

‘Whose man is this?’

The impara’s voice did not echo in the ruin of the hearth-tent. The landward struts had fallen: his khans gathered seaward, beneath yet-hanging banners. There were bullet-holes in the cloth and they were pierced again now by sunlight; still it smelled of gunsmoke. Aman and the northmen stood further back, by the rent they had fled through that morning; it caught in the wind and that whole wall shuddered, precarious. The centre bole, where the man lay, did not move.

‘We do not know, sire.’

The Companions watched the dead outside; the corpses had been gathered, but for this one. Aman stepped closer, bent to see the man’s face; the scribe and witch-man followed.

The corpse’s mail was well-made: new and oiled, shining wetly, and in a style forty years outdated; the same the estoc at his thigh, and its scabbard of black-lacquered wood. He lay uneasy, propped by the sockets for two wing-frames, fixed to the bottom of his back-plate. The armour had served against the knives and blades; less so the pistol-shot, buried in the man’s upper breast and weeping thickly into the wolf-pelt across his shoulders. It had paled his face, which had not been given peace yet.

The impara knelt closer. ‘Two-Waters,’ he said. He ran the man’s sash between his fingers, the banner-markings. ‘Have you found Two-Waters-bey yet?’ He held the tassled end high, that the khans could see its colour, and what it boded.

The ataman-chief who had spoken before shook his head. ‘No,

sire. He is not among the killed; he may be hiding still.'

The imparā nodded. 'We have his singer. First riding, not my father's: he is too old.' The dead man's face was thatched with lines and scars; his hair was white and very thin. The imparā looked on it, then down to where the body's hand had fallen. The nails were cleaned, trimmed and painted; the palms had not held a sword in many years. Aman marked this, and the lettering on the inside of the wrist.

'Priest,' he called, and Leon moved closer. Trying not to look to the blood. 'These are your letters. Do you know this name?'

The white man glanced down, and went whiter. 'Yes, khan.' He folded his arms beneath their hanging sleeves; clenched them, where the imparā could not see.

He did not resist as his guard moved him aside and himself looked down. The witch-rider read the name and shook his head; held tighter to the straight-sword he carried, then pointed. 'That is not his scabbard.'

The imparā, still knelt, looked up at him uncomprehending. He sighed. 'I read your tongue, north-man; I do not speak it.' Then to Leon. 'What did he say?'

The priest pushed back the armoured man and knelt beside Aman. He took the sheathe in one hand and put it beside the sword. The scabbard was gently curved: they did not match.

'Another's, then.'

Leon nodded, and stood.

The imparā's head was bent still; he looked on the dead man's face. 'He did not flee with his khan.' A moment passed in silence, then he flicked a hand over to the assembly. 'Somebody write the ministry at Two-Waters; if they will speak. I would know what song it was that ended here.'

Leon bowed. 'I may do it, khan, if you will let me.'

The imparā turned up. His eye narrowed. 'You think to be here

for the reply? You plan a long embassy, north-man.'

The priest remained bent over. With a robed elbow he pointed to the slave-mark. 'His grace knew one of that house. He may want that I hear what is written.'

The impara shrugged and turned back around. He brought his face above the dead man's, and met his eyes. 'As you wish,' he said.

I am Khatan.

For the span of years I rode with the men of the north-land, and ate with them, and shared their tents; I made war on them, and with them, and among them, in great regret. This is what my eye has seen: I served the Impara in his greatest riding, I was at Arkay when the red-gate fell. I trod the long-war, and watched it end.

I was asked to sing the things I have learned, for my sight is fading and soon I will not know I learned them. I have no sons and no daughters, and I have wandered too much: I will go westward soon, and these words will be my soul as it remains here. May the spirits and the Father grant clarity and wisdom in this task, and may what I say be true.

*These words are written by the hand of Jannes, servant and friend of the great khan of Two-Waters, rider of the Khagan, beloved of the Skyfather; protector of the orders of the Long-Isle, Three-Mountained: all praise to him. For my part I have changed nothing of the content of this song, excepting only for clarity, brevity, and for the sake of beauty where needed.*

*It was presented to the khan and his family in the 5-and-13<sup>th</sup> year of the Great Father, in the 11<sup>th</sup> year of the Peace.*

These are the words of Khatan:

**F R E E D O M**

# 1

I was born before the war, in the land of the shores of the sweet-sea. My father was Gasai, my mother Henna; my khan was Altai, great-uncle of my father, who ruled the land between the Flooding and the sea.

The land had seasons wet and also dry, though even then the streams did not stop between the pasture, and there was water on the grass in the morning: our hooves drove it up, and it became the mist there. Though our camp was small, my father had many sheep and horses, and in the foaling season we took them past the stream and grazed them in my father's cousin's land also.

I had three brothers, who were older, and two sisters, who were younger. My brothers rode the land on the edges of our pasture, and took the watch-lands as their inheritance; my youngest sister was the favoured of my father, and she had the hearth-camp as hers. My elder sister died of wet-fever when she was young. Being of the middle-age I had no inheritance.

We were at peace then, and did not raid; some passed through in arms, and I played out that I was among them, with wings on my back. I had not yet held bronze or iron, and did not know what it meant to do so: I was young. We walked the sacred trails, from summer into winter and back again, and this was the rhythm of life; I did not wander from the path, and no spirit entered into me to do so, then.

My father loved me, and my mother, and they wanted heaven for

me; they showed to me the blue-sky when it came between the cloud and mist, and told me that that was my heaven, and he was my Father.

I believed their words, but it would not be so: I was given to anger, and was not in command of myself; I killed my eldest brother when at drink.

I was jealous then, my hands drawn tight in thoughts of horses and wives and lands I felt denied. It weighs on me; he did not deserve to die, and I robbed my mother of a child and my father of a rider and my khan of a spear in his host.

May his spirit fly seaward, and my sister's, and my mother and my father's, for by now they are surely dead. My khan banished me, and I could not cross the Flooding, or come again to the shore of that sea. I turned and went west, and I left that place behind; I sold myself to the khan of another land, riding north.

This was the seventeenth year of my life.

\* \* \*

We did not know the long-war then, and did not call it thus. We thought it something normal: peace, war, and peace again in time, in cycle; I did not know how it would have me, be with me and part of me for many years. How I would be a part of it.

Then, a boy, I did not care, for there was fighting in distant places, and I would go there; perhaps I would have gone still, even had I known all. There was so little behind for me; so much yet to find, and gain, and lose. I would have a clan again in time: it was my hope, my fear, and as prediction it was truth. I would; I would have many.

I had two horses, and a bow and a spear tipped with iron, and so I was placed in the first rank. It was many weeks before we came to foreign lands, and longer before we fought; we passed through places first familiar, remembered of my mother's words, for she was not of the Flooding. But I had not travelled, and soon I did not know these places: one morning I could speak their tongue, and in another it was

strange to me. Lying in tall grasses I saw the stars and bow change also, from patterns I would not see again.

In the north it is cool in summer, not hot, and there are few villages of the stone-people and camps where folk may tend their horses. It is old: there are more ruins and mound-places of the spirits, so we kept to close trails. They did not enter much into my thoughts then; to my mind the touch of iron and the heat of blood upon his chest had banished them from me, and I from them. I walked outside the sacred while others kept close, deep into the rocks and beds; and nothing evil came upon me then, I thought.

Half a season turned before an enemy came: chance is the mother of battle, and that is how it found us, in anger and for me much fear, for it was my first. This is how I remember it:

It is late-summer. We are coming into blue-heathered Kaldri and are crossing a river-valley; men who ride out in front come back and tell the khan that the enemy is on the other side of the hills, in a dry stream bed. The grass is low and grey-green, and it clings to the rocks and falls off when we walk across it.

We do not expect them. They are marching along the stones of the bed, and I did not know why then, for they could not see, for the bluff on either side, and could be pelted with rocks and arrows. Now I think they must have been going upstream to find water for their horses, and did not think men would find them in the low bed.

Desperation, the father.

They are shouting in our train to take the mules back into the next bed; they order us, the fighters, forward. I feared then, and folded my saddlecloth over to hide it. The khan and his men are behind in armour, and we are at the front, on the crest of the hill. We are all young; some try to turn about but cannot, for there are riders at our backs and on the hill and in the bed in front. The sky is above, white.

The enemy hear us shouting and put their spears around the horses and the wagon; they have handguns but no cannon, not drawn

in wain or by horse. The headman that the khan put over us tells us to string our arrows and shoot at them; we do, but no stone-men die for they are in armour and we are far away and up the hill.

I loose twelve arrows before the horn sounds; and worry, afraid I would have none left for fight. I say this, in a child's voice that shakes, and the woman beside me laughs. I look over to her, smiling.

The horn sounds, and the riders behind us strike their horses and keen and push us forward; brush cuts at my leg and the side of the horse. I feel the wet beneath: the blood and also shame. We are riding down the hill and across the flat of the bed and I am shooting, and I think I kill one but I am not sure; there are many rocks, and someone trips, I hear the sound. Dry snapping and wet scream.

It is noon, and their armour is shining white like the sun and I cannot look on it; they have their guns resting on staffs and axes and some do not have powder but wield them like clubs. There is quiet and quiet and the pounding of hooves: this is all. Many talk of the roar of battle, but none of the self-made silence. They fire, and break it; I have heard no louder sound than this.

I turn my face away and the horse rears but does not throw me; all is ash and smoke and earth thrown up, cut through by riders falling. I do not know where I am. I look over to the laughing woman, but her horse is dead and she is on the ground. There blood in her mouth. Her name was Henna, as my mother, but I did not know it then. Her spirit comes to me sometimes; I do not know why.

I stand there and do nothing, do not strike the horse; others ride past me, and a man clips my side with his lance and orders me on. The horn sounds again and we turn from the spears and shoot their flanks and the wagons. They do not know what to do; they cannot move the guns to shoot at us. Many drop them and flee and are pierced by arrows. We are meant to carry on and chase them, but I go back to the mules and our stone-men in the bed.

I wait there; I hear the khan-riders break their spears, and we take

many prisoners when they run and leave the oxen. I can still smell it all, gunsmoke and blood, and I do not go back over until it stops; the others find me, and I say my horse ran and I caught it. They do not question this, or the stain upon my cloth.

That was my first battle, though I fought for not much time and did not join the close-fighting or chase the rout afterwards. It has been too many years now, and I remember all.

We of the front rank were given the first of the loot after the khan and his men: I took a knife and kettle from the train, both of bronze and unmarked. It was the first I had seen my face not in the waters of our streams.

We fought for the rest of summer and autumn, meaning to go to the cities, but did not; I saw them only from far off, stacked like greater cairns. I think the khan had expected more to come, and he had no cannon to take the walls with; this is what they said in the camp.

When it became cold and wet the khan returned to his land, but there were many who did not; I among them, for I could not go south again. Nothing waited there. We lived off the cattle and raided as wolves do, eating raw. I think I liked this: it was freedom, and being chased from camp to village and back gave no time to think of where I was, or why.

And pack is family, when you too are a wolf.

One man was killed when we raided a village, but we took his body and made a pyre for him and his horse; we went back to that place after and made a pyre of it also, to please his spirit. I had so much anger, but still I wavered with the torch: another took it from me and cast it to the houses. I watched the shadows moving between the shutters as they burned.

By spring we had not much food, and people were complaining; we looked for another khan. There were none passing by that way though, for the dry summer makes no harvest, and few came from

the south in that year. We did not wish to go north into the mountains, for winter would be harsher, and nothing awaited east but hill and rocky streams.

So we went west, into the cities.

\* \* \*

I do not know if those who hear this will have been as I was, once: not knowing of the stone-lands and the people who lived there and the ways of them. If you were, then you will understand the strangeness I felt riding there; if not, then I cannot make you feel it.

And you are a stone-man, Jannes-scribe: I do not think my words can call up the fear of fettered skies for you; you know none any wider than this, where we sit with towers rising above, to hem us in.

*You do us both too little credit, Khatan: I think I feel this roof swaying already.*

We rode until the hills became flat, the streams wider and deeper, and the trails were not covered by grass. Stone-men in girded robes stopped tilling and looked to us; we went between the mounds that mark the field-boundaries and wore our horses hooves on flat stone pressed into the ground. We passed from the open, where the land is below only sky, and came to where men may own it; we came to where men may own other men, and those who looked on us were slaves. Some of the others spat on them, but I did not; perhaps it was foreboding. We set our tents in a rocky place.

I did not know the tongue of these people, but I went with those who did into their town; still I have not learned it, though I know the language of the north-men, which has many words the same. We camped far out and raised an empty quiver above our tent in peace. I do not know if they knew what we meant by it: the stone-people's tongues are different from our own, and so their eyes see things different also. We came beneath the shadow of the gate and entered.

Men looked at us, for we were as foes to them; we were in arms

and they were not. The stone-people and the north-men do not wear their knives or bows when at peace, and they do not fight when drunk. I thought this foolish then, for I had raided them and they ran and did not fight, clutching to the safety of the walls; now I am old, and I have spent time with them, and I think there is wisdom in their way, even if I may not always understand it: few die by bow or spear in the towns, or knife.

The Great Father says, 'Each path is root of what it flowers.'

In that city there was the smell of horses and that of people, and I covered my nose with the straw of my cloak; I thought that the stone-people and north-men must not bathe, to smell so, and must wear one coat all year. It is the stink of all cities, for there are too many people and no winds to take it from them: it falls heavy on the ground and this is why they are always ill there.

I saw the people lying in rags in the dirt and horse-shit; some were folk without clan or a father's name. They drew heavy on their pipes, and I turned my face from the mirror of their eyes, without direction.

We were young, and did not know the way of things: we rode straight through the town and to the walled-camp of the prince, high and looking out onto the lake-sea; standing as a khan armoured at the centre of the host, ringed by those younger and more poor, houses of wood and cracking stone. The road to it was tight, winding where these buildings had fallen. It was hard to move the horses through it, three abreast.

There were men at the gate. 'We are forty,' we said to them, 'and strong, and will sell ourselves to your ruler for a season.' Old men, grey, and the mail of their skirts trailed to the ground.

They laughed. I put my hand on my knife and wished answer for this, but my companion put his arm out and bade me not.

'Come now, friend: be well. It is you who said their eyes and tongues are different; give them time to understand.'

So I let my hand drop.

He was Oman: Golden, the Leopard. The one they sing of, or he would be, in time. He was my friend. The other with us was Dinan, older and bearded, who came with him also and could read and write in the stone-person-tongue; it was he who spoke to the men, in their words, bending his head low from the horse.

I do not know what he said. 'Very little in many words,' whispered Oman, laughing, but the guards did indeed point Dinan to the house where we needed be. They laughed still, as we walked there.

The men inside were queer to me: warriors who wore no mail, folk of the plain who gave no folk-sign; I tried to give it to them, but they said nothing, and waved us on. What is familiar is made strange, in strange places. Many people walked about, stone-men and our own and others, from lands I do not know; some in armour, some with great bows of wood, not horn. Some with faces painted black.

We came into a room filled with paper, stacked unto the ceiling. I was afraid: I had not yet been inside a house and could not see the sky or feel the wind. My hand was on my knife again; Oman put his fingers on my arm and held it, and whispered: 'Peace.'

There was a small man there, beneath the parchment-towers, and he had a binding with many words in it. Oman and Dinan walked to him, and said something in that tongue.

The man nodded his head and held out papers; he asked Oman to mark his name on it in ink. Writing is much-loved by the prince-men, to trap men's souls.

Oman did not know how to do write this, then, and wrote a crossed-sign instead; I myself have never learned. I might have wished, but it is too late now. For many things.

Oman did this and looked up, and he was smiling. 'Brothers,' he said, 'and father' – he ever called Dinan father, though they were not of blood – 'we are clan-family, now.'

I did not know how paper and ink could make a clan, but he was

wise in their ways. Now I have seen how such things may happen: the world has many wonders, and sorcery, and that which is done with writing is the least of all of these, in power if not evil.

We rode out to the camp and told the others; they cheered for Oman and we drank much milk that night. Few wished to go back into the wild and prey on people. Those who did, left. I did not envy them: it was good to have a prince-paymaster to ride for, I thought, and to be awash in loot; to have Oman, a khan to ride under, and behind, and to lead us on.

For he was a khan, now: the thought thrilled and troubled him. 'What have I done?' he had said, riding beneath the gatehouse and seeing the empty quiver hanging above our camp, the men – his men now – who sat beneath it. He had laughed. 'What have I started here?'

'You?' I clipped the ear of his horse. 'We are all at fault. We have all unleashed you on the world.'

In answer, he tossed my cloak above my head, in a haze of straw and curses.

'Look straight, khan,' Dinan said as we came upon the camp-ground. Beneath his beard he grinned: for all were stood, in lane, to welcome their new sire to his home.

I do not think I ever saw such brightness in Oman's eyes, or Dinan's; I think there was never such in mine again, as at the sight of the new company assembled. And quickly parted, as we fell to feasting and to boasts and drink.

One man said we should have a name and a banner for our clan; I pointed to the quiver on the lance.

'We shoot so many arrows,' I said, 'that our quivers are ever empty. Let them fear the peace-sign!'

Oman and the others laughed and said it was a good name. We sang it to the Father, and so we were the Empty Quiver and Oman was our khan. He had watched me through that evening: he crossed the hearth and took the lance from out the earth and gave it to me. I

was his bannerman, and we rode together for many years.

\* \* \*

In summer the prince sent us in front of his army, to warn him of danger. Some said this was boys' work, but I did not mind: it was easy and we did not fight often. Neither did we raid, for we were in the land of the prince's people, and we ate from the train with the others.

There were some who chafed at this also, and I was one, for it was all hard-bread and weak milk and no meat. Certainty and rote breed boredom in the young, even with hunger in the balance. The spearmen and gunners did not wish to sit with us, but there were many of the folk there, so we made camp with them when they ate, and we would talk of our homes, of where we rode towards and from.

There was not so much war in the lowlands and the cities then. We rode north to fight in the mountains, where the rivers are faster and make valleys not beds, and our restlessness was sated by clear air. Small towns of wood squatted by the banks, and many low ships passed down and through them, to reach the lake-sea.

We met women of the stone-people there, and took some with us when we rode; they much loved Oman. He carried himself as a ruler now, and those who joined the prince would bow to him instead, and think he led this thing; he would laugh at it, but I think in secret he liked the bowing, too. Even mine, done often in mockery.

It was nearing the end of riding-season when we fought another battle, this time with mountain people. They were of the folk, not stone-people, and rode high as we did, their faces picked in weird colours and ash; why we fought, I cannot say. I am not a khan, and such talk is not for me: not then, when treading the great round of war was enough, without direction. They called them rebels, so I will also.

We saw them throwing dust from afar, and once or twice I rode to see them with the fastest people, then fled when they gave chase; four hundred maybe, but it was hard to tell when some were behind

the hills, or moved single snake-like down the cliffside.

The prince put all the riders beneath a folk-man, aged and armour-bearing: he was Gokun, wise in battle, and he was from a distant place. Dinan took much liking to him for both had age, but in other ways were not alike: Gokun wrote no tongue, not ours, for he came from where the world runs out and they speak words that differ.

I heard them come together and talk of numbers, kept by Dinan in a scroll that counted days, and argue of how these bore on our riding, whether food was good or bad, our lot of horses good or bad; then get very drunk, and curse each other in tongues the other did not know.

I spoke with Gokun sometimes also. His face was heavy-picked in blue, painted dark, all lines about his eyes. Many lines; I asked him once what they meant and he said each was for one he killed. One line, one death, and longer for a rider and his horse.

I thought, then, that for a life so long there were not so many there.

‘Yes,’ he said. ‘That is right. You must choose well.’

It was a truth I did not know then.

He organised the cavalry and put us in the land-wing with the other archers, apart. He did not like the old way, where spear and bow are together, and the unarmoured sheathe the lancers before the final blow.

‘A khan preserves,’ he said. ‘He is the wing-shadow of his people. Doesn’t reckon their own blood as well-spilled.’

Where we fought that day was a broad place between two rivers, cut only by dark trees and the patches of farms. The prince was in a basin with his spears and his handguns and cannon; Gokun said this was to bait the enemy to come. Fires were made, so they would think we burned a village and ride to stop us. We would come down, secret, when they did and take them from behind; I heard his word as he said this, in the camp of the night before the battle.

I saw no problem with it then. Dinan spoke against, though not to the prince's face: 'This man is a fool,' he said to me later, as we looked down into the basin in the morning and watched the prince-men gather and pile the wood. He spat over his shoulder and we rode down.

The ground was rocky and uneven, the grass sparse, and we were careful not to catch the legs of the horses. There were houses here and there, and fields on the slopes cut out and bound by trees; we broke the fences and walls with axes and brought them to the prince's men, who made them also into stakes, others thrown into the fire. By the time that this was done it was later, afternoon. The foe-scouts had caught our fires and the battle was started:

The lip of the basin is fired and only in the light of their spears shining can we see the rebels riding to us, to the smoke. Gokun is in the right with the lancers, and we can see him from the slope; Oman is on left-wing, ataman of archers. I think I pray something to a war-spirit.

When the riders come to the basin they seem not so many; I am glad of this, but Dinan scowls. 'We cannot know that by sight alone,' he says to me.

We move back behind the ridge and are not seen; there is much smoke now, so I think if we cannot count them, then they cannot us, and this is our advantage. They come and follow the prince-men down the slope, slowing to cross between the fields and standing houses and the trees.

They are in the cannon range, and some handgun; their riders follow the slope back and around to avoid it. More bands come to the sides of the basin, keening, and they ride down even to the barricades. They go back and forth like this, shooting and being shot; eventually the riders waver and some grow angry and begin to charge and circle round the spears low in the basin. They break the fences we made, in the moments between the cannon-fire.

It is like wolves about a flock. I look up, and, couched in the smoke, there is a lance with a red cloth on it lifted: it is the sign to ride down. Oman calls out and I lift the Quiver high. We cry out ourselves, coming from behind the ridge; three hundred are in the basin now, maybe more.

Some dozen turn their horses about, but it is too late. We go between the broken fences and field-boundaries and houses and take them from behind. Their line is scattered, some here and some there, and they have no defence: many are killed by arrows and thrown spears, grey gunsmoke adding to the cannon- and that wood-burned.

By the sound of his strange horn, whining, we know Gokun has come down also with the lancers; in a broad field they find the rebel flank, and break it in two. Some try to run from him through the barricades and through us, or into the spears, and their horses are confused and trip on the stakes and the rocks; I see the spearmen go over to finish them on the ground. And I see our paymaster the prince shining plated, atop his horse.

Oman and Dinan ride close together at the front, the younger riding gaily like he had wings of his own; how did he look a khan, without mail? The laughing, I think, the flashing of white teeth.

He turns to me, still smiling. 'It is over,' he says. 'Well-won, well earned!' He claps his arm upon my shoulder and I hear the relief in his voice; I am glad also, for my arrows are spent and some of us are dead. We should never have been fighting close.

But there is another horn, and this is deep: there are riders on the crescent ridge, where we had been, some behind us and many behind Gokun and his lances. Hundreds.

Dinan curses. 'More,' he says, 'more.' Would that I had listened; would that the prince.

Oman turns in horror to behold what happens, and I do also: it is we who are confused, we who are trapped, not them. They come down and behind us and we are forced into battle again.

I had always been an archer, and my spear and knife had only bloodied animals; I was scared. It is loud, and the guns and horns and men crying are all around me. We do not know where to go, for the enemy is everywhere and there is no order or line.

Oman shouts war-words and calls us to ride with him to Gokun and the lancers; Dinan curses youth and follows, howling. They have swords, but I have only a spear; still I go and so do the rest, for they see the banner and hear his voice. It is chaos.

I am laying all about me, and striking men who have fallen from their horses. Some are in armour, you only see their eyes; some are like us with bows. Both cry out the same. Our own wing and Gokun's and the rebels are all confused, bodies lying in ditches and in hedges and earth-rows. Who can say who they killed: all look alike.

Oman slays many, I few, and we come between the spears and the enemy: we have made a path in the battle-sea and come to its centre. I had never thought the stone-people brave, for I had raided them and they had fled not fought, but the spearmen and fire-men stood with honour; they were bloodied, but their faces were grim and they did not fear the riders coming.

We go from there to the right, a close-packed knot of forty; we fight to where the lancers were before. And see them: they are few, closed up in a field, and we see the red banner surrounded by riders not our own. We see Gokun bite the necks of those who try to take the flag from him.

A foe grabs him by the shoulder and tries to drag him from the horse; Oman rides into the mass, alone, and slays this one before he can. I follow behind, and behind me the Quiver: we flow about the wounded men and force back the rebels with our spears. I do not know how; perhaps some spirit entered me, entered us, and turned aside the blades.

Gokun shouts something and he laughs, and he clasps hands with Oman and Dinan. 'You are the burning spear,' he says, 'you are

the blue one's host!

We surround him and his bannerman, who I think is dead lying over the saddle; Gokun has the lance in his own hand. I take the dead man's reins: we lead them through the enemy to others of the lancers, more, who are in bands fighting in the other parts of the basin.

Gokun comes high into the saddle. 'At me,' he shouts, 'at me!' And his voice echoes on the slopes and ridge-walls, as the inside of a drum. They come to him, red banner in red hand.

Armoured men ride past us and bow their heads; a ruddy-faced man, wild-bearded, puts his hand on my shoulder and says he owes a blood-debt to the Quiver now, to Oman and to me.

I do not know what to say to this. They go past and make a line; we see them charge, and force the enemy between them and the prince's men.

'Now we go,' Oman says. The smile is stretched thin, but it is still there when he meets my eyes. I see then, as I saw later, the counting and accounting in his head: his gaze flicks to all who died and marks their names upon his heart.

In this way the enemy were forced away and the battle ended, and we learned that on the landward side others had survived. Many did not; Dinan said it was the fault of the prince and his plan. He called it pride, and did not say that to any but Oman and Gokun and to me.

We were given first spoils, even before the prince's men: I took a sword and helm, and Oman had a lance and a pistol. Walking through the dead, picking from them, I found a man who looked my size and took his chain from him. We lost twelve of our number: they were put in a pyre and burned. It is a high place, there, and the smoke carried seaward; the carrion-birds found the bones.

This was the first battle of the Quiver, and it was then that we were famed for bravery. Oman found the rebel khan on the field and cut the tail from his horse; he told me to lower the banner and he

fixed it there.

He had not asked Gokun, ataman here and rightful taker.

But the old man envied not. 'Should I add all to mine,' he said, 'it'd be greater than the pines here and I should not carry it.' And anyway, he had burned his flag: with the man who died to save it.

I was first painted like him also then, by a man who rode in the train. It is an eagle and a quiver above my shoulder; I still have it now, though the ink is faded.

We rode with the prince and fought lesser battles, and we camped about some towns of the mountain people and sieged their houses and tents. When winter came we were discharged with honour and some people came to us and asked to join; in this way we grew in number and fame and went to find another prince.

\* \* \*

These were the blue-sky days of the Quiver, and of me also; sixteen years of riding and of war. We became many and wealthy, and we were often called by the princes and the khans. From forty came sixty, and from sixty came six hundred; some were still archers, and for this we were famed, and our banner was the quiver. Oman and I and the Forty, though, wore armour, and rode at the front of the host with sword and lance.

I had that suit of mail draped in silk and wolf-pelt, and some called me Wolf, who nips the herd and guides them into death, and I carried the banner on my back and in the holster.

We were once given a sum of gold in payment, and Oman took his share and had it melted and cast, a sheathe, about the banner-quiver. It sat atop the many horse-tails and shone when the sun hit it; for this some called us the Golden Quiver also, and this is the name that has entered in the songs. I preferred Empty, for it was the name I gave it, but it made no difference then: I did not see the change it bode.

We took much from the khans and the princes, and were cursed

by the stone-people and our own when we came. Many were the towns we raided, and when we passed through fields the men would give us gifts to spare themselves; Oman bid we take them, and we never burned a town that gave gifts, for we were men of honour then.

For sixteen summers we rode in war, and for sixteen winters we were at peace. It was not always easy, but our strength was great and our bonds of friendship; when each rider fell we notched the banner-pole, and all knew their name. We burned few in those days, and neither I nor Oman among them, for the favour of the spirits and the Father; in the heat of battle we were ever together, he in the van and I at his side, and our bravery won wars.

Some spoke of taking a city ourselves, or going south and taking the land of some clan and being khans, but Oman would not have it and I was glad of this. Better to be ever riding beneath the sky, khans of ourselves and ours and no other; I did not wish to go south again. When they flowed, money and wine did freely, and we wanted not while the war still went, when khans and princes and other peoples had need of our bow and lance. I do not dream often, but when I do it is of these days, of the men I knew and battles won; of myself and my khan, riding on the storm.

...but I get ahead of myself. That would all come, but I have no wish to speak of it yet. This is how it was soon after: