

Darkburn

Book 2

Winter

Tayin Machrie

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Chapter 1

“There are five of us now,” said Charo. He tried to smile at the woman because he was terribly afraid that she would climb on her horse and ride away. There was nothing here for her to stay for. Everything was in ashes: his house, his family, his friends, his whole world.

Sometimes, at night, it seemed as though the town and its inhabitants were still burning. But when he awoke, shivering on the hard unsympathetic ground, Obandiro was stark and silent. The ashes had been slowly cooling for a week now; although the fires, he thought, must still seethe unseen in a few smoking buildings, where sudden small collapses now and then occurred like mocking forgeries of life.

Charo had nothing left to stay for either. But he had nowhere else to go. And then there were the others: the responsibility for them weighed heavy on him. Now he suddenly hoped this woman wouldn't turn out to be a useless deadweight, another burden on his shoulders. If that were the case then maybe it would be better after all if she just rode away.

She was looking up and down the street again, taking everything in. Her face was familiar so he must have seen her in the market before the... Before. But he had never spoken to her.

When she looked back at him her gaze was no longer stunned. It was intense and focused.

“Where do you sleep?”

“We found a cellar,” Charo said. “I'll show you.” Now he didn't know what he wanted. She would make up her own mind anyway.

So he led her down the Cross-street, the elegant horse following them, to the ruins of the inn. The yard was blocked by the remains of a burnt-out cart. Charo stepped over it and past the grey approximations that might once have been the innkeeper and an ostler or a guest. If he had cared to search what was left of the bodies he supposed he might find some identifying badge or buckle. But he had not cared to search the bodies. Whoever they were, it could make no difference now.

The inn had neither door nor roof. Within its walls of sooty flaking stone, the counter and the furnishings were turned to shapeless stumps of charcoal. Two pewter tankards lay amidst the ashes on the flagstoned floor, melted and distorted.

As the woman entered after him, Charo picked up the branch of fir which he had walked half a mile to find and brushed away their footprints in the courtyard. In the street it didn't matter, because the ash was so well-trodden anyway by the feet of the men who had done this. But it was important to leave no new trail of footprints leading into here.

He had told the others to stay down in the cellar while he went out in a vain search for some vessel to hold water. All they had was one warped tankard. So many things they needed, and he didn't know how to find any of them.

The trapdoor to the cellar was behind what once had been the bar: the rusted hoops of barrels lay across it. The barrels, spilling out their beer, had probably saved the trapdoor from being completely burnt away. Its wood was blackened but intact.

Charo lifted the concealing hoops aside. Beneath them the trapdoor was already propped slightly ajar, to allow air in.

"It's me," he said into the opening, and saw the small yellow pool of a lamp being unshielded. He let himself down the ladder into the cellar and the woman followed, a little clumsily.

Only two of the other three were there. They were already on their feet and staring at the descending woman in something close to fear: certainly not delight.

"That's Elket," he said, pointing at the older of the pair. "She's fifteen, the same as me. That's her brother Dil. He's nine. And this is..." He paused. He had forgotten the woman's name. The other two were like statues in the lamplight.

"I'm Yaret Thuleikand," said the woman. "I'm the grand-daughter of the old weaver Ilo, from the farmhouse on the forest road. I've just returned from travelling. My farm is burnt out, no survivors, everything the same as here. I am very glad to find you." Her voice was low but matter-of-fact. Charo was glad she wasn't crying, because they had done enough of that and it really didn't help.

The others seemed stricken dumb.

"Where is your fourth?" asked the woman, and finally Elket answered.

"She's gone out."

"She's not supposed to," said Charo, exasperated.

"I couldn't stop her," said Elket. "How could I stop her? You know what she's like. She said she was going to look for eggs."

"Eggs? Where does she think she's going to find eggs?"

"She said near the chicken huts," said Dil. "She said some of them might have escaped and be roosting nearby."

"She's mad," said Charo. "I wish she wouldn't do this."

The woman sat down on the nearest barrel and glanced around. There were plenty of beer barrels inside the spacious cellar, although not much else. It was high enough for them to stand up in. The roof beams had been protected from the fire by the flagstones laid above.

There had been three hams hanging from the beams, but they had eaten all except the second half of one. There were still two big rounds of cheese – they had finished off the other two – and a sack of red roots in the corner. None of them liked red roots, which were pungent and stained everything they touched, but Charo supposed they would have to start eating them soon. They had been a popular fried snack in the inn, before.

Before. Everything was before. There was a huge burning line dividing then and now. It separated him from everything that he had known, everything normal. The days passed mostly blank and numb and the burning line with his family on the far side of it didn't seem to get any further away. The separation just got deeper. More uncrossable. More permanent.

He tried not to think about it. He had quickly learned that it was better to concentrate only on the present, not the past or future. He didn't often succeed.

But the cellar had been safe till now. It had been a giver of gifts. As well as the food, there were several large jars of lamp-oil, and three lamps. There was beer in some of the barrels, but he had no intention of letting anybody drink it. Luckily none of them showed any wish to.

"What's the name of your fourth?" asked Yaret.

"Shuli," answered Elket.

"How old is she?"

"Twelve."

“She’s not,” put in Dil. “She’s says she’s twelve but she’s really only eleven and ten and a half months.”

“How long has she been out?”

“About an hour,” said Elket.

Yaret nodded. “I walked all through the town and saw nobody,” she said. “She’s good at keeping hidden. I expect she’s safe enough. Has anybody else been through Obandiro since this happened?”

Charo answered reluctantly. “The men who did this.” He did not know what to call them, but gestured at his hair. “Men with... things on their head. They’ve been back twice since the, since the first time. The last time they came through was five days ago.”

“Stonemen,” she said. “I know them. How many were there, do you think?”

“When it, when it, when it happened, there might have been about two hundred, I suppose. Maybe more. I don’t really know.”

“What about when they came back?”

“We were all in the cellar so we only heard them,” Elket said. “I think they came into the inn but they didn’t find the trapdoor. They tramped around outside a lot.”

“The second time they came back while I was out,” said Charo, “looking for food. I heard them coming. They weren’t quiet. There were only about ten of them and they walked up and down the streets and then they went away.”

“Searching for survivors,” said Yaret. “Or people who might have escaped and returned later. You have had none of those yet, I suppose?”

“They’re still waiting till it’s safe,” said Dil. Charo winced. He knew that Dil had hopes and didn’t want to squash them. But he had to be realistic.

“No one else has come back yet,” he said. He thought the four of them were the town’s only survivors, but he had never said it aloud. Although his voice had broken last year the words made it crack as if it were breaking all over again.

“Well, I have come back now,” said Yaret. “One more question, and then you may start asking me your questions instead. When they returned, did the stonemen bring with them any darkburns? They are the hot, burnt creatures that—”

“We know what they are,” he said, before she could start describing what they did. “No. We didn’t see any. Not since that first, that first time.”

“Good. Now: your turn.”

Charo didn’t have as many questions as he had expected. He knew she was a travelling pedlar, but it didn’t really make much difference where she had been and for how long, and he didn’t really care. He asked who had lived with her – and had died – at her farmhouse. The only other thing he could think of to ask was,

“Is that your horse outside?” It didn’t look like a weaver’s horse.

“You’ve got a horse?” asked Dil eagerly.

“It was given to me,” said Yaret.

“Who by?”

“Friends, far away. It’s a long story.”

“Can you ride it?” Dil demanded.

“I can.”

“Good,” said Dil, and he then asked a much more useful question than any that Charo had thought of. “Is there food at your farmhouse?”

At that, Yaret smiled.

“Oh, yes,” she answered. “Quite a lot of food. There is a cellar nearly as big as this one, with oats and flour and roots and apples and cheese, all safe and unburnt.”

“They’re not red roots, are they?” said Dil.

“No. They’re yellow ones and sweetroots.”

“Hurray!” Dil cheered. And then the trapdoor lifted and Shuli’s surprised face looked down at them.

“There’s a horse outside,” she said.

“And there’s a strange person inside,” said Yaret. “What if we all go out, and find somewhere to sit where we can see each other properly, and talk for a while?”

So they all climbed out of the cellar. Yaret again seemed slightly clumsy – of course, she was an adult, so not nimble – but when she walked over to her horse he noticed that she had a limp.

“I saw you near the Dondel bridge,” said Shuli.

“And I did not see you.” Yaret introduced herself to Shuli, and asked, “Did you find any eggs?”

Shuli uncurled her hand. There was a small brown egg inside it.

“They’re roosting on the other side of the orchard,” she said. “Some of them, anyway.”

“Well discovered,” Yaret said.

“I think so,” said Shuli, and she put the egg down carefully just inside the ruined gateway to the inn.

“We’ll go to the burial ground,” said Charo, because he felt he ought to be in charge, and wanted to get a suggestion in before Shuli did. “We can sit down there and talk, away from the, away from the town.” He meant away from the bodies.

“Can I take the horse?” asked Dil, and Yaret let him hold the bridle. Elket said nothing as she led the way. Shuli walked at the back, probably so that she could watch the woman. She was nosy about everything. Charo did not know where she found the energy.

The new woman was nosy too, or at least, she was looking hard at the bodies in the streets. She need not have bothered because none of them were recognisable. He suspected that there were many more that were not even recognisable as bodies, but had been devoured entirely by the fire. He said nothing about them, and neither did she. Dil was the only one who talked, pointing out buildings as if they were still there and Yaret was a casual visitor to town. The joiner’s yard, the fletcher’s shop. There was nothing left of them. Yaret merely nodded.

But the burial ground, outside the southern edge of town, was relatively untouched by fire. The memorial stones and the paved paths between them were blackened, and some of the stones had fallen – or had been pushed over – but that was all. They could sit on the curved stone bench in the middle, in the remembrance circle, and look at each other. They had seen each other so little in daylight for the last few days that Charo was shocked at how grubby and tired and thin the others looked.

“A good choice of place,” said Yaret, and unstrapping one of her saddlebags she began to hand food and a waterskin around. The biscuit was slightly gritty and the cheese stronger than he was used to, while the dried fruit was of a kind unknown to him; but it was all very welcome.

“Have you come across much food apart from what is in your cellar?” Yaret asked.

He shook his head. It was a worry although personally he really didn’t mind much if he starved to death. Except that it might not be a pleasant way to die. And it wouldn’t be fair on the others.

“And the cellar is also where you sleep?”

He nodded.

“A hard bed,” she commented.

Charo shrugged. It was another thing that didn’t really matter, given what had happened to Obandiro. He hoped she wouldn’t start asking them about that dreadful night. She was bound to want to know.

Thankfully she did not ask, but merely looked around her as she ate her biscuit, until she said,

“Is this where you hold evening council?” Although she addressed nobody in particular Charo answered.

“No, we have it in the cellar.”

“We did,” said Shuli, “to start with, but then we stopped.”

“That was your fault,” said Dil.

“It was boring,” Shuli said.

“We stopped,” said Charo, “because there seemed to be not much to say.”

Yaret nodded, her eyes moving thoughtfully from one to another of them in turn. Then she wrapped up the uneaten end of her biscuit.

“Although it is not quite evening,” she said, “I wonder if you would consent to hold the evening council here, now. I for one feel badly in need of it.”

“I suppose so,” said Charo. He glanced at Shuli. She was the person most likely to make trouble.

“I pray you all to attend this one time,” said Yaret, “because it is important to me.”

“All right,” said Shuli. “I don’t mind.”

“Very well. We will start with Oveyn, for all those who lie around us.”

She began the incantation and the others joined in. Charo felt it was meaningless. He had stopped saying Oveyn because it was not adequate for what had happened. Nothing was. None the less he now felt a certain relief in hearing Yaret speak the familiar words.

Then he realised that she was saying a longer version than he knew, and it gave him a shock. It did not only offer thanks and honour to the dead but spoke of them as standing by the shoulders of the living. It spoke of them becoming one with earth or trees or skies, as was ordained by powers beyond thought. He knew that this was Ulthared and it made his scalp tingle.

Yaret finished, touching her hand to her forehead, and studied their faces. Even Shuli was looking faintly stunned.

“I have said the last part which is Ulthared,” said Yaret quietly, “although you younger ones in particular would not normally be made acquainted with it for some years to come. But there is no-one now to tell you the Ulthared lore except myself. So I think I have to impart some of it early. Not all. And of course I do not know it all myself.”

They were silent for a moment. Then Dil said in an awed voice,

“Can you say it again?”

“Tomorrow evening,” answered Yaret. “Now it is time for news, if you are willing. But for my part I feel that anyone unwilling does not need to speak. Do you agree?”

Since she was asking rather than commanding them to agree, Charo said, “Just for this evening, maybe. But I think it’s important that everyone joins in or there’s no point.”

“Elket never says anything,” said Shuli.

“I have heard Elket speak,” said Yaret mildly, “so perhaps *seldom* would be more accurate.”

“I’ll go first,” said Dil. “It’s always youngest first.” Yaret turned on him a long, thoughtful look and said nothing. To Charo’s astonishment Dil began to squirm.

“Please may I go first,” he said.

“Please do,” said Yaret.

“My news is that somebody arrived today, and we don’t know yet what she is like, but she did bring some food and she has more in her own cellar and we hope that she is good.”

“Shuli next,” said Charo.

“The hens are roosting behind the orchard. I think they’ve settled there. I found an egg.”

“Elket.”

“Somebody arrived,” said Elket, and left it at that.

“Now you,” said Dil to him.

"I think you summed it up, Dil," he said. "Somebody arrived. Thank you for the food. We hope you will not go just yet."

"I will not go just yet," she said.

"Your turn," said Dil.

Yaret did not speak immediately. Then she said quietly, "You know my news. It was your news two weeks ago. It is that everything has changed. And everything will keep on changing; and not always for the worse."

"That wasn't news," objected Shuli.

"Forgive me."

"Now best thing," said Dil. "Can I do best thing first?" Charo realised that Dil had been missing evening council. Perhaps he had been wrong to let it drop.

"Go on," he said. "Best thing today." It was really meant to be Thanks-saying, but they were following the simplified children's version of evening council for Dil's sake.

Dil beamed. "We've got a horse! I mean, it's nice to have you here too, but we've got a horse!"

"He likes horses," explained Elket.

"She's called Poda," said Yaret, "and really she should be rubbed down properly before nightfall. She's worked hard these last few days."

"Can I rub her down?"

"Anyone who wishes can," said Yaret. "She'll enjoy that. I have a brush in my pack."

"Then that'll be my best thing ever today," announced Dil. He sounded even younger than usual. To Charo it seemed that Dil did not fully grasp the catastrophe that had come upon them. Sometimes he appeared to just ignore it; although at nine he should have better sense. But Elket protected him, perhaps too much.

"Shuli's turn for best thing," he said.

"I found an egg," said Shuli. "Elket's turn."

"We have the promise of more food," said Elket, "in the cellar at your weaving place."

Now Yaret looked at him. He knew what the obvious thing to say was. Of course her arrival ought to be the best thing of the day. But everything was so confusing. He did not know what she would want to do with them or what might happen. In one way she had upset everything.

"Your coming here," he said, because he had to.

"I hope it will be," Yaret answered gravely, "but you cannot know that yet."

He nodded and bit his lip.

"My turn," said Yaret.

"It's finding us," said Dil.

"Yes, it is. I don't know how you four come to be here, and you don't need to tell me now. Tell me later if you wish. But I am very glad to find you."

She looked at Charo, so he said, "Now. Plans for tomorrow. Dil?"

"I want to ride the horse," said Dil. "Please."

"Find more eggs," said Shuli.

"Find more food," said Elket. "Not just eggs. Anything."

Charo took a deep breath. "Work out what we're going to do," he said, because it now seemed slightly more possible than it had been before.

"Those are all good aims," said Yaret, "and since my brain seems to be rather slow at present I think I should just fall in with all of them. So tomorrow morning, if you are willing, I will take Dil and Elket and the horse back to my farm, and load up with provisions there and bring them back. If Shuli wishes for help in hunting eggs I will do that on our return."

"I don't need any help," said Shuli.

Yaret bowed her head in acknowledgement. “And then,” she went on, “at tomorrow’s evening council, we can start to work out what we’re going to do.”

Chapter 2

Dil was in ecstasy.

He had never been atop a horse so fine, so grand, so high-stepping. He had hardly been on any horse at all apart from the miller's old dray horse; and Poda was completely different. Charo had said that Poda looked like a nobleman's horse and Dil was ready to agree.

Last night he had rubbed her down diligently and today her coat gleamed like a ripe conker. He bobbed in the saddle and was not entirely comfortable, but he was very happy.

Elket and the new person walked alongside. Dil knew she was a woman in male mode but sometimes he forgot. He forgot her name too. Yaret. That was it. She was most important to him as the owner of the horse.

He didn't understand how a weaver could own such a good horse, however. That was something to be explained later on that evening, after the council, when Yaret had promised to tell them the story of her travels. She was going to explain her leg as well. He had nearby collapsed in amazement last night, in the cellar before bedtime, when she had said,

"Ah, just to warn you. This one's wooden," and had pulled her own foot off. Pulled it right off! And then passed it over for him to look at! He rehearsed the story to tell his friend Armendo and then remembered that Armendo was not there. At that, the panic began to grip him and it made him grip the horse in turn until she grew restless.

"What is it, Dil?" said Yaret, who was walking beside him.

"Elket," he said. "Do you think Armendo is still hiding in the woods?"

"It's possible," said Elket. "You never know. He might be."

"How long would he have to hide before it's safe to come out?"

"A bit longer, perhaps," said Elket. "Until those men, you know, have really gone away."

"The stonemen," said Dil soberly, his joy at the horse all dissipated. He shouldn't have thought about Armendo. But how could he just forget him? He missed Armendo and it made him ache in the middle of his chest.

And he missed Ma and Da almost as much, Ma anyway, although they seemed to be already further away somehow – Ma especially. He had cried lots those first few days, hoping Ma would reappear and comfort him; but really he knew that she wouldn't. He thought he had already got used to her not really being there, because she had been so busy with the baby for so long. And the baby had been so ill. It might have died anyway, even if. Even if. If. Not.

Go away, he said silently, go away, go away, and although he was not quite sure who he meant they did go away after a few minutes and left him sitting on the proudly-stepping horse and with a farmhouse just coming into sight. It was burnt, of course, all the houses were, but as they entered through the non-existent gate he found the ashen shapes on the ground quite easy to ignore. He and Charo agreed that they weren't people any longer.

"Are they still people?" he challenged Yaret, ready to put her right if she said yes.

"Not like us," said Yaret. "I think not. No."

"I keep thinking that we ought to bury them," said Elket.

"Again," said Yaret, "I think not. Not just yet, at any rate. It would be a huge and difficult job and it isn't really necessary as far as hygiene goes. Also the disturbance to the ground would be quite obvious."

"To those stonemen," said Dil. "If they come back again."

"Yes. At the moment, undisturbed as they are, those – those effigies that were once bodies – they protect us. They make the town seem uninhabited, untouched. We might regard them as our guardians."

Dil looked at the blackened shape nearest the house and at once his perception of it changed. It was now a guardian, a burnt and almost magical thing. It seemed to have acquired a different sense of life.

“Guardians,” he said. “That’s what they are.”

“At present guarding our food,” said Yaret. She helped him climb down off Poda, which he found he was quite glad to do after all.

“Ouch,” he said.

“It’ll take you a while to get used to riding so far. You’ll have to walk back home anyway, because Poda will be carrying a lot of weight.”

That sounded encouraging. And when they entered the burnt farmhouse and descended the ladder to the cellar he saw that there was plenty of food here. Elket stood next to him and just sighed, a great sigh of relief. It was the same way Ma used to sigh after Da had gone out for the day. But that was before...

No. No. Go away.

It went away quite easily this time, because there was so much to look at and discuss and do. What to take first? A bit of everything, they decided, so long as they could carry it. Oats, flour, apples. Dil found a bag of dried peas but Yaret told him to leave those where they were.

“We might need them in the spring,” she said. Dil didn’t understand why peas would be important in the spring and not now, but before he could ask Yaret, she picked up a sack of oats and gave a cry of pleasure at what lay underneath.

“Ah! Excellent,” she said. “These will be useful.”

Dil ran over to see what she’d found. It seemed to be only a pile of old empty sacks and some folded cloth. Yaret unfolded it. It was a long woollen piece, rather blotchy and mildewed. She sniffed it.

“Hmm,” she said. “But we can wash it and use it as a blanket. The winter weather will come soon. Do you get cold at night?”

“No,” said Dil.

“A bit,” said Elket, and he remembered that Elket had given him her cloak. It made him feel slightly guilty but not much because she didn’t have to.

“We can stuff some of the sacks with heather or dry grass,” said Yaret, “or even bedstraw, if we can find any, to make ourselves more comfortable at night.” Dil had been quite comfortable at night. But then Elket had told him he could fall asleep anywhere. She said he could fall asleep on the blade of a knife.

There were no knives or anything so useful down in the cellar. There were some candles and soap, however, which Yaret took. They loaded apples into one of the sacks and carried the cloth and everything else back up the ladder to the horse. Yaret filled the saddle-bags until they bulged and threw a sack of oats over the saddle. When Poda tried to reach round for it with her nose, Yaret smiled and then looked sad.

“My donkeys used to like oats,” she said.

Dil did not want to ask about the donkeys because he assumed they were now black sticks inside one of the burnt sheds. But she went on,

“I had two donkeys. One of them went lame by the river Thore and I had to leave them both behind. So they’re probably very happy running free up there, with the wild donkeys for company.”

He breathed more easily again. “What are they called?”

“Dolm and Nuolo.”

Elket said, “By the river Thore? Isn’t that an awfully long way away?”

“It is.”

“Will the donkeys be in your story tonight?” asked Dil.

“Oh, yes. They play quite an important part. And so does Poda, and another horse called Narba.” Yaret was staring at the sheds but he had the feeling she was looking at something much more distant. Charo did that too sometimes.

He was suddenly quite glad that Yaret was here. Charo was all right but he wasn't yet a man. Yaret wasn't a man either but she was half-way; and she was nearly twice Charo's age, she said. It meant that she seemed to know a lot of things. And she was very calm.

“Before we go,” she said, “let's look around for anything else that we can salvage. I'm thinking about anything metal and tools in particular.”

So they divided up the farm buildings between them and had a rummage in the ash. Dil knew that he was getting very dirty, and he had no other clothing to change into, but neither had anybody else so it didn't matter.

He found a spade without a handle, and a garden fork with one prong melted like a worm but the others still proudly straight.

“Good,” said Yaret. “Those could be very useful. We'll leave them in the kitchen here for now.”

Elket had found in one outhouse a jug – not metal but pottery, with only one thin crack – a metal carding comb, and a whole bunch of iron spikes lying by a wall.

“They were for fencing posts,” said Yaret. “Again, let's leave most of the spikes here. They're heavy. We'll just take a couple with us.”

She washed the jug at the little spring and they all drank from it. The water tasted good. There was a spring behind the inn but the water from it tasted smoky and bitter. Charo said it would improve.

“And I found more cloth,” said Yaret. She seemed to think that cloth was important. It was probably because she was a weaver. “It was in the dye-baths. They must have almost boiled dry; but the cloth seems to be all right, just a bit shrunken. I've rinsed it and put it in the cloth-shed to dry out. We'll take it back next time.”

He liked the sound of that. “Next time, can I ride the horse again?”

“It might be someone else's turn. Like Shuli's. Does she ride?”

“I don't know,” said Dil. “I didn't really know her much before.”

“She lived with an aunt and uncle just outside the north edge of town,” said Elket. “She said she woke up when the moonlight fell on her face through the window and then she heard people marching past and smelt a smell and had a strange feeling, so she climbed out of the window and went to see what was happening. And when she saw what was happening she ran away.”

Dil knew that this account was not entirely true, because there had been no moon that night. He thought Shuli had probably been up to no good, but there was no point saying that, and in any case it seemed like telling tales.

Yaret paused. “So they came at night?” she asked.

“Before dawn,” said Elket. “It was still dark. My mother woke us up – she was awake every night with the baby – and she pulled us out of bed and told us to run. I only had time to grab some clothes and then she pushed me out of the door and just said ‘Look after Dil.’ We're on the west-side so we ran straight out across the field towards the woods. There was fire to our left. We could smell – the smell – and we felt – so – so weird and shaky that after a bit we couldn't move and we had to sort of sit down. Nobody saw us in the field. We were invisible. But we could see fires starting up all over the place and they spread so fast and burnt so high, so high you wouldn't believe, and then there was a lot of shouting and everything was just burning, burning everywhere. And then as soon as we could move again we ran into the woods.”

Dil listened. This was the most that he had heard his sister speak since it had happened. He knew that she was missing a lot out. They had seen more than that – people on fire – those

men running after them with swords, black against the roaring orange dazzle of the flames – the one that – the ones – Go away, go away, go away, go away. It wouldn't go. He ran over to the horse and began to stroke her frantically, making sure she wasn't scared. He didn't want her to be scared.

"It's all gone now," he said to her. "It's all gone." And eventually it was. The horse was warm and quiet and solid and didn't seem to be so scared any more.

Yaret and Elket were still talking, in low voices, but he didn't want to listen to them. So he stayed to stroke the horse until Yaret came over with an apple and some biscuit and they ate that before they set out home. He gave the horse half of his apple because she was such a good horse.

As they left Yaret turned to look back at the farmyard, and nodded. She had already brushed the ash across the kitchen floor with a piece of bushy shrub she'd found somewhere, so that no footprints were visible. Now she did the same in the farmyard.

"We do that at the inn," said Dil. "It was Elket's idea."

"And I am copying it, because it's a sensible idea," said Yaret. She smiled at Elket, who said nothing now, as if she'd done all her talking in one go.

He didn't mind the walk back home. Some of the woods were still nice and not burnt at all although they smelt of smoke. Dead leaves crackled underfoot the way they were supposed to. There was a squirrel and a jay.

"Nuts!" he said eagerly. "Cobnuts! Look, look!" There was only one hazel-tree with nuts and the squirrels had already had a share, but he could still fill both his pockets until they were knobbly. The others filled the jug.

Closer to the town they passed many of the no-longer-human shapes, but now that Dil knew who they were he didn't mind them. They were the Guardians. He felt that they approved of the day's work. It was very pleasant to arrive back at the inn and show the food and everything else to Shuli and Charo. He felt triumphant, as though he had saved everyone. A bit, anyway.

"I found a few cobnuts too," said Charo, "but not as many as you, Dil." He looked at Yaret. "And I did what you suggested." He held open the small bag which she had given him that morning. "You were right; there were still quite a lot of beans beyond the south-side in someone's garden."

She peered into the bag. "Good. These we will keep in a cool, dark corner of the cellar, for sowing in the spring."

Now Dil thought he understood about the peas. They were for sowing too. But that worried him. It meant that they would still be here to sow the peas in spring. It meant that they would still be here to pick the plants in summer. It meant that there would be nobody else to do it for them, and maybe no other food. He felt himself start to go tight as the aching gripped his chest again.

Yaret looked at him. "Just in case," she said. "Because I think there will be many other stores of food to find, and other people to join up with. But it is always good to be prepared for everything you can."

"All right."

After that it got better again. Shuli arrived not with eggs but amazingly with a whole chicken.

"A fox had just got it," she said. "I chased it away. Can we cook it?"

Charo pulled a doubtful face. "I don't know. I'm worried about smoke. We haven't tried making a fire yet," he told Yaret.

"I can understand that. And it has not been too cold. But now is perhaps a good time to try a fire, while the weather is dry and the whole town is still smoking slightly. At least it

appeared to be from a distance. There are probably embers still smouldering in places, so any smoke you make will be disguised.”

“We’ll need dry wood,” said Shuli. “Cutting down trees won’t work. They’ll smoke like mad.”

“Perhaps around the edges of the town,” suggested Yaret, “would be the best place to look, where wood stores may be partly burnt but not entirely.”

She looked at Charo, who said decisively, “In that case, we’ll all go out again now, to look for dry wood, so that we can cook the chicken. Bring back all that you can carry.”

“We can store it in the outhouse,” Shuli said. “It still has nearly all the tiles on the roof. I climbed up to check.” Dil wished he had done that.

But he was allowed to go with Yaret and the horse, although he did not ride it. Shuli went with them this time. Shuli said they ought to try the forge because it used so much wood for fuel. Dil thought it would all have been burnt, but she said there was a wood store by the stream, and sure enough there was. Fire had caught its edges but it had not burnt entirely.

They filled the sacks they’d brought. Now he understood why the sacks were important. Sacks and peas. Yaret loaded up the horse. He noticed that she was watching Shuli. Yet she asked no questions, until she said, “Anywhere else?”

Shuli thought. “Holvet’s farm,” she said. “He must have had a wood store. He was a pig-farmer and kept a smokehouse.”

“We should check that for hams,” said Yaret.

“I already did. There aren’t any. The smokehouse is gone now.”

“Pity. Still, we’ve done well here. We’ll save Holvet’s farm for next time.”

“I’ll take a proper look tomorrow,” Shuli said.

Dil led the horse home. She obeyed him every step and stopped when he stopped. He thought he might already love the horse. Yaret didn’t seem to mind; she was still watching Shuli, who was looking around at everything. But they didn’t talk much.

Back near the inn Charo had found a place to build a fire. It was actually a real fireplace in the house two down from the inn. You couldn’t see it until you were right inside the ruined house, but Charo had cleared the cavity and the ashpit. There was still a bit of chimney over it although it went nowhere.

So they built a fire and put the chicken over it, spitted on one of the fence spikes they’d brought back from the weaver’s. They shoved some of Yaret’s roots into the embers and she added some of the red roots from the inn although they all protested.

“I like them,” said Yaret, laughing.

“Then you can eat them all,” said Shuli, “and leave the proper ones for us.”

When they went outside to check, there was hardly any smoke, not enough to matter. They ate the chicken with their fingers. It was tough but very tasty.

“Tomorrow I will look for wintergreens,” said Yaret. Dil opened his mouth to protest that he didn’t care for wintergreens, before closing it again. He hadn’t believed Elket when she told him wintergreens were important, but if Yaret said it then it might be true.

After the chicken they left the roots to continue cooking in the embers and walked down to the burial ground for council. He had so many things ready to say that they were almost bursting from his mouth. But he had to wait.

Yaret said Oveyn, as before, the Ulthared version which made them all listen almost without breathing. Dil thought it might take him another few goes to remember because it was quite long, and strange, but he decided that it sounded comforting even though he didn’t understand it. Then Yaret sat back while they had the council. Charo led it although he was not the oldest any more.

All the news and best things tonight were obvious, of course: food, horse, wood, chicken. Dil surprised himself by adding the Guardians, and then Elket had to explain. Yaret said

almost nothing which was strange because she was the oldest. But this time she was quieter than Elket until the plans for tomorrow were discussed.

“We haven’t decided yet what we’re going to do,” objected Shuli. “I mean are we going to stay here or not?” Not staying here had not even occurred to Dil. It alarmed him.

“Where would we go?” he said.

“That is too big a decision to make all at once,” said Yaret. “There are several possibilities.” She waited but when nobody else spoke she went on. “We can stay here in the town, obviously. I think there will be more food and tools to be foraged from cellars and storerooms. It’s just that they are all buried in ash, but we can dig them out. There will be outlying gardens and fields still left untouched. There will be sheep out on the hills if we can catch them. I saw deer spoor in the woods so if they return there will be hunting.” Dil hadn’t seen the spoor and felt put out.

“What with?” demanded Shuli.

“My bow. We can make more bows. How many of you can shoot?”

“I can,” said Charo and Elket together.

“Sort of,” added Elket.

“I want to learn,” said Shuli.

“You’ll need a smaller bow than mine,” said Yaret, “but if we can make one I can teach you.”

“Me too,” said Dil, although he wasn’t sure.

“Not until you’re ten,” said Yaret gravely. That was a long way off; further than he could see at the moment. He was only just nine now. At first he hadn’t been sure that any future would happen. Everything seemed to have stopped. But Yaret was now talking about the future as something assured.

“As long as the stonemen don’t come back I think we could successfully winter in Obandiro,” she said. “Alternatively we could all move to my grandparents’ house; the cellar is big enough, but it is more isolated, and higher up, so it gets more snow. Or we could travel to another town – Byant is the closest – before the winter sets in, and see what the situation is there.”

There was a silence. “Do you think it will be the same as here?” asked Elket.

“We have no way of knowing until we go to see,” said Yaret. “I didn’t come through Byant. On my way from Coba the villages were untouched. But Coba is more than a week away, and things may have changed there too by now.”

“I don’t want to leave,” said Dil. “What if Armendo comes back and there’s nobody here? What will he do?”

Shuli seemed about to say something. Then she stopped. Then she started again, and said, “You know, he has a point. There might just be more people out there. Travellers, like you.”

Yaret nodded. “I think, for another week at least, we establish ourselves here,” she said. “If the stonemen don’t return then I will ride out to Byant and see how things stand there. The days are shortening fast but if I go within the next fortnight I could be there and back before nightfall.”

“Don’t go yet,” said Dil, suddenly afraid of losing her, and the horse.

“No, I won’t go yet. Tomorrow’s plans?”

They all made suggestions. It was decided that they should look for more firewood, and for more places to store it. Yaret suggested that Shuli should scout for wood and she would go to collect it on the horse.

The others would explore houses, starting on the Cross-street, methodically looking for cellars and storerooms or anything useful hidden underneath the ash. Yaret said that anything metal would be good. Knives, pots, needles, hammers, spoons. And if they found a cellar,

they should check not just for food, but for pottery, candles, clothing, anything that they could use.

Charo said he would search the forge and after a moment's hesitation, she nodded. Any building they went inside, she said, they needed to carefully remove any fresh-looking footprints afterwards.

"At present our tracks are not obvious on the streets," she said, "but we need to keep an eye on that too. And just in case we see anyone approach the town, stonemen or anybody else, we should agree a plan of action and a signal."

The plan of action they agreed was basically to hide; and later to meet up at one of four places on the perimeter of the town – the inn, the mill, the Northgate or the Dondel Bridge, whichever was furthest from the danger.

The signal was more difficult to decide. Yaret suggested that they all try bird calls, so they sat there hooting and whistling and squawking until Dil was in a fit of giggles. They fixed on owl because they could all do a shrill "week, week" quite convincingly. It wasn't very loud but it was better than nothing. He pointed out that owls sometimes called during the day, so an owl call wouldn't sound too strange, but not very often, so there shouldn't be many false alarms. And everyone agreed.

Dil felt quite happy by the end of council. There were plenty of interesting things to do and many of them used the horse. Charo had thought of lots of things before, but now that Yaret had arrived it was clear that there were things he hadn't thought of. Dil hoped that Charo didn't mind.

So on the walk back to the cellar he told Charo,

"I think you and Yaret both make really good leaders."

"Thank you," said Charo, sounding surprised. "But you know the whole point of the council is that we don't have leaders."

"I know. But all the same." Dil felt quite glad that he was only nine and didn't have to be responsible for anyone else. But he could still be leader of the horse.

Back at the inn he was allowed to brush the horse down and then Elket made him wash himself, and had a moan about his dirty clothes. Since it was starting to get dark and the roots were cooked, they took them down to eat by lamplight in the cellar. Yaret picked some large stones out of the fire and wrapped them in sacks and took them down into the cellar too. When she unwrapped them and piled them up on the earth floor it was almost like having a little fire to sit near. But not a dangerous one. They ate the roots and listened as she began to tell her story.

It was going to be a long story, she said, and would take many nights to tell. It started with her grandparents and the two donkeys. Dolm was the male, the stubborn bold tough noisy one, and Nuolo was quiet and clever but also stubborn.

The donkeys and Yaret marched quickly through various towns and markets on their way to the first important bit. Which was a burnt-out farmhouse, and he seemed to stand inside it with her and feel the wind blow through. But it was all right because she had already made it clear that everybody got away in the carts, and took the horses with them, although she didn't know where they had gone. But they were safe and it was also very far away and felt safer for that reason too.

He liked the story being so far away. It made it more of a story and less real. Next she was somewhere that she called the loft, where there might be lions, and then all of a sudden there was a horse galloping out of the forest, with no rider.

"My horse!" he cried, and Yaret looked at him and smiled.

"Our horse," she said. "And I'll stop there, and go on with the story tomorrow evening."

Dil didn't want to wait till tomorrow but then they had some singing and Yaret led them in a round. He was good at singing and didn't lose his place once. When they began to get ready

for bed he realised he was very tired. It had been a much busier day than usual. The roots filled his stomach and the story filled his head quite nicely. He gathered it was going to be a rather scary story but so far he hadn't had to tell any of it to go away.

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