate. Who followed us round the market the other day and what was the cause of our Ambassador's behaviour? Personally I'd like to know more about the Espice family. You see that's two deaths in their family and two very suspicious pretenders."

"Those will have to wait James. I must see the King about your riots immediately."

John went to the court. "Please tell the King that I am hostage for any misdeeds of my comrades and will wait within close call." As he expected this strange message soon resulted in a summons.

"What's this John? I'm busy."

"With respect Your Highness I thought as the struggle between you and the Church hots up I should be easily available if the riots get out of hand."

"What are you talking about?"

"We presume you're going to incite the people to show their displeasure at the fat bishops while they starve."

"No. What gave you that idea?"

"Oh I'm sorry Sir. We thought it was the obvious and cheap way to bring the Church to heel."

"And have you started any of this!"

"No Sir. Not one bit. We know how to do it and how to make yourself the people's hero at the expense of the Church but I swear we have not started the smallest rumour."

"Good! What's this about being a hostage! What's the mischief?"

"We thought if one of us was definitely not free to wander it would help our Lady Duchess think twice before doing anything rash. She has a nasty habit of acting on a whim before anyone else is prepared and getting her way by the surprise of others. The girls are hoping to talk to her, take her to the clothiers and suggest going hunting. With the anti-Briton feeling about we don't want her to cause any problems. She may be upset by last night's cool reception."

"She warmed up later John! Now I see you're a very very wicked young man. I must have you strangled and poisoned and stabbed and burnt for your finnish simplicity! Why didn't my councillor's think of using the mob?"

"It's a very frightening weapon Sir. It could get out of control. I believe we understand the common people a bit better than your nobles. The Duchess has humbled the Church twice. Once by ridicule and a mob that nearly burnt down an abbey and once where fanatical churchmen turned an orderly capitulation into a bloodbath. The first part is starting the hungry mob. That is a few livres spent on rumours. The second part is directing them to a particular target. Thirdly they must be allowed to frighten the churchmen and perhaps beat some of them up. Finally you or a popular general take leadership at the critical moment when the crowd has done all the hard work to negotiate the surrender with as little bloodshed and as much forgiveness – at least in public – as possible."

"You make it sound easy."

"Our Duchess would do it easily but we must keep her out of this as the first thing she would do is take the public credit and make you look weak. The Black Team spent last night discussing the plan. If it is your wish we can advise but we suggest secrecy and not getting involved. You might see Minda is enjoying hunting somewhere else to keep her away from the action."

When Maggie and Rachel went to the Briton Ambassador's house Rachel was pleased to see some of 'her' guards doing their job intelligently. "I'll have that drink with you yet Tom. Let me look at your sword belt. Good honest leather. You see my sash – that's to carry my sword. Now you men don't want a silk sash as it would be horrible to keep clean but what about if I brought you all shiny black leather ones with the royal crest on them?"

"Your ladyship is too kind."

"You deserve it. I've been hearing good reports so I must thank you. I will see what I can do."

"Everyone has been practising their rude songs your ladyship."

"Good. I have no intention of leaving without scandalising the neighbours."

"You're a treat for us all miss."

"Be patient. And well done for remembering to smile. Our lady Minda insists on smiling guards and I'll tell you another two good reasons when we're all drinking."

The household was understandably in a confusion of settling-in and dealing with Minda. The plan was to let James brief Minda on the practical and political situation then hand over to the girls in the hope that they could guide her to pleasure and share their news as girls together.

While they were waiting for James to finish Rachel said "I'm scared."

"Me too. Will she do as we tell her?"

"She's only eighteen and in a strange country, can't speak the language, has few friends and some enemies."

"And completely failing to stun everyone with her appearance last night must be bitter."

"Remember she knows the hand signs so we can't use them."

"We'll just have to do the best we can. Don't forget to smile!"

"You have developed a lovely confident smile Maggie. Your eyes shine and your whole face says 'happy to see you'."

"Does it?"

"When we were at Bartonbry you smiled shyly as if you were nervously happy inside but now you throw it."

"Really. I suppose it's being with you. You always smile at the men like you can't wait to be drinking with them – Again!"

"I know. I'll tell you a secret. I found the smile that worked and then I enjoyed its effect so I used it more and added a swagger."

"Do you really enjoy drinking and singing rude songs with the men or is that just for show?"

"Oh yes! It's good fun. I can't drink half what they can but I can have twice the fun and they all know not to try touching me up."

"How do they know that?"

"I *do* have a reputation when it comes to being angry with men!"

"Oh I see. Very clever. You sounded very convincing when saying you wanted to kick the Briton mercenaries out of Italy."

"I meant it. I think that would be a good thing to do."

"And where would they go?"

"Oh? Good point. It needs thinking about. But the idea that there are Britons who are really bands of outlaws being paid to bring war and misery to neighbours is horrible. We need Al to find out more."

"I'd rather we were out of this mess before worrying about Italy."

"One of the spies on the boys in the market might have been Italian."

"What makes you say that?"

"Nothing. We don't know who any of them were working for. It worries me that we have to rely on others who may not be up to their job rather than finding out for ourselves."

"I suppose it's something we have to learn. Until we came here we made our own intelligence but now instead of being five or six we are eight or ten."

"Or thirty if you count the guards I stole from the castle commander."

"We grow up every day don't we?"

Minda greeted the girls with long hugs and kisses but this time it was different. Maggie and Rachel were sturdy women not pliable girls coming back to a mother's embrace.

Maggie said "We're so glad you're safe. Rachel has been training the guards so don't worry about that."

"It appears I was worrying about you girls unnecessarily. But as I'm here now I will make the most of my visit. The King seems a good sort. I see you know him well. You kissed him in front of everyone last night Maggie! Either you're a tart or a witch."

"No! He's a nice man who loves me and I love him. Who do you think paid for this finery? We have made him love Briton and there will be a hundred Lanconian cadets if you want them in the autumn for another school."

"What! I haven't finished with you lot yet."

"Oh I'm sorry. We said between twenty and thirty but plenty of girls to start by Martinmas."

Rachel could imagine the 'follow-me' sign. "We went to the Italian Ambassador this morning to suggest some Italians as well."

"Did we do wrong?" Asked Maggie.

"You did right but you should have asked first. You did really well. Yes you did. I can see you have done me a really good turn."

Rachel said "Please can all the Black Team ask you to do us a really good turn. James should have told you the King has a little problem with the Church. We have the King eating from our hand and in this delicate matter we are about to help him again. But please Minda – If you get involved in the slightest way in these affairs you'll be picking at a scab. It will start bleeding and make a stain that can't be removed."

Maggie said "You're sometimes hot-headed Minda. Now is not the time or you will spoil a lot of things with untold damage."

"I'm not sure what you're talking about but I suppose you're right as I don't know the lie of the land but you do."

"Exactly!" said Rachel "We can show it to you but there are traps and we are about to return home as fast as we can as soon as a couple of loose ends are tied up."

"Now of course we will stay to guard you – but that was our plan."

Minda said "James told me Jane intends to be the next Duchess of Orfleur. What does that mean?"

Maggie replied "It means she will be nearly as powerful in Lanconia as you are in Briton. She has told us straight that she would marry the current Duke even though he must be over forty – nearing fifty perhaps – to stop the dukedom falling into the hands of the son. However she is making a man of the son so she might do it that way."

Rachel said "Jane was a brilliant general for us. We need days to tell you our travels. Carry on Maggie."

"Jane says she wants to be a powerful duchess not a little one."

"What's special about Orfleur?" asked Minda.

"That's on the coast opposite Briton. Good for trade. Rich and well-run. Didn't you land at Orfleur?"

"No we came a different route landing at Hamorne."

Maggie said "We captured Orfleur with friendship and hints of alliance with you. It's an important dukedom with two important ports. They're looking forward to trade and will only need a little leadership to understand that if pirates can be kept away more ships will use their ports and pay proper port taxes than the riskier ones."

Rachel said "I have pledged her that if she becomes Duchess of Orfleur I will see the Briton side of the water gets the same amount of pirate fighting even if I have to do it myself."

Minda said "My goodness. You have been busy."

Maggie said "Please Minda what are your plans?"

Minda sighed and was silent. "I came full of empty anticipation. The language has beaten me. The sullen servants are impossible to talk to. Last night was strange."

Rachel said "Shall I explain? The details of fashion are very important in Arlesene. We set the new standard by chance by getting these black sashes made – You see this band of white there – That's for you. The court had spent the day pretending it didn't care but every yard of black silk in Arlesene was being turned into sashes."

"And some other colours as well."

"What sort of game is that?"

"Rachel wanted a way to carry a sword – there's a good reason we'll tell you about later – but why have something as coarse as the usual shoulder strap. So we all had one."

"Who paid for it."

"The King will."

"Will?"

"In the end. When the Queen tells him."

"You like to live dangerously girls."

Rachel said "We've earned it already and this plan to beat the Church will easily pay for all."

"Tell me about it."

Maggie said "We'll tell you about it only if you promise not to get involved. This is a tricky situation for the King – which I suppose if we're honest – Rachel and me got him into. We flushed the Archbishop into open defiance."

"Exciting! Go on."

Rachel left a few seconds before responding. "We need your promise."

"Oh. I see you were trained well. Alright I trust you." The complete silence of only a handful of seconds reminded Minda she was dealing with determined experts. "I promise."

"Thank you." said Rachel. "That's been worrying us since last night. We will take you to get your gown changed and see you're invited to the

dances or hunts you wish for but you have taught us well enough so we can manage this situation on our own."

Rachel said "Without your interference. I say that bluntly Minda because if it became known that you were involved in what we think is about to happen then it would be horrible. Briton has reputation built on quicksand here."

"So what should I do girls?"

Maggie said "Three things. First visit the clothiers with us. You'll never be respected here unless you're fashionably dressed. Second get out of town. If you don't know any friendly duke then we do and you can go hunting."

"You're on holiday!" said Rachel.

"Then when the King has asserted his power we will introduce you so you can be his quiet firm friend for the future." said Maggie.

"And you could be in some danger. I will make sure you are guarded. Did the bear-duke guard you last night?"

"Yes!"

"Will he take you away for two or three days if you ask him?"

"I'm sure he will."

"So is that settled? We get you measured. You go away. You come back and are equals with the King."

"Then we go home." added Rachel.

Minda said "To be honest I haven't got a better plan girls."

Maggie said "Is everything alright Minda? Are you escaping from anything?"

"Boring business. The moment I heard you were having fun in Lanconia I wanted to join in. What's the point of being rich if you can't do what you want."

"And spend money on fashions." said Rachel.

"And dance with gorgeous dukes." said Maggie. "I'm glad you came."

Al spent a long time with the new Briton Ambassador telling him the events and current situation.

"You're a credit to your father Alefred. You have been clear and organised and I can trust you to give me a complete picture. This hour has saved weeks of foggy stories."

"We have been lucky to make the right sort of friends Sir."

"Making friends with the King takes something more than luck."

"Thank you Sir. There is more which is not for anybody else's ears. Not even your clerk of secrets."

"Um. Go on."

"I must warn you that we are trapping our enemies by this so anyone who knows it will be arrested and harshly questioned."

"Who is we?"

"The Black Team and our friends who you know."

"Go on."

"Well Sir. It's not as I said before that the killer of your predecessor is a mystery. We know who did it."

"Who?"

"We did. We all planned it. Rachel executed him."

"But you can't do that!"

"You said you trusted us. You have to trust us that we deemed it necessary."

"Are you sure it wasn't to indulge the bloodthirsty girls?"

"No Sir. What you know about them from Black Friday is truth but their desire to slaughter is legend. They realise that such a reputation can be an advantage but in the main they can't be bothered with all the blood and mess. Rachel volunteered to do the deed and when she had the man begging for mercy in the bedroom upstairs here she took the opportunity to – experiment – she called it. I can see her point – if she's going to kill people then she needs some live practise. How do you cut a man's balls off? Her question Sir – and now she knows the answer."

"Wait 'till I tell her father!"

Al's knife flashed into the space between them. "Did you listen to what I said?"

"Oh! Er Yes."

"What did I say?" The knife stayed fixed.

"It was a deadly secret."

"Secret not to be said to anyone?"

"Yes."

"But here you are about to gossip it to Rachel's father. Explain."

"Sorry. I was not thinking."

Al withdrew the knife. "I expect you're tired and very busy with lots of things in this new job. I will let you get on with it. I will keep the other deadly secret I was going to tell you. James is working to salvage the intelligence office here. I am completely of one mind with the Ambassador-at-home. And you should go to the clothiers as soon as you can Sir – Arlesene fashion cannot be ignored."

"But you ignored it."

"No we didn't. As soon as we came to court we ambushed it. I expect Minda has been telling you ambush stories on your journey – well you don't have to be on the road to make an ambush."

The girls left a message for the boys that the Italian Ambassador would be their host for dinner this evening and they may or may not have Minda in tow. The boys swapped news of their morning's meetings.

James said "It's so frustrating not being able to find out for ourselves who those four followers were. I'm getting cross. Jean Espice and Beetle Espice both killed. We still don't know how Jean died. What about the Espices who found us on our first night."

John said "I wonder. It's just a thought. We think 'Espice' is 'Spicer' in Briton. I wonder if it's a way of saying 'spy'."

"It's a very poor way – so obvious" said Al.

"So obvious that none of us thought of it." said John.

"But why take the risk?" said Al.

"What does it matter?" said James. "It's an interesting thought and we might want to follow other names to see if there is a pattern but surely we're birds in a cage."

The truth of this finished the discussion. Al said "I'll see if Italian Ambassador will invite the Briton Ambassador and would it please Lord Robert if I take his one of his daughters on my arm as well."

"Oh! You're so romantic!" said James. "Come on sweetie let's go for a boring dinner at yet another Ambassador's. You can't fail."

"Come and see me polish my armour darling." said John. "You certainly know how to make the girls swoon Al!"

"Stop it! I can't invite the Ambassador-at-home himself to the Italian Ambassador's dinner but I do want to let him know we're not up to any conspiracy now Minda has arrived."

"Oh Um. Sorry." Said James.

"Me too." said John.

Al said "I'm beginning to see how diplomacy works. Our friends are trusting us with really important things. This riot business is making them nervous. We have to make them excited without worrying they're being taken on a ride over a waterfall."

John said "If Maggie was here now she'd be hugging us all and telling us how clever we are. I think we are still riding the steeplechase firmly in the saddle but I have an escape plan if it all goes wrong."

"Well done brother. Shall we hear that before bed tonight?"

"Yes. I think tonight is going to be another one when the Black Team don't get much sleep."

That afternoon the smiling girls were busy spending the Queen's credit and Minda's money. They called at a couple of the families who had come to the games day to introduce Minda but she was baffled by the language and unable to play her usual games of charm and demand. Little Arthur was with them which was everything that was magic – sparkles of happiness and pricks of jealousy. James had spent a few minutes teaching him a few useful words of dress and a scale of 'no-never' to 'you are brilliant'. He wasn't embarrassed in the least by using sign language or making mistakes. A skip and a bow could fix everything. A little acting of his noble deportment with a showing-off of an imaginary ornament would halve the price as the clothiers, jewellers, hat-makers, lace-makers and other trades recognised that Little Arthur was the perfect model – Happy to show off everything for the sake of enjoying it – and a perfect way to get youngsters sent to them by fashion-conscious parents. Maggie and Rachel could see that his antics kept Minda amused. The two new sides to Briton that broke upon Arlesene like a rainbow after the storm were the strange duchess who was their heroine but for why nobody could tell, and the imp who brought something never seen before in Arlesene.

The boys were told to attend on the Frederick the Kings oldest son. There was a confused quarter of an hour where Frederick was gathering facts but didn't seem to have understood any strategy or reasons.

James asked himself 'What would Minda do?' "Frederick. Do you like that name or should we use another for close comrades – for that's what we will soon be."

"Erm. My father said you'd test me."

"I'm not testing you! I'm James Taylor an orphan from the docks – Al is Alefred Robert Ruggleston the Briton Ambassador-at-home's son – John

is my brother. We are half of the Black Team. We are not testing you we're just trying to get you in our team as quickly as we can. If you have a name we can use when arrows start flying then tell us."

"My wife calls me Tintin."

"We don't want to get into your private life. Shall I call you Tomkit because you remind me of a kitten keen to know the world."

"You're being insolent!"

"No Sir. Our world is strange to you. We will teach you like a cat does its kits. Our hunting is going to be more than hawking. Our prey is men."

John saw the 'follow me' and added "Very powerful men. If they weren't very powerful then your father would have buried them long ago."

Al said. "Please Sir. The King has given you the job of battering the Church. He hasn't given you an army – Just us, a few servants at your command and a few livres. We are strong medicine – one drop will be enough."

James caught up the follow-me. "You're going to as good as massacre the Archbishop and his top clergy. We spilled their blood in Lostnock because they tried treachery. The churchmen here must know that story so one of the things we should do is have a few parades of troops. They will be frightened that you mean to loot their abbeys and cathedrals. They will know the threat and we will – no you will – say you'd heard there was a mob threatening to burn every church to the ground so the troops were there to protect them."

"But they won't believe me."

"That's the whole point Sir. It's a way of saying 'I'm your friend' to their face in such a way as to let them know you have no intention of really being their friend. It unsettles without provoking them ."

John added "When you sword smiles everyone smiles."

"But not proper smiles. Green smiles."

"Good fun isn't it! Did your father give you this job because he was afraid to do it himself or because he thought you needed the experience of learning how to deal with a crisis?"

"Oh. Um. You are besting me in this skirmishing. I suppose I should trust you."

"The King didn't hand you over to us so you could decide if you trusted us. He would never have let you near if he didn't trust us. The issue is can you lead? Are you a general? Now are you going to be a general or not?"

"Of course."

"Good. We'll call you general Tomkit. If we win then Tomkit becomes something very special to be proud of."

"And if we lose."

"Then we'll be back in Briton... ..If you lost through no fault of yours then you can come back with us."

"What can I lose?"

The boys wished the girls were there to hoodwink Tomkit with charm and sense but they had to explain every last bit. Sometimes more than once. Eventually the fact that it was a really good idea to kick the Church into the ditch and he would have the credit for it thanks to his father's generosity and wisdom gave Tomkit the motivation and confidence in the strange plans of the Black Team. At the end of their planning session John invented the obvious whip. "Tomkit I have to tell you that the King asked us to see if you were man enough for this job or would he have to do it himself. We think you can do it."

James saw John's 'follow-me'. "We're sure you can do it. Don't look so nervous!"

"But what if it all goes wrong."

"First it won't if we do things right. Second we have a secret weapon. Third we just kill the bastards and fourth we can run away."

Al added "The fourth is a last resort. We are here to make your first work. Remember it is your plan and we aren't involved at all. If anyone thinks that Britons are behind it the plan will crumble and you and the King will look like puppets dancing to foreigner children who have strung you up with witchcraft. We will be with you every moment but only in the deep shadows. You have to have your own courage when it comes to ordering death."

"Now I understand. I still wish it wasn't me."

James said "I wish I was at home in Briton at this minute but we came back after Saules because we knew there was plotting against your father. I wish it wasn't me but I'll do my best whether I like it or not."

John finds a family

The plan was to have all the Church properties in Arlesene surrendered to the guardianship of the King as quickly as possible. Thought had gone into how much damage to do, who should do it and how the

collapse should be spread from one religious institution to the others. Getting the right rumours started was a delicate task. John and Denjun went to the inn in the docks that 'looked right' and put two gold coins on the counter saying they were for the most senior criminal of the docks. Within half an hour three cautious and mean men were seated in a back room with the boys and told they would be paid to help the King help the people get fed. After the slower two had it explained by the third that John was part of the Black Team of Britons and they should respect that – they also had the girl who sings rude songs with the castle guards – so shut up and listen to what the boy has to say.

"Sir. That is Rachel. Tonight she fulfils her promise to drink and sing with the guards. Last night she was sat next to the King. The night before she cut the Archbishop down with words. She is seventeen and has four men to herself."

"Strewth! Four men! She must be an amazon."

"No. I meant she killed four men by herself. I can tell you she likes it. Whatever you do don't cross her. Don't worry though she is ever so friendly. Now to the King's business. Are you all ready to be paid to help yourselves, the King and his people?"

The senior one spoke for them all. "What's your bargain?"

"My bargain is money for secrecy. One gold coin for secrecy. One for expenses and one for profit. And promise of more work for success. What do you say?"

The chief said "I will work for the King if he is working for us. It will be a first time."

"You've heard the proclamation about the granaries to be thrown open to feed the starving. He is going to enforce that against the Church whether you help him or not. You can make it happen tomorrow not in a week or a month's time."

"He means tomorrow" said Denjun trying to be brave.

"God knows food is short and prices are so high people starve."

"Starving isn't nice is it? I was an orphan of the quays of Melbun so I know Sir."

"Really? I mean were you?"

"Yes. Then a lurker in the service of the Duchess of Avel rescued me and now I am destined to have houses and servants and clerks of my own if I make good friends and trades."

"Who is your friend here?"

"This is Denjun. Two nights ago in complete darkness he stood his ground as a screaming man bled to death at his feet... ..Show them your sword Denjun... ..in the black the man screamed because he ran onto Denjun's sword."

"John's brother had just stabbed the other thief upwards from behind at the top of the stairs. It was his plan."

"Alright I get the message. You are not silly boys. I think I know of both the men you killed. It would happen sooner or later and they were not always honest. I hate dishonesty!"

John said "When we have finished our business will you stay a while Sir? I may have more gold and for myself more credit to your sense for justice."

After an stupid argument between the men about how could Britons be helping the King – it was agreed that more than a dozen men and prostitutes from the quays would be spreading rumours as instructed first thing tomorrow morning.

When two lesser men had been dismissed the chief introduced himself. "I am Wernol. Who are you?"

"John Taylor, orphan born and bred on the quays of Melbun, recruited into the Black Team and now as you have already guessed a trusted servant of the King."

"I can guess but what does that prove eh?"

Denjun said "We have killed the King's enemies."

"I'll have to take you word for that."

John said "This is Lord Jajeuer's son – we call him Denjun short for Dennis Junior – That should tell you I'm from Briton! Now he is just a keen youth of the nobles. I can tell you that if you get a message from Dennis senior asking for help then please try. But for now Denjun perhaps you should leave us. Please Mister Wernol would you see that my friend gets home safely." Wernol instantly recognised John's authority. There was going to be a meeting of chieftains. Equals alone. He liked this boy.

Wernol shouted for help. "Drogo! See this young man gets home safely." He saw the confusion on Denjun's face. "Don't worry lad – John is my friend. He won't come to any harm. Off you go!"

John said "Please Sir. Wernol? I will soon be leaving this town and returning to Briton but I would like to leave good men like yourself with a way to stay friends with young men like Denjun and Densen for when it might be needed. We're not talking about blackmail but self-interest. Our lady Avel has a policy of giving the powerless and dishonest the way to be honest and the powerful and dishonest the option of death or reform. I am honest and know to close my shutters and watch for death in shadows so I know the worry of fear but I can rely on honest men to help me or revenge me."

"What are you talking about?"

"One day you might want to leave the docks and live in a nice house in the country where you can smell the blossom each spring. Who would watch your back then?"

"Young man I respect you. You're brave and clever – and dead if I should say so." John stayed silent. The only silences Wernol had experienced like this were through fear and guilt. John had been trained never to respond to threats. "So. Hmm. What do you say to that? I could kill you inside a minute." John stayed calm and silent.

Every second of silence increased John's moral superiority and reduced Wernol's. John said "Why do you threaten me?"

"To make you afraid."

"I knew the danger. I came. You know I am untouchable except through stupid anger so why threaten me?"

"Alright. You have nerves of steel." John's knife appeared for a fraction of second under Wernol's chin then vanished back into his boot. There was a sweaty silence and unbreakable eye-contact.

John said "I'm sorry I spoke about retirement. I apologise."

Wernol struggled to reply. "I have challenged you plenty enough. We must be equals. Did you really grow up on the quays of Melbun?"

"Today I will be your master and you my servant and yes I really did grow up on the quays of Melbun. Hungry!" Out of nowhere came a 'Maggie thought'. "Do you have any children Sir?"

"A boy gone to sea and never returned and two girls married with three grandchildren."

John went all cold in a wave as the next 'Maggie thought' came. "I am nearly seventeen. I want to marry and have children and now Sir you have shown me the gold of grandchildren I never thought of before."

John was genuinely clouted by this but there was no time to swim in this emotion.

"John you're a real man. I don't know what's going on but I like you I like my own son."

"Sir – Last night I was called 'son' by the King himself. For someone who never knew a family this is the magic of Arlesene. You are so happy to have me as your family I'm – see my tears." John really was crying.

"Come on now John. Be brave."

John breathed deeply "Sir – I made pretend families on the quayside. One day merchants another a fisherman and basket-maker wife and so on. I want to return here when I'm married and adopt every orphan." Wernol called for attendant and whispered. Soon there was spirits and spiced cakes on the table. Eventually John mastered his emotions "I'm sorry Sir. That thought has made me determined to beat every stupid courtier and every corrupt noble and do what I say."

"You were determined before."

"I was determined to open the Church's granaries as quickly as possible so we could go home. Now I have to live two – four – ten years to get rich enough to do the one thing I want to do which is what I said."

Wernol had never seen a strong man subside into snuffles and shameful tears like this. Luckily his wife arrived.

"What's up Lou?"

"My dear. This boy is my adopted son. He's upset. How do I comfort him?"

"Kiss him stupid! Like this!" John was kissed. It really made him better. The emotion turned from swirls of rage and hope into a single love like Maggie gave him.

"Mistress! I don't know how to hold you close." Soon he caught the son-and-mother hug and gave up on not crying. Wernol tried giving advice in the background but John didn't hear it and Tallya ignored it.

It took a long while for John to be able to say how moved he was without blinking then crying. Eventually Tallya ejected Wernol and said "Now then John. My husband is a rough man so you have found his soft spot. Please leave while it is daylight."

"No lady you don't understand. My place is here. In the docks. I have to leave to get back to Briton but I will be back as soon as I can support the children with no families. I've had a blade to your husband's throat today – ask him – so that should tell you."

Italian hospitality

The Italian Ambassador had listened to the girls and made the dinner a family occasion. Lord Robert's eldest daughter, Janice, came with Al as if they were a couple. They both secretly knew that they could be a real couple – Like James and Helen. Al had assumed that you won a woman by brave fighting display in the tournaments but since joining the Black Team he'd left that boy's fantasy behind. Janice had been at the games day and joined-in half-heartedly but then despised herself for being so grumpy when really everything was such fun. Maggie and Minda and the Ambassador chatted in one corner. Rachel, Janice and Arthur were made welcome in another while children and babies were displayed. Arthur asked Rachel what the Italian for 'we are all far from home' and then used it at the right moment to bring the ladies closer together so they made extra efforts to make their home where they were.

John, James and Lord Ecklark congratulated Al on capturing Janice. The Ambassador's wife introduced herself. "Hello Britons. My name is Isabel." So soon after thoughts of the lovely Janice, all their pulses quickened. The most experienced spoke first. "Lady how lovely you are. If I wasn't married I would be easily smitten by your lovely eyes and – I admit it. You are beautiful from head to toe."

"I was told the Britons are cold! You're my type Lord Ecklark."

"Lady Isabel we both know we mustn't be tempted. It's fun when we are far from home but tonight we must stay apart."

"Lord Ginger – Is that right? You Britons like first names no? – You banish me to a barren desert without your love."

"You have my love lady and I see you have – er – seven children. Bless you dear. Give me a little kiss and we will be friends."

The boys watched and learned.

The younger children were banished from the meal and yet Maggie and Rachel made a point of sitting with the youngsters. Minda and Janice were carefully placed next to one of the boys and Al had the unexpected attention of Isabel while Janice and Lord Ecklark were either side of the Ambassador himself. Despite the three nations of strangers present it was a family gathering. Maggie and Rachel had made it so. Everybody was interested in each other and their backgrounds rather than their personal problems. How clever the Britons were. No wonder the Italian Ambassador had such reports from the Melbun Ambassador. Naturally

he treated Janice as the most important guest. She was slow and shy but trying hard to be useful. Normally he'd dismiss such a person but if Alefred brought her then there was a good reason for her presence.

He said "Have you been to foreign countries?"

"No Sir. My father says the time is not right."

"If you were a servant then you could come back to Italy with me as a house-maid to see my country for yourself."

"Why shouldn't I just visit?"

"Ask your father. I will see you get safe passage and letters of introduction."

"Thank you Sir. I knew it was simple!"

"It's easy to ask me but perhaps your father has other reasons."

"He says Italy is full of war. Why go when today's king is tomorrow's corpse."

"It's not as bad as you hear miss."

"Al says you're not a real kingdom at all."

"But we are a federation."

"What's that?"

"There are eleven what we call 'states' each with their own rule that join together to call themselves Italy."

"Why?"

"Because they're Italian."

"That doesn't make sense. They can't belong to the Kingdom of Italy without a king!"

"But they do. It happens."

"What happens?"

"Now you're asking. I admit without a king some disputes get out of hand."

"By out of hand you mean slaughter and worse don't you?"

"Yes I'm afraid I do."

"How can you be an ambassador for a non-existent kingdom?"

"The kingdom exists and there are enough princes in the states to chose people who will represent their joint interests in trade."

"So you're a chief merchant."

"That's a good phrase. Yes I am I suppose. My job is simple – I have to convince people that trade is more profitable than war."

"Is that all."

Lord Ecklark intervened "There may be things on the side but an ambassador tries to join everyone together in harmony. Sometimes that is like tonight when it is nice to make friends. Sometimes two horses of different owners are needed together to pull the cart so a little bargaining goes on but the load is moved. One might suggest a better route and have to persuade the other. Troubles from one source might descend on the other so a complaint is made. Troubles from elsewhere might need both to cooperate. For example between Lanconia and Briton there are pirates – outlaws of the seas – now they cannot stay at sea all the time so they must harbour on our coasts or another place. If Briton drives them out they might simply pay a few bribes to lurk in Lanconian ports. So we will act together. Italian merchants may have to pay a tax for use of waters we spent money to keep clear of pirates so the Italian Ambassador here needs to know it is for the greater good of trade of all of us and not some spiteful punishment."

The Italian Ambassador said "And there's another thing the Black Team have shown me. We must look to tomorrow and what better way than have the youngsters find out for themselves that foreigners are not all bad."

Janice said "Yes Sir. What you said before. I haven't really wanted to get my feet dirty in far countries but perhaps I make an exception with Briton."

"And Italy I hope."

"Let me try one kingdom first. I guess it won't be long before the Black Team visit Italy and I would like to see that for myself."

The Italian Ambassador was always on guard for deceptive statements. He realised Janice wanted to visit with the Black Team and see what happened rather than indulge in Italy itself. "Let me tell you both that it would not be a good idea for the Black Team to ride into Italy as they have a habit of being at the centre of trouble. Rachel has told me she intends to suppress the Briton mercenaries who she says plague my country. It would not be safe as these are rich and ruthless experts and you can guess what a reputation Britons have – Not a good one."

Lord Ecklark said "I will see to it that she gets proper experience nearer home first. Then we will talk again. She means well but we know how money can crush good intentions."

Janice said "Oh! What? Rachel being a general to bring peace to Italy! I'm going to come too!"

The Italian Ambassador said "This isn't a game Janice. Many people will die. Towns destroyed, farms burned, crops left to rot in the fields. What we have said tonight is a secret between us. I would like to see my country a united kingdom – and even an empire again – but it will need more than ten thousand soldiers to make it so. Let there be good will to the Black Team and who knows one day their boldness may be the sun that ripens the crop of unity."

Janice said "You're very picturesque sir. I have heard Italians are like that."

"Yes dear. We are very poetical."

"If you'll give me a poetical book I will use it to learn some Italian. I could if I wanted."

Minda and the Ambassador's wife with Maggie as interpreter had settled into questions and answers about lifestyles. Maggie took a while to get used to the strange duty and she was far from fluent in Italian, nevertheless she managed to get Minda's confidence that she wasn't amplifying things and Isabel's patience with using half a dozen slightly broken words where one would do. Maggie was soon learning about Italy from a woman's point of view that had never occurred to Allesandro.

John and James were brought into the family circle at the bottom of the table. This was as strange to them as Italian was to Minda. Rachel encouraged them and they tackled the new challenge with determination at first, then attention, then with the realisation that this was a lesson. The language difficulties camouflaged their discomfort at being uncles and cousins to children for the evening. Knowing it was a lesson, even if Rachel already knew all the answers, made it worth working at.

Two laconic old men, Al and Little Arthur, surveyed the scene commenting on recent events taking it in turns for a short comment, a sigh, and a pause of however long careful thought takes before the other had their wry observation on the ways of the world.

11 Orfleur reunion

Jane burst into the Duke's apartment and threw herself at him. "We're back!" She hugged and kissed him. Johnas lurked just inside the door. "Orfleur is a great name in Arlesene. Johnas is a star. Now we play for double or quits! You're the hero Sir."

"It's lovely to see you Jane – And you Johnas. I have heard the reports so I know about the games."

"You haven't heard half Sir! We won the heart of the King. Thanks to you we won the respect of the nobles with the games at your castle – what a lovely castle! I can't wait to be mistress of it. But we were also ambushed and Paulanne captured. I sent the rest of the Black Team back to Arlesene to deal with that while I came to demand you support the King with a small army. I know I shouldn't say 'demand' Sir but I speak my mind plain to you and I will let others say why it will be a good thing to do."

"Come here sweetheart. I see Johnas is quiet behind you so I see you're not mad. Let me speak to him while I hold you. I have heard so much and so little. It's overwhelming to have the lady herself back skipping, breathing and smiling in my arms.

"Father I think she has made me a man."

"Gadzooks! Really? What's this Jane?"

"Johnas has shown he can think clearly and command. Best of all Sir he is quickly learning how to lead."

"It's easy sir when I have such a good teacher. She encourages me and suddenly I see for myself."

"Miracles will never cease! What do you see Johnas?"

"Demand and command are different father. My heart stopped just now as she demanded you give her an army to support the King."

"I didn't. I didn't demand it should be given to me. I'm not a silly child who wants to play with soldiers. This is an opportunity to show the whole kingdom the Duke of Orfleur himself is the sort of friend to the King that is quick to support him. If you thought the King was weak and soon to be swept away that's all changed. The Black Team has been the hounds and you have been the huntsman behind. You have forced his enemies to acknowledge that Briton and Orfleur together are strong and together with the King we all three are invincible. You're the key to that Sir."

Johnas said "Paulanne was captured at Saules by betrayal by either your guards who are an hour behind us which we honestly don't think – or officers of the King. We know the King himself is our greatest friend so it must be that his officers are treacherous. That is why the rest of the Black Team have been sent back."

"Why?"

"So they can help. Mister Jim will tell you more Sir."

"Mister Jim?"

"Hallenson father. That's what we call him."

"He was brilliant Sir. He showed us lots of things and worked incredibly hard. And when we'd trained your guards properly they were really good. William deserves special favour. He took command of the road party while we went by river."

"Father! I saw them change from dull shields into shining swords with my own eyes. Please come and welcome them back after a day's journey. You'll hardly recognise them." Johnas and Jane exchanged smiles which the Duke couldn't miss.

"What's the joke?"

"It's not a joke!" said Jane.

"It's a joke on us Father." said Johnas. "Come and see for yourself. They can't be far behind."

"Oh alright! Go and wash that dust off and then join me at the gate."

The baggage party arrived full of quiet pride at the town's gate. They stopped even though it was open. Townsfolk were gathering round and chatting to the guards they knew. The guards themselves had the confidence to chat back without crumbling from formation. The sergeant performed a charade of pointing out invisible faults for the men to correct. According to the plan he was supposed to march his proud troops into the castle but he called for three cheers for the next Duchess of Orfleur. There was no doubt that here were loyal, disciplined and thinking troops. There were only sixteen guards and twelve servants but they were just what a troop on the Duke's official business should be.

As the guards marched through the town gate Jane came out to the square. "Citizens of Orfleur! These men have served me well. Be proud! I am proud of them. Some think I should be the next duchess but the King has told me to wait for his permission. Be proud! Your men are

strong and when I tickle them they find their brains quickly enough. I brought them all back unharmed."

A voice from the crowd called "Did you bring any wheat?" There was a horrible silence.

"No. I was going back to Arlesene at first light tomorrow to help the King or I could go on to Briton tomorrow to bring a ship-full of grain. I cannot do both. Will whoever shouted please step forward so we can all see this brave person."

A tough young man in what appeared to be a farrier's apron burst through the crowd. "Do you worst duchess-to-be!"

"This man is rough in his language because he is hungry. Nobody should go hungry in this day and age. In Briton we speak up before we're starving. The price of grain is horrible and I know it means squalid death for the less fortunate and biting hunger for the rest. Now here is a question. Should I be fed so I may see you are fed? Wait! If you cry yes then I can not guarantee you are fed as God's ways with the weather are sometimes difficult to endure. If you know any that would try harder see they have the strength to do so. What is it to be? Me or another?" Jane fizzled with glorious excitement as she stood alone and apart in front of the crowd forcing a stern look on her face. She made eye contact with as many of the silent watchers as she could.

There was the Duke in the shadow of the gatehouse. She signalled for him to come out to her. He tried to march out with eyebrows raised as if this was a wayward daughter. That confused the crowd. Jane pulled him close and whispered. "Follow me! Clear?"

"Yes Jane."

"Good. I'm going to lie for you."

"People! I'm just told the Duke has already sent to Briton at his expense for some of their spare grain. We've had two good harvests on my side of the water... ..Oh no! What am I saying? Lanconia is now my side of the water! You're so lovely I wish to stay – May I?"

A confused crowd sorted out its collective mind then cheered enthusiastically. They didn't often get compliments from the rich. The Duke put his arm round Jane. She smiled at him and the sun rose for a thousand mornings.

Later the crowd realised that 'Jeane' was the first noble person who had spoken to them without a whip or tax bill in their hand and she had more

balls than the Duke and his son put together. The duke and his son realised the same thing.

There was a lot to be described and discussed that evening at Orfleur. The guards were rewarded with money. The servants were rewarded with a week of leave and a little bonus. Mister Jim was rewarded with constant questioning by the Duke followed by a declaration of indebtedness for all he'd done (prompted by Jane) from Johnas.

When the Duke retired to bed Jane followed him. Ever since she'd admitted to being willing to marry him – even at his age – the thought had lurked underground and now burst out into the light. Johnas was worthy but she wanted a confident and cheery man of the world. Now.

In his private chamber she stood close before him and said "The King has said to my face I am too young to marry. Does that stop me sharing your bed?"

"No you shouldn't. I cannot think of a finer woman to tempt me. I could so easily peel off your clothes and ravish you this very night. I don't know of a more admirable woman to make me young."

"You are young in your heart."

"Getting younger every minute sweet Jane. You're so very prim. Your lovely hair still bound and soft fingers touching nothing but each other. You're so serious it makes me sweat cold."

Jane kept her gaze fixed. "Of course I'm serious. Will you be my husband whatever the King says?"

"I am cornered like a mouse with but a single choice. Don't tease me any longer."

"No." Jane stepped back. "I could easily leave silently and chase your son – No fun in that! – Or perhaps become a some merchant's wife. Shall I return to Arlesene without you?"

"Stop talking like a wife! We're not wed yet!"

"We could be tomorrow."

"Are you serious?"

Jane smiled as she carefully unpinned her hair and closed right up to the Duke, hands on shirt. "My body aches for you. How cruel you are to let me suffer. Let me have a place in your bed for just a brief while. Comfort me with your warm body. Take off this shirt so I may feel your naked

skin with my travel weary hands. I've dreamed nightly about you sweet breath in my ear and clever hands on my breasts."

The Duke quickly pulled off his shirt. "You see my dear. Nothing but an ordinary man. An old man with grey hairs on his chest."

"Curly!" She let her gaze travel up to his eyes. "You poor old man am I tiring you out? I can feel your heart beating. Better lie on the bed to be safe." They sank onto the bed warm in each other's arms. He nibbled her lip.

"I've dreamt of you too sweetheart. Old man's dreams of forgotten youth."

"My gentle yearnings for you are lost" she whispered "No more words – feed my fire."

12 Arlesene end game

John and James knew something special. People were easy to fool. That is why three carts laden with old ship's rigging, a couple of barrels of tar and a few sacks of grain at the tailboard were good evidence for a plot by the Church to burn their surplus grain rather than see it be given to the poor as the King had commanded. A 'monk' in the front (who had not fully recovered from a night out with Rachel) completed the tableau. As James said, the important thing was the plume of black smoke climbing into the early morning sky so that the whole town could see for itself the Church's contempt for ordinary people. One cart was set alight in the square opposite the gatehouse of the King's castle as an insult. The others were in the squares outside the cathedral and the Archbishop's palace. The worry of fire soon had everyone's attention and it didn't take half an hour before everyone in Arlesene had been told by someone that bishops would burn their grain rather than allow the starving people have it. Apparently it was against the King as well. They'd had the nerve to burn grain outside the castle gate! But mostly there was a proclamation from the Archbishop that said that it wasn't for man to complain if God sent bad harvests. God knew what he was doing. The obvious question was 'why were the priests fat but the commons thin?' Time to teach the crows of the Church a lesson! By a mysterious process even those who considered themselves spectators

had a weapon of some sort. It appeared some beggars (with hangovers) had brought incendiary materials with them so soon there was a fire burning against the closed cathedral doors. Two carts of cobblestones were conveniently discovered in the square beside the abbot's palace.

The Black Team were frustrated that they couldn't be with the crowd. They knew their escape plan but in truth none thought they would really have to use it. Tomkit may be a stranger but he knew his future depended on breaking the Church and showing them the smile of his sword. The Black Team had learned a lot by trying to put into words how to judge when to blow the flames and when to quench them. They had recruited locksmiths and got two teams of guards to practise breaking through heavy warehouse doors. Axemen soon had blisters but they found the best way was twice as fast as random hacking.

James went to the intelligence office. There was no doubt that this was a sad ruin of a place with Wooly and Frank doing their best to pretend they were making progress against a flood of setbacks.

"I see you're downhearted gentlemen. I'm sure Helen will be back soon. Won't that lift your spirits? You'll be busy training new clerks and dusting-out the attic of faded plans."

"It's alright for you." said Frank "You can run off home. We have to deal with our sorrow, our failure, ridicule and knowledge that a rag-tag bunch of foreign teenagers showed us how to do our jobs. Don't mis-understand – you have done well and I am grateful – but we have to live with the effects of our... ..incompetence."

"Sir! Wooly. You were against a lot of powerful people while you had little money and no respect. It was us boys who let Beetle get poisoned."

Wooly said "Once our reputation is lost none of our agents trust us. They wonder if they have been betrayed. They also wonder if Terence can be killed under our noses who is next. Our job is now impossible."

James asked himself "What would Jane do?" Something sharply provocative. "Harzel wanted your job Frank. If he was honest would he have the energy and contacts to relight the fire?"

"Bastard!"

"I ask the question Sir so we may start a discussion. I don't make decisions but as I am learning I help people see a peaceful future for themselves."

"I'm sorry James." Said Frank.

Wooly said "In one way – Not to say yes or no – In one way we can blackmail him with what we know and what he has confessed."

"Is that good or bad?" Asked James.

"Good. I could remind him to curb excesses."

"Is that good or bad?" James asked again.

"Good of course. Power needs to be kept in check."

"What might be the bad reason?"

Wooly looked at Frank. There was that silence of admitting the teacher would have to tell them. "I don't know."

"Blackmail by Italian bankers brought Harzel to corrupt Hasty. He knew he was their tool although I expect he hoped he might escape – But who ever escaped from the bear-claws of blackmail? Who else could blackmail him with your knowledge? You might be honest Wooly but the next clerk might be another Hasty." The gulf between the Black Team and the intelligence office when it came to understanding what mattered was clear to them all. After a sad silence James continued. "Harzel might be a good intelligencer. He is devious we know that. He is quick to accept when he's beaten – that's a sign he isn't a fool." There was a longer sadder silence. "I didn't mean you were fools. You may think I mean it but you have done well against power and money. It's good Helen isn't here because she needs fresh views. When she returns I think she and James should go to Italy to see for themselves if Italy is a threat as a kingdom or an annoyance as unruly neighbours."

"Our mission is to protect the King."

"Today he is protecting himself with Tomkit."

"Tomkit?" asked Wooly.

"His son. We call him Tomkit."

"Why?"

"Because we do. You know how we give names Wooly."

Frank asked "What about me? Do I have a Black Team name?"

"Just Frank or 'The intelligencer' I'm afraid."

"Oh. I was secretly hoping you might have a special name for me. I'm past it. You may have done well to stop me resigning but I need a replacement quickly so I can retire."

"Which is why I brought up the subject Sir. You cannot retire without someone to take your place. Helen needs to see the world before trying to understand its secrets. Who does that leave?"

"I don't know James. I've always tried to do my best."

"You know you're retiring so don't worry about the past. You have to trap plots in the next week and then next month and then you can retire. Wooly you'll be needed for a lot longer. A new generation of senior clerks will be needed. And an accountant."

"Accountant?" asked Frank.

"Yes. It's all about money. It's like you have wives – Oh I'm sorry Sir I forgot – Wooly you have a wife who manages your money so you don't have to worry about it. But also if your accountant can talk to the tax officials in the way they're used to then he will see things about trade that might not be honest." James got confused looks. "Don't you have accountants in Lanconia? Perhaps I haven't translated right. Men who manage money in books?"

"Yes that's right."

"Our duchess makes her cadets do accounts. Even John and me who can hardly read have to do sums to start with then how to count to find the gaps in people's stories and opportunities for profit. All the cadets are mad for trade now. – 'Profit' is a magic word."

"That doesn't help us." said Frank.

"It will. Right! Let's get back to today. Where is Paulanne? Word was we would get her back yesterday."

"Ah – well it's a bit difficult." Said Frank.

"The King's holding her against your departure."

"What! I don't believe you."

"It's true. Ask him."

"Have you asked him?"

"Er. No. We only just found out."

"Oh no! You're so convinced of your own uselessness that you believe anything. How long would it take to check? Who told you this rubbish?"

"It's true. She's safe in the King's castle at Revere."

"No she isn't."

"Yes she is." Said Wooly.

"Truly." said Frank.

"No she isn't. For a dozen reasons. Do both of you truly believe that?"

"Er yes." Said Frank.

"My sources are certain." Said Wooly.

"You secretly hoped for a name from the Black Team Frank. I will give you one. Are you ready?"

"Yes."

"Prick'. Now listen! You have been fooled – Of course you have if you think about it. Please play whatever game your contacts are playing but if you obstruct the rest of us in getting her back you won't be sad any longer you will be listing your sins with Saint Peter at Heaven's gate. I wish the girls were here. They would know how to show you the light. I'm afraid I haven't learned that yet."

"Why are you so sure?"

"Because the King is neither an idiot or an enemy. Hmm. Gentlemen I have few weapons to help you but if you will have my help you can have it all. You ask the King to his face about this nonsense and ask him if you can use the Black Team to help you. Sir. Please listen. We will get Paulanne back with or without you. If you have a rosebud with a worm in it do you cut down the whole bush and plough the garden? Of course not."

Al and his guard went to the Briton Ambassador's house for an update on what people thought was happening. "What's happening Sir?"

"The people are burning the cathedral."

"Why?"

"I'm sure you know Alefred."

"I do but you tell me what you've heard. I'm one of the ten people in this city who know the facts and the rest believe in rumours. I want to know what all the rest believe."

"You knew about these riots?"

"Yes Sir. We started them. It's a good way for the King to suffocate the Church."

"And just at the time the Duchess arrived!"

"That was nothing to do with it Sir. We have arranged her to be many miles away so she can't be implicated."

"Implicated? Implicated in what?"

"You must know that these riots are encouraged and hardly spontaneous. Did she start them?"

"You're romancing Alefred. The King gave a clear proclamation that the granaries of the churches were to be opened to feed everyone. The churchmen have defied him and the people are upset. That's all there is to it."

"Bless you Sir. That's what I wanted to hear. If that's what they're saying on the street then we've done our job."

"Er. You haven't really started this riot have you?"

"Yes Sir. It was Maggie's idea to pressure the Church, feed the people and make the King a hero. The King and Tomkit saw what a cheap way it was to humble the Church and gain credit themselves."

"Oh no! You realise what this means."

"Yes I know. What do you think?"

"It means that Britons have deliberately started riots in the capital city of Lanconia. It could mean war."

"That's a very good reason for never telling anybody about our role then isn't it?"

"You're blackmailing me!"

"Possibly. More like showing you how we help the King without taking credit. We help him for the reward of friendship and loyalty between us alone."

"I don't understand."

"The King is our friend so we help him. As you said yourself, if it became known we were behind it a different interpretation could be put on it."

"Why would the King want riots? That's a nightmare."

"I told you. To break the Church. Like we did in Briton."

"It leaves a foul taste."

"It is a battle for supremacy. What did you expect – Chess?"

"But you started it."

Al decided he held all the cards and replied casually. "Oh. I suppose we did. And we followed it through. And in the next few hours we'll be watching rat-holes for rats. In the next few days we'll be showing the King how much he has won – making sure he follows up his victory. In the next months the Church will be furious that the King crushed them so easily and the King will be thrilled when we smile at him. His courtiers now have a successful leader to follow not a magnate who might be toppled tomorrow."

"Who put you up to this?"

"Nobody sir. We showed the King a way and he followed it. Please remember this is deadly secret. We have done deadly secrets before. Now the next item on the agenda is the Italians. We'll/"

"/Hold on! You don't treat me like that!"

"Yes I shall. I have to train you, keep Minda out of trouble, see the King follows-up his victories, get Paulanne back, and other things which I cannot tell you, before we can get back to Briton. I am too busy to parley. The King will be very friendly to Briton for secret reasons that you know – Deadly secrets remember. You'll need to think how to build on that but marriages are already being planned which will be cuttings to quickly shoot rather than seeds that will gradually root. Italy wants to be our friend but we haven't offered our hand and there may be many voices of Italy. Briton must share some of the blame for the fighting that keeps bursting into flame there. Your job is to understand how we may make Italy a strong friend rather than a dozen squabbling states crawling with mercenaries."

"You speak sense but I shall write to your father and object to your manner."

"I would be grateful if you did so Sir. Now please take care as if a whisper gets out that Briton is orchestrating something as important as feeding the starving from the granaries of those who have hoards your house will be attacked and I will have to ask the King to rescue you with little dignity."

Riots

There are always some who will be in the front rank of a riot, or at least speak like they will be. There are others who hope for justice and know no other way of getting it. Then there are the excited masses who want

to see what happens and perhaps throw something bravely when nobody is looking. What they all need is a cause, a weapon and a place to gather to cloak themselves in the bravery of the crowd. Every servant, labourer, artisan, horseman, soldier and peasant can feel themselves noble for a just cause.

Well before mid-morning the three targets had been overwhelmed by the mob. A fact which had escaped the rioters was that the cathedral complex, abbey of the Trentertians and Priory of the Roman Jehovah's had no granaries on site. Luckily once (or even before) the institution had surrendered to the King's protection the doors to the granaries were hacked apart by axemen. Only the people who worry about these things wondered where half a dozen efficient axemen appeared from. Figures varied, and kept being altered to suit the teller but the Archbishop's body swinging from a rough gibbet in Cathedral square was proof that the King was not going to accept anything less than his demand for the Church's granaries to be thrown open. News soon spread. More rural establishments negotiated releases. A week later the Kings command was being taken seriously wherever news reached.

Tomkit had managed his part well. One minute being in the lead to storm the cathedral and the next holding the mob back, praising them and promising grain when, almost as if by some pre-arrangement, a cart full of grain sacks forced its way into the square. Troops guarded it and Tomkit announced that carts would pass along every street starting with the poorest quarter handing out grain for free at each door and then selling it at a reasonable price in the better class neighbourhoods. He made a speech about how the brave people had made his job of breaking the tyranny of the Church possible. How gratifying that some of the crowd started cheering at everything he said. John's gold at work led the mob.

The Black Team were amazed at the speed, scale and success of their deception. Maggie reminded them that they were still in danger and not to relax their guard. "You've all done well. We haven't won all the prizes as we've still lost Paulanne and need to escape."

"With or without Minda?"

"We'll have to ask her. Is there anything else?"

Rachel said "We should congratulate Tomkit and see the battles here are turned into proper victories. The King and Tomkit know what to do but they should be doing it now not when they've spent days congratulating themselves while the enemy recovers its strength."

Al said "What about the three councillors that tried to stop us talking to the King on the first day? We haven't dealt with them."

Maggie replied "We can't deal with everything. One was Harzel and what happens next is up to the King. We have shown him his weaknesses and strengths. That's enough."

John said "Can I take James to see my new friend Wernol." John had privately told how his 'what would Maggie do' moment had opened that particular door and his pledge to look after orphans. "He wants to meet the rest of you secretly."

"Alright."

As John and James made their way to the place where Wernol could be contacted they discussed the problem of the intelligence office. James said "When Hasty and Wernol's name came together I wonder if we may not have two useful servants for the King. He has proved himself today."

"What! As intelligencer?"

"No! Of course not. But one leg of a table. It's clear the Intelligence office has little idea of what's happening on the streets. I bet Wernol does."

"So do we suggest Harzel as intelligencer? If so can we test him?"

"I think we should put the question to him seriously and ask how he would do the job – tell us what he thinks needs doing and get him to tell us himself how he would show his new loyalty." Before they could reach the Swan inn a ragged boy ran up to them and asked them to follow him. "Your master must have given you something more."

"He says 'we are all orphans'."

"Lead on!"

In a minute they were led through the back gate of a cramped house then shown into a small parlour where Wernol and Tallya were pleased

to meet them. After the introductions John said "I must thank you for your patience yesterday. I mean to keep my pledge to the orphans."

James said "The boy said you too were an orphan Sir?"

"And my wife." It was very quiet. "Thank you for coming to see us. I like to look after orphans too. I have found Paulanne and she will be back in a couple of hours."

The boys were surprised into silence and then realised the many significances. James said "I don't wish to say this because it may be impertinent but if there is money to be paid we have very rich friends."

"Your offer is understood James as a matter of business. You're right to suspect that this is something that money cheapens."

John said "Thank you Sir. When you come to visit Bartonbry as our guest you will truly be a guest of honour."

"Our lady Minda has a way of seeing that everything is a welcome for our friends. If you cannot come yourselves – I really hope you can – Again if money is involved you'll not be out of pocket – then you must nominate boys like us to join the nobles at the Duchess of Avel's school for young noblemen."

"And girls." Added James.

"Our girls have asked to meet you so they may thank you for befriending me yesterday. They say if you want to meet in secret then we can at the house where those two men died. Laughlin's house."

"They're clever but are you sure they didn't want to avoid being seen with me?"

"Yes Sir. If you wished they would be here in a few minutes bouncing grandchildren on their knees as happy as anything."

"What do you say Tallya?"

John said "You could come to the castle and be feasted if you wished. Tomkit should be prepared to stoop down to the level of criminal orphans from the quays as without them he wouldn't be enjoying his success now."

Tallya said "We have seen the grain carts handing it out to the poorest households with our own eyes. The guards are strict."

"Did the guards have black sword belts?"

"Oh now you say – yes they did."

"Those have been Rachelised. Our Rachel – the one who was singing rude songs last night with them – has trained them to think. Tell me. They had a difficult job guessing how much each house should get. Did they do 'not too bad'?"

"Yes John. They smiled at offers of money and gave extra sometimes when it looked needed."

James said "So the King wins his battle and the people get the left-overs."

John added "At least they have something. Can you guess we are telling the King and the Queen and Tomkit that it will be a really good idea to see grain is stockpiled in public in future."

"We can say silly things like 'don't let people starve'. Because we come from the other side of the world we are allowed to say it and continue saying it. There's a month to harvest. I will let Tomkit know that if 'an orphan from the docks' wishes to have a quiet word in his ear about conditions here then he should wake up."

Wernol said "It's not as simple as that. I can't knock on the castle door and sit down to dine with royalty."

"Yes you can. If you want to do it today then say so. On the other hand we can save that for later or Briton and share something in the back-room of an inn at our expense."

John said "I'm sorry we seem to always be making demands on you. Decide this! Decide that! Decide the other!"

Tallya said "Don't worry boys. Our children are now all flown. Louis has enough for a comfortable retirement. It's good someone asks these questions. Louis told me about your offer of a place in the country to retire to. That would be lovely."

"But the trouble is" said Louis "we only know the docks. Neither of us have been more than ten miles from this spot. We know this place."

"All our family are close by. We don't need a big house and lots of servants."

James saw the flaw in this dream first. "Who will take over the business or will you have to carry it on all yourself Sir?"

There was a silence. "You have the big question. I don't know."

"Do you need to decide this week?" asked John.

"No."

"So shall we deal with today's matters? Where shall you meet the girls?"

Tallya suggested the back room of the Swan Inn. James immediately opened his purse and gave her two gold coins. "You know how to feast here but we don't. To be truthful with you, our girls are intrigued that I can find such good friends all on my own. My Maggie who I hope to marry was sad and happy when I told her about you."

At three o'clock the Swan saw the whole Black Team and uniformed guards arrive at the front while the Wernol clan complete with grandchildren and guards without shoes arrived at the rear. Rachel had instructed 'her' guards to make friends with the other watchers and gave them a few pence for ale to be shared amongst them. After last night Rachel's guards were not sure they wanted to see ale ever again.

Two families met and became friends. Al had been briefed not to talk diplomacy but if necessary baby-clothes. John and James didn't realise until afterwards that they were on show as examples of orphans from the docks who had struck-out and found success. After half an hour a messenger whispered to Louis who in turn called-over Maggie. When the password had been given she said "I will vouch for him Sir. It is Tomkit come to see you."

In a minute Tomkit dressed very badly as a castle guard was shown in. Rachel went up to him and explained in detail why dressed like that he was a disgrace to the castle. "Now our host is the nice Mister Louis Wernol. This is Tomkit who claims royal blood in his veins – But with a name like that who could be sure!" This gentle jesting launched the meeting onto a casual family footing. Tomkit wasn't used to official meetings without a clerk to guide him so he remembered Rachel's instruction and her insistence that this was important for them all and tried to appear casual and genuinely friendly. Everyone excused him for failing and credited him for trying. Another credit to the Black Team for dragging the King's son to a dockside inn.

Tomkit had hardly had time to thank Wernol for his help that morning when there was another interruption. Paulanne ran in and looked around at so many faces all looking at her."

Louis said "See the Black Team have you back."

John and James were not half as surprised as the others. James went straight to her and hugged her and kissed her. The room was silent. "Al! Come here! While you have been playing ambassadors this lady has missed you. You know what to do."

"Do I?"

"He's still sixteen Paulanne. Kids today! Come on Al!" At last Al managed to get within hugging distance but balked at the full deed. He looked round for help. He was revolted by this woman who had been stolen away to goodness-knows where. She was dirty and defiled by kidnapper's hands! She had no hold on him even though her arms were open and waiting for him. He was brave –so they said but it was like a glass wall had been put between them.

It was clear to many that there was something wrong. Rachel acted first followed by Maggie to give Paulanne every hug. Al would have run out of the room and thrown himself in the river or something if Tallya hadn't caught him.

"What's the matter Al?"

All he could do was breathe and mutter things in British that meant nothing to Tallya. Tallya soon had Maggie beside her but they'd got no real understanding of the problem. Maggie asked Tallya with a look but got a blank in exchange.

Tomkit broke the impasse. "Alefred. To me!"

"Yes Sir?"

"What's the problem?"

"She's – er – unclean in a horrible way Sir."

"Then you must bathe her! Go!"

Everyone looked at Tomkit in astonishment. King's sons were not supposed to have this sort of wisdom. In the corner Al and Paulanne cautiously touched hands then a few seconds later held hands in a cold quest for something promised once in a dream.

Tomkit said to Wernol "I owe you something for her return."

"Put it on account young man. I am truly honoured and happy to meet you. As you have shown your friends and enemies today how you are

strong and not to be crossed so I have done the same with getting the girl back."

"Yesterday I wouldn't have understood but now I know what you mean."

"What do I mean Sir?"

"A Bartonbry question! It's catching isn't it!" They smiled but Louis kept Tomkit's gaze. "You mean it isn't just winning but making others submit to show your strength."

"Correct. Fear that you can turn on anyone whenever you like. There are lion-men and dog-men. Welcome to the lions."

"The Black Team showed me how."

"And will you forget when they leave?"

"I may. They have a magic I can't believe in myself."

"If you'll see the poor people get fed then I will see you have a few more lessons in making your supporters work for your favour."

"You have a bargain Mister Wernol. Thank you."

"Thank you. When every man thinks he is his own master the dogs attack the sheep."

"Oh I see! The lions attack the dogs." Tomkit resolved to have a gold lion made as a necklace for Tallya. That would be a nice surprise and genuine gift between friends.

The next morning Tomkit commanded the nobles of fighting age lined up in the castle courtyard as if they were common soldiers and asked the captain of the castle guard to inspect them! Tomkit himself was properly dressed for business. He addressed them. "Men. We are going to war against the Church. I will have you and your men properly disciplined so we don't get any bloodbaths like they had in Briton. You have the whole Kingdom to deal with which means weeks in the saddle with your troops. You will use this month as a practise for more to come. I will be watching you closely and anyone who is a feeble leader will not be welcome in Arlesene again. If you're a feeble leader and know it then offer to help a stronger one. There are twenty six of you and I expect ten will be first class. We're going to war not games." Rachel's voice came in his head. "Any questions?"

"Why are we doing this?"

"Because I say so. I need the poor fed. I need the Church to be more obedient to my father and I need you to be good at getting things done."

"Any more questions?"

"What's the pay rate?"

"You'll be rewarded by results according to my decision."

"What if we don't go?"

"Good question. Did you all hear that men? You! Earl of Trouves what do you think?"

"Er – I Don't know Sir."

"Anyone know?" Silence. "I know and because I don't waste myself on dog-men it will be quick. Does anyone want to step forwards now to find out the details?" Silence. "Good! The reason you get the privileges of court is so we can all ride together in times of danger. If anyone thinks riding up to a monastery with twenty heavily armed troopers is dangerous then you should go back to your nursemaid."

Minda didn't know what to do about being sent out of the way by the Black Team to where she couldn't interfere. It was a lesson for her in how it feels to be manipulated by youngsters and now she realised how many others must have felt at being directed by her. Peeved to begin with but then proud that they knew what they were doing. She could hardly complain but she wished she was doing their dangerous dancing with Kings and assassins. Arlesene was not for her. The Black Team had obviously settled in well but she was fox in a hat shop. Well yes why not have a winter cadet school for Lanconians and Italians? It had to be a good investment. Every cadet was one less enemy and one more merchant to trade with and one more ambassador to tell the world about Bartonbry and one more safe bed for Briton cadets. She would set that going then leave.

Paulanne refused to say anything about her captivity except she hadn't been badly treated. I am sworn to secrecy. John and James knew Louis would tell them if he wanted to. They were sure he would know their curiosity and guess at the use they might put the intelligence to but the nearest John came to the subject was to ask Louis if there were people or places they should avoid. "No I've dealt with them."

"Thank you Sir."

"John you really are curious about Paulanne?"

"Yes Sir of course. I trust you to tell me what I need to know."

"That's a big responsibility for me."

"You're a big man. I will eagerly take all the details if you like and you know they would be secret but time and distance might loosen my tongue at the wrong moment."

"Amazing! You Britons are so open and yet so cautious."

"We call it discipline Sir. That reminds me Sir. The Duchess has agreed that there will be a cadet school this winter for Lanconians and I will come personally to collect your nominees. Aged fifteen or sixteen. Boys or girls. Clever. Here is gold to teach them some British. I guess three or four. You have seen us so you know something."

"But you wouldn't be anything without the girls."

"We'd be thieving servants to the upper classes." John paused. "Sir! Thank you! I've just seen it! We need a whole team of girls on their own. Some from here if you know of sauce, strength and brains together. I'm sure I will be back very soon to choose the best for Minda."

"You're welcome any time John. Tell me more about this magical Duchess."

"I can spend an evening telling you or you could walk arm in arm with her up and down the docks if you don't mind being seen with the most powerful woman in Briton."

"You're teasing me."

"No Sir. She's an orphan too. You'll have trouble stopping her being generous and forcing you to show you your family – Grandchildren and all."

"I am intrigued."

"She meets the King at noon so shall I bring her to outside the Swan at say three? Do not tell anyone but we will leave tonight."

"I know. You'll find your vessel has two extra passengers."

John thought carefully and quickly. "So you and Tallya will meet the Duchess then and not this afternoon."

"Yes."

"You realise we will travel many miles. I can vouch it is pleasant and nowhere near the edge of the earth but there are hills and smells and tiny villages. It will be strange."

"I think we'll be in safe hands. Until tonight."

"Until tonight."

Minda's meeting with the King was awkward because of Al as interpreter and because all they had to discuss was business. Al admitted they had made a shortlist at the games to start with. He suggested the best ambassador would be the Lanconian Ambassador in Melbun. Al would work with him as required to convince the nobles it was a good thing.

"Don't worry about that. I have learned from Tomkit. I will tell those on your shortlist what I expect. Tomkit – how do you invent these names! – Tomkit says you may have some from the docks."

"Yes Sir. I expect yesterday was strange for him. There are lords everywhere though you don't make them. Louis Wernol has a fearsome reputation. I've told Tomkit he needs the same fearsome reputation."

Minda was useless. There was nothing she could charm or attack or help with. "Al! Ask the King if he will help me rid the seas of pirates."

Al took dozens of words to pass on the simple question. "Yes. I explained you knew it was difficult as pirates came from other countries but impossible if Briton and Lanconia didn't work together."

"Good." She smiled at the King. "Tell him our Ambassadors will appoint an admiral for us both and I will see our half of the plan is done without fail."

He says "He understands fully but the sea is not a meadow to manoeuvre troops on. She is a wilful cat so be prepared for setbacks."

"Tell him thank you. I know nothing about it except the job must be done."

"The King says you're right. The job must be done by people willing to do it. He salutes you for being willing. He will match your efforts. You're a noble leader."

"Tell him thank you. He is quick to see his duty. I like that in a man."

When this last but was translated to him the King beckoned to Minda and put his arm round her waist and smiled. She responded but it was so difficult to pitch gestures just right without words.

Al used his petard to break the confusion. "Sir the Black Team would like to thank you and the Queen from their hearts. We are so lucky to have been able to give you a service."

"Tell the Duchess that her children are the best. Everyone wants one!" He smiled.

"Tell the King I am sorry I don't speak Lanconian. I must get back to welcome my King to my town. Next spring or summer I will have every house in Bartonbry ready to welcome himself and as many Lanconians as wish. It's the least I can do for his patience with my tearaways."

Al had got over his rejection of Paulanne as quickly and mysteriously as it arrived. Tomkit's command and Tallya's soft words buried it. Paulanne though found the shock growing as the smear smudged further rather than being washed away. Maggie and Rachel realised that being kidnapped must be horrible but could hardly ask Paulanne about it. What would Minda do? After a lot of discussion between Maggie and Rachel they decided actions were better than words. They asked Paulanne if she could cope with Al on his own for a few days to sort things out for themselves. Eventually she thought that was best but she was scared of every shadow so perhaps staying with the boat with all of them was the best thing. Safety in numbers.

When Maggie whispered her worries to John he quickly said "Boat! We'll have good soothers on board."

"But Rachel and me are not soothers."

"But I know another."

"Not Minda. She couldn't soothe a frozen lake. She tickles everything. Give her a toddler or a grown man and she'll have them chuckling but she's too strong for Paulanne."

"I know another. It's a secret woman. She will be a quiet guiding star shivering in the crystal cold of the night far away from home."

"When we're married I won't let you keep these secrets John."

"Ha ha! You lead us well my sweetest Maggie but I will have my own secrets."

"Men!"

"Women!"

"You're so secretive."

"You're so unreasonable."

The manufactured argument finished in smiles, hugs then hands and lips finding and sharing a hundred electric moments.

At midnight on the quayside ten boys held lanterns on poles five either side of the gangway. The Black Team and Minda's party appeared arrived and vanished on board in the space of a minute. Nothing happened for five minutes. The lamp-boys were still and it was clear that there was a drama about to happen. Two more lines of lamps arrived with Louis and Tallya walking arm in arm in the middle. They must have come no more than a hundred and fifty paces. They all understood the lesson. There were no shouted commands to cast off or push away as soon as Louis and Tallya had walked across the gangplank. There were only whispers as the lamps on the quay slipped back into the night. John introduced Minda to Louis and explained Paulanne's problem, as far as he understood it, to Tallya.

Maggie tried to find out from the captain who was in charge.

"We're going for twenty miles miss. After that who knows."

"Do you take orders from me?"

"No miss. I know you're to be trusted but for now Wernol says what happens."

"It's good to know we're in safe hands then. I'm going to sleep. If Louis goes to sleep then wake me up."

"I will ask him miss."

"No I will tell him." Maggie went to Louis and said directly. "I have been told you are commander. If you wish to sleep then please wake me up. Good night."

Al and Paulanne sat asleep on the deck propped up against each other and the mast.

They weren't the only couple on the deck. As cool summer's dawn came coyly then in a rush, Louis and Tallya were arm in arm enjoying many new thrills. The air was different! The rows of vines on the steep hillsides above the river. The winding curves of the river with boulders on the inside of bends and overhanging trees on the outside. It was magical – beyond their imaginations. They were so lucky to have each other. All this so close to Arlesene and yet a lifetime of ignorance. As the light began colouring-in the banks and hills behind them so their wonder grew and became more real. The wingbeats of a pair of swans flying past carried like whispers in this bowl of quiet. The rose then gold of the light was so clear now they were away from the smoke of Arlesene. As they watched the moon faded into the blue.

Historical note

When the Italian Ambassador is talking to Rachel he mentions a mercenary band called the 'White company'. This actually existed and was at one stage commanded by an Englishman John Hawkwood.

Future books

It is 15 months since I started Minda expecting it to be a single book. The key plot element of that, the thing that got me going, is looking further away all the time! The next book in the series is well on the way to completion. The Pope isn't happy with Minda and is on the war-path! Will anyone be able to snatch love and fulfilment from turbulent times?

