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S.A. Rule



Shaihen Heritage: Book I

Cloak of Magic
by S.A. Rule

Prologue.

In Shehaios, you do not believe in the Spirit.

It is.

For a Shaihen to say, "I do not believe in the Spirit" is for a man to stand in front of a tree and say, "I do not believe in this tree". It will make little difference when it falls on his head.

The Spirit of Shehaios dwells in the soil of the land. It breathes the soft moist breath of the creatures who live there. It flies on the wings of the birds and insects who breed and feed there. It flourishes in the flowers of the Shaihen flora. It lives, sometimes, in the hearts of the men and women who call themselves Shaihen and writes its name on the works of the best of them.

Part I

Introduction

They had come over the top of the world. Through the waste of snow and ice, across the barriers of golden rock that lay between Caiivor and Shehaios, they had forged their way in search of plunder.

The land that was so hard to reach was mythically rich. Game teemed there and crops grew in abundance. No-one went hungry in Shehaios. It had been worth the journey.

Twenty strong, the band of tall, battle-hardened raiders looked down on a small cluster of buildings made of the local yellow stone. A small, hairy cow stood chewing the cud in the lee of the low farmhouse, sheltering from the keen wind that whipped across the hillside. Two pigs rooted in a patch of trampled earth enclosed by a drystone wall. There was no sign of the human inhabitants except for the smoke drifting from the peak of the turf roof.

The warriors' leader, a burly man with streaks of grey in his tangled mane of golden hair, drew his sword. He raised his painted face to the gods and let out a bellow of primeval violence. His followers echoed him as they charged down the hill onto the unsuspecting farmstead.

A mile away up on the hillside, a thick-coated, wolf-like dog pricked up his ears at the distant sound. He raised his head, scenting the air. His mate, watching him, did likewise, and got to her feet. Their master looked round at the movement.

"What's the matter with those dogs?"

His brother finished checking the latest of the new arrivals to the flock before he answered.

"Maybe a bear about?" he suggested.

Both dogs were up now, and the bitch was whining and pacing. She and her mate were there to protect the flock from predators, but this was not her normal reaction. Their master caught their uneasiness. His gaze tracked her questing nose, towards the ridge that obscured the view of his homestead.

"There's something wrong. Something wrong at the Holding," he said uncertainly.

"There'll be something wrong with our stock if we leave these new-borns here undefended," returned his brother shortly.

"Stay here with the dogs. I won't be long."

With a sharp reprimand to the dogs who tried to follow him, he scrambled up the low peak beside them, and stood regaining his breath as he looked down on his farm.

He looked for some moments before he could comprehend what he saw. There were figures swarming around the farmstead. Big men, clad in furs. He saw the light flash from sword blades. He saw figures dragged from the buildings; small, struggling figures, hopelessly outmatched by their captors. He saw the blades cut, and slash, swing and fall again. All in the distance, beyond his reach, like some nightmare.

He staggered back, horror stealing his strength and his balance. He half fell back down the hillside running as he had never run in his life.

"Attack!" he gasped as he passed his brother and the dogs.

"What - ?"

"We're under attack!"

With a curse, his brother ran after him, the dogs loping ahead. They knew as they ran that there was nothing two men armed with knives and sheepdogs could do. These were raiders from beyond the edge of the world, and tales of their butchery preceded them across the mountains. The farmers of the Shaihen hills had thought they were safe. They had thought the mountains would protect them, and the fearsome raiders would never come.

But come they had.

Chapter 1: Twelve Stones

Darkness was no hindrance to the rodent. It scavenged by night, its mind tracking the world around it through its long, sensitive nose and its highly tuned network of whiskers.

The young man lying comfortably beside his campfire, high in the mountains above the foraging rat, noted the conflicting information reaching its senses as it paused to interpret what they were telling it.

Its myopic eyes saw a shoulder of rock reflecting the night sky overhead. Its whiskers warned it of something living, a meat-eater, an enemy. Its memory recognised the dilemma, and decided there was no danger. The big creature was not hunting. Not interested.

The rat scurried underneath the scaled foreleg and picked at the rank remains of the sleeping dragon's last meal, which were lying beside its head.

Not having any desire to cultivate a taste for rotting meat, the man drew back from his communion with the small scavenger, and briefly scanned the thoughts of the sleeping dragon. It was, as the rat had already ascertained, deep in a blissful stupor, its mind sated with contented dreams of easy and plentiful meat.

Content with his reconnoitre, Kierce turned his full attention back to the spread of painted pebbles laid on the ground beside him. He knew the rat was right. Until the dragon's stomach began to send a complaint to its brain, it would remain happily oblivious to the world around it. Dragons were not ambitious creatures.

Neither was his opponent.

Kierce gave a grunt of satisfaction as his companion cautiously placed three more stones on the grid marked out in the dust beside them. The firelight flickered on a picture of a sword, a crown, and a rock; truth, authority and strength. Exactly the stones he would have expected the heir to Arhaios Holding and future Chief of Oreath to play.

"Pay attention, Caras!"

Kierce laid a single stone in the centre of the grid, and lay back with a triumphant smirk. It bore the figure of a man, the piece in the game that turned the value of all the others on their heads.

Caras cursed in exasperation.

"When did you get to be this good, Kierce? I used to be able to beat you at least one time in three."

"Practice," replied Kierce. He scooped up the twelve stones from the ground and tipped them into a leather pouch. "I practice winning."

"You cheat," grumbled Caras.

"Against you? Never."

Kierce grinned. He knew very well that Caras still couldn't tell when he was lying and when he was joking.

Caras got to his feet and stacked more wood onto the fire.

"Well, my mind wasn't on the game."

"Any other excuses? Could it just be that the heir to Arhaios is a crap twelve-stones player?"

Caras shot him a baleful look.

"If you mean I spend less time playing it than you, then I'm guilty. Idle sod."

"Much underrated, idleness. You should go in for it more yourself, Caras."

Kierce stretched contentedly on the ground by the fire and pulled the thick furs over his shoulders against the chill of the spring night. He watched the play of the flames in front of him, letting his mind drift. No predators at all to pit his wits against tonight. He didn't need to cheat. Caras was risibly predictable.

His gaze shifted to the friend he had grown up with, ridden the fields and forests of Shehaios with, wrestled and vied with throughout their childhood. They were the same age almost to the day, but Caras looked older. It was partly his hair, which had turned a uniform iron grey almost overnight when his parents died a few years back. It was also the worried frown that was beginning to carve a habitual furrow on his broad, blunt face.

Kierce knew what worried him at the moment. They had both been present when the minstrel brought the message to the Holding, the two youngest among the elders gathered to hear the news from the Palace. The announcement of the King's marriage did come as something of a shock, but Kierce still felt Caras was taking the responsibility of his position too seriously.

Just how difficult could it be to take part in a wedding feast?

Kierce rolled onto his back and stared up at the vast original of the faint and distorted map of stars and scudding cloud the rat had seen reflected in the dragon's skin. The title which gave Kierce ti' Gaeroch the right to sit among the elders of the Holding sat more lightly on his shoulders. Since the day four years ago when his father came out second best from an argument with a bear, Kierce was Arhaios's Horsemaster, responsible for the supply and training of the Holding's transport and power supply – the horses for which Oreath province was famous.

He had inherited his father's title earlier than he anticipated, but he had never expected anything else. His mother had died before he was a year old, and from his earliest memories he had lived his father's life, out on the hills and grasslands west of Arhaios among the herds of wild horses, watching and learning their language. When he brought them back to Arhaios, Shaihens trekked for days to barter for them.

Kierce enjoyed his life, and the company of the other creatures who shared the life of the Fair Land. He also liked to make the most of the limited time he spent among his own kind.

He began to contemplate a new calculation. They were three days out of Arhaios; they could reach the Haven in another ten. But it would not be unreasonable to take three weeks on this journey. Possibly more. Another eighteen nights, at least; eighteen Holdings, eighteen warm and hospitable welcomes for the future Lord of Oreath and his companion.

Or ten days camped out in the Shaihen mountains, watching for wildcat and bear. Not to mention the occasional dragon.

He thought it was an adult female. Asleep, certainly, but it may not stay that way.

He looked across at his stolid companion frowning into the fire, the lurid light deepening the strong lines of his face and teasing subtle echoes of its own fierce colours from the day's growth of beard on his chin.

"I think you're making me work unreasonably hard, Caras. Why are we sleeping out here tonight when there's a Holding a few miles north we could have got to before dusk? I could have played against someone capable of giving me a decent game. We could have found... all sorts of entertainment. It's not often I get to see the beauties of our more distant Holdings." He grinned, leaving Caras to interpret "beauties" in whatever way he chose.

"It took us out of our way," said Caras. "I want to get to the Haven. I want to know what's behind this announcement of Rainur's. It makes no sense to me."

"I thought that's why you wanted to visit as many Holdings as you could on the way. Find out what they think here on the borders." Kierce paused reflectively. "Not that they seem to be doing much thinking. They're losing stock to Caiivorian raiders, they've seen hunters who are not Shaihen hunters. But they still think the mountains will protect them. Their strategy makes about as much sense as your twelve-stones tactics, Caras. I suspect you can trust Rainur to be more subtle, at least."

“But now of all times, when we’ve got Caiivorians raiding our borders as never before, why has Rainur decided to *marry* one?”

Kierce thought he definitely could detect a subtle stirring in the dragon’s dreams.

He dropped his voice into a passable imitation of Brynnen the Minstrel’s sonorous tones.

“The great eagle brought tales of the peerless beauty of the Princess Cathva from far across the mountains. The King heard the tales, and could know no peace until he had seen such beauty for himself. So he journeyed to the fabled Imperial City – .” He broke off and looked up. “How much do you want about the fabled Imperial City?”

Caras just threw him an exasperated glance.

“Quite right. Let’s get on with the voluptuous beauties of the Princess. Like the sun rising upon the mountains was the face of the Princess Cathva to the King – .” He frowned. “Her face. Why does the man look at her face?”

Caras smiled grudgingly.

“It does go on to mention breasts like golden fruit, I think.”

“Ripe and perfect, no blemish on her skin. Breasts are all very well. Legs lead in a much more interesting direction. Did he mention her legs - ?”

“It’s not a partnership between a man and a woman, it’s an alliance with the Caiivorians,” Caras cut in impatiently. “You know it is.”

“You mean you’ve got me to come on this journey on false pretences? The fair Princess Cathva is not more beautiful than the morning sun - ?”

“By all accounts she is, but it wouldn’t really matter if she had a face like the rear end of a dragon. She’s a daughter of the Imperial family.”

“And there you have it, Caras,” said Kierce with a yawn. “He’s not marrying a Caiivorian, he’s marrying the Caiivorian Emperor’s daughter. There’s a difference.”

“She’s still not of the Spirit. She’s still a Caiivorian.”

Kierce sighed. Caras would not stop gnawing this bone. The image teased him as he let Caras’s troubled thoughts ripple over his own mind without touching him.

There was something very dog-like about Caras. It always made him smile. He liked dogs. But he didn’t want to be pack leader himself. The weight of responsibility Caras felt resting on his shoulders made Kierce shudder.

He knew very well the real reason they were not enjoying the hospitality of a Holding tonight.

“And you might still be good company,” he said lazily. “On the other hand, you might be just the heir to Arhaios.”

Caras scowled at him.

“Time we got some sleep,” he said, abruptly. “We’ve a long way to go yet.”

Kierce paused, still contemplating the night sky. *Further than you think, Caras.*

Caras thought he already lived in the land of the Spirit; the Fair Land, the Whole Land, the Home of the Free. Kierce could see what went on inside peoples’ heads.

“Your duty is to go there, Caras. There’s nothing to stop you enjoying yourself on the way.”

“That’s very easy for you to say,” retorted Caras. “Since you don’t give a damn.”

“I can give a damn without having to worry at it every minute of the day. Worry about it when we reach the Haven. It might look different by then.”

“Yes, well. I’m not sure we agree what enjoying ourselves involves, these days, anyway.”

“Not sure we ever did.” Kierce grinned at his companion. “Stop being such a pompous ass, Caras. Tomorrow we stop at a Holding, agreed?”

“Not if you’re going to abuse their hospitality.”

“I don’t abuse anyone’s hospitality. I haven’t fought anyone, I haven’t insulted anyone, and if I’ve cheated anyone they haven’t found out before we left.”

“You know perfectly well what I mean.”

“No idea what you’re talking about. Fair Elani not satisfying you, Caras?”

“My marriage to Elani is fine,” snapped Caras. “It’s an arrangement you should try.”

Kierce looked mildly surprised.

“Well, I’m always happy to oblige a friend, and you know how much I’ve always admired Elani – .”

“I was referring to marriage. Partnership. Something that lasts longer than one night.”

“A fine institution,” said Kierce. “You are without doubt a fine institution, Caras.”

“Go to sleep,” muttered Caras, throwing his furs over himself in disgust.

Kierce smiled. Tomorrow, he would need to determine exactly how close that dragon was. The need to mate was the only desire other than food that could awaken her, and one appetite was much like another to a creature with no imagination. A hungry dragon was a dangerous dragon.

Chapter 2: Encounter with a Dragon

The life of the heir to Arhaios Holding was not a pampered one. Arhaios was a prosperous farming community in the northern foothills of the Shaihen mountains, and had been so for many generations. Its origins were buried somewhere deep in its soil. Its Holder, Caras's grandmother, managed the distribution of its wealth amongst her community; she did not appropriate an undue measure of it to herself and her family.

Nevertheless, Caras ti' Leath was used to the luxury of a roof over his head.

He awoke on a hillside scoured by driving rain to find himself alone. The covers beneath which Kierce had slept were stowed under a rock in a wrapping of oiled cloth. Caras wrung out his own sodden blanket and packed it away disconsolately. Sometimes, it almost seemed as if Kierce could do it on purpose.

He had not chosen Kierce for this journey out of sentiment for their boyhood friendship. The fur that protected Kierce from the cold was proof of his invincibility in this wilderness that was his home for so much of the year. It came from the bear that had taken his father's life.

The tale of how he achieved it was different every time he told it. There were those cynics who put his achievement down to sheer luck - the bear's carcass bore distinct signs of a wolf-kill.

Caras knew Kierce well enough to know the two truths could co-exist. It was a wolf-kill and it was Kierce's kill. Kierce not only understood the creatures he lived among, he seemed able to speak back to them. He used some to help him hunt others, he used their senses to warn him of danger, to alert him to potential food, the presence of water or a treacherous patch of ground. Or a change in the weather.

Caras had grown up with Kierce; he never thought to wonder how he did it. All Shaihens had some such skills, and though it was generally acknowledged that Kierce was in a class of his own, better even than his father, Caras was used to him being quicker and smarter than he was. That was just Kierce. Who else would he ask to guard him from the dangers he would encounter on the mountain route to the King's residence in the Haven?

The Horsemaster returned, clutching a handful of small eggs, while Caras was coaxing life back into the fire.

"Breakfast."

"Thanks." Caras took the proffered eggs. "You might have woken me."

Kierce shrugged.

"Awake and wet, asleep and wet, what's the difference?" He glanced across at the two horses huddled grumpily, tail to wind, just below their camp. "The horses agree with me. Precious little shelter and sod all to eat up here."

Caras scowled, and set a pot of water on the fire to boil. He watched it moodily, conscious of the clinging dampness of his garments.

Kierce was right. They would be better to travel lower down, over easier ground, and rest themselves and their horses overnight at local Holdings.

But it was only this journey that had made Caras realise just how much distance there was between the boy who had discovered the world around Arhaios with him and the man he had become. Caras was not at all sure he liked the man Kierce had become. Not in the company

of other human beings, at any rate. Though he had to admit that there never were any upsets or arguments, Kierce always won the games of chance and the girls always smiled at him.

Always smiled at him. Caras couldn't understand the attraction. He would not have described Kierce as a handsome man. He conceded the possibility that the mobile face and the dark eyes full of humour held some appeal, but the Horsemaster was small and slight, hardly what Caras imagined a woman would look for in her perfect man. Unlike the tall, muscular heir to Arhaios.

It was possible his disapproval was less outraged morality and more sheer jealousy.

Without any discussion of the matter, they descended to the high pasture just above the tree line to continue their journey. The rain cleared as the day progressed, and by afternoon they were riding through spring sunshine, the green of the new year's grass sparkling beneath their horses' hooves. Caras's mood improved with the weather. They had crossed out of their own region of Oreath into neighbouring Mervecc, and if they kept up a steady pace they should be at the Haven within ten days. The air was sharp and clear after the rain, the hillside jewelled with flowers and dotted with the sheep of the mountain Holdings. An occasional hare bolted at their approach. The Fair Land stretched away around them.

Kierce was riding ahead as usual, his heavy travelling cloak disguising his shape so that horse and man looked more than ever like one dark creature moving across the bright hillside. Caras felt the sudden hesitance in his own horse's pace at the same moment Kierce checked and cautioned to Caras to do the same.

Caras gave him a questioning look, and Kierce pointed towards a tooth-edged rock a few paces ahead of them, lying among a heap of other rocks beside the path they were following. A long, low finger of it stretched out in front of Kierce's horse. Caras frowned at it, and gradually began to see that it was not a rock. It was the same texture and pale gold colour as a rock, but it was in fact a twelve-foot long somnolent dragon. The obstacle in Kierce's path was its tail.

Kierce dismounted and climbed across the boulders scattered around the dragon. Caras watched anxiously. It was notoriously hard to awaken a Shaihen dragon, but Caras would still have preferred to put some distance between himself and the monster. He couldn't tell when it might feel peckish.

Kierce crouched down beside the two-foot long jaw and slid his hand beneath the dragon's head.

"Kierce..." began Caras.

"Come here," said Kierce. "I'll show you something." He smiled at Caras's hesitance. "It's quite safe. I'll warn you if she's about to wake up."

Caras reluctantly left his horse and approached the dragon. As he got closer, he saw that Kierce held a sac of soft, swollen tissue suspended beneath the dragon's throat.

"Now, if you were a male dragon, the scent held in here would drive you mad with desire." Kierce glanced at Caras and grimaced. "Even you, Caras. From the state of this one, she's going to send a wake-up call to every male dragon in about a ten-mile area the minute she stirs. They only do it once about every five years, but unfortunately..."

"This one's five years old?"

"More like fifty, but you get my point. I don't think we really want an army of sexually aroused dragons following us, do we?"

"When's she likely to stir?" asked Caras in alarm.

"Can't tell for sure. Could be another couple of hours, could be a day or more. Either way - ." Kierce drew a small earthenware bottle from a pocket hung at his belt, and squeezed the dragon's scent glands carefully over it. A glutinous secretion dropped slowly into the bottle.

"Isn't that going to wake her?" Caras enquired tentatively.

"Let me concentrate, Caras," said Kierce carefully. "If I spill this, I'll have every male dragon for ten miles in amorous pursuit of me."

When his task was completed, he moved slowly away from the dragon. He picked up a handful of wet mud from a nearby puddle and packed it into the neck of the bottle before driving the stopper home.

"That should do it. Shall we go before she wakes up?"

They remounted, and continued their journey. A mile or two further on, however, the horses began to show signs of agitation. Kierce uttered a mild expletive.

"What?" queried Caras, with an uncomfortable feeling that he knew. Sleeping dragons were something of a joke. Wakeful ones were a very different matter, and the scent of the two men and their horses was undoubtedly still fresh in this one's nose. Dragons were not fast or cunning hunters, but they were persistent. They only gave up if they came across some carrion on the way which was sufficient for their purposes. Other predators seldom argued with a dragon.

"She's woken up," Kierce confirmed. "I knew she wasn't far off, but I was hoping we'd have a bit longer than this."

"Is it just her? Or does she have suitors - ?"

"Just her." Kierce sent his horse into a canter. "I think."

"You think - !" exclaimed Caras, following him.

Kierce only laughed.

Caras looked back across his shoulder. He couldn't see anything. He allowed his horse to stretch out across the mountain turf, catching up with Kierce.

"How do you know it's the dragon?"

"Can't you smell it?" replied Kierce with a grimace. "The horses can!"

Caras threw him a startled look as the sleek form of Kierce's black stallion shot suddenly away from him.

"Enjoy the journey!" yelled Kierce.

Suddenly, the savage need to match Kierce surged over all other considerations. Caras drove his horse forwards, leaning low on its neck. The whipping mane tangled in his hands; he breathed air filled with warm, pungent sweat. He felt the power ripple through the horse's body as it strained to catch up with its companion, and he was back in his youth, following Kierce's skills and intuition, revelling in the ride into a world that, compared to Kierce, he only half understood.

He was almost level.

"Tired of this yet?" Kierce shouted.

"My horse soon will be."

Kierce flung him a disparaging glance.

"Too much weight to carry on his back."

Nevertheless, he checked the pace a little, racing alongside Caras. They could only outrun the dragon for as long as the horses could keep running. Not long, at this pace.

"What are we going to do?" asked Caras. "You ever fought a dragon?"

"No," replied Kierce cheerfully. "Don't think I'd recommend it. Let's try inviting it to dinner."

He turned downhill towards the dark line of trees below. Both the sure-footed Arhaien horses took the broken ground in their stride, and they reached the forest with Caras barely a head behind Kierce. Once they plunged into the tangled gloom of greenery, however, Caras had lost the contest. Kierce continued at barely diminished speed, twisting and ducking beneath branches as if he ran on his own feet and threaded his own body through the crowding trees. After one salutary whack in the face, which almost unhorsed him, Caras took it somewhat more cautiously.

By the time he caught up with Kierce's horse, Kierce was no longer with it. Caras checked in the slight clearing where the black stallion stood blowing from the run, and turned aside. He knew what Kierce was doing.

He took a spear from the pack behind his saddle, led both horses into the shadow of the trees at one side of the clearing, and waited.

Conscious of the pursuing dragon, the moments seemed to pass extremely slowly, but it was not an altogether unpleasant tension. With the sharp tang of pine in his nostrils and eyes and ears awake to the sounds of the forest around him, Caras was suddenly aware how long it had been since he last hunted with Kierce. He had forgotten how it felt.

He heard a crashing through the undergrowth and readied himself, the spear poised in his hand. He had no doubt that Kierce had already killed, and his pride demanded he too make a contribution.

A group of small deer broke out of the trees and bounded across the clearing right in front of him. It was an easy shot, and he had no difficulty bringing down a good-sized buck. As the rest of the herd fled into the forest, the black stallion raised his head and trotted off purposefully in the opposite direction. Caras let him go. It was more than his life was worth to interfere between Kierce and his horse.

He dismounted to retrieve the deer, and he was still in the process of doing so when the black stallion reappeared through the woods with Kierce on his back and a deer carcass across his neck.

“Oh, you remembered what to do with that weapon, then,” Kierce greeted him, with a satisfied smile.

Caras ignored the jibe.

“Where’s the best place to leave them?”

“Back along the track. The more forest between us and the dragon the better. I want plenty of other prey distracting her next time she wakes up, or she’ll follow us to the next Holding – and I don’t think that would make us very popular.”

“Right.” Caras hefted his own kill onto the horse, and turned back the way they had come. “How far?”

“Until we meet her coming the other way. She won’t go for a moving target with fresh meat under her nose. Dragons never take anything but the easy option.”

They travelled single file back through the trees. They were nearly at the edge of the forest again when a tremendous roar, pitched so low they felt rather than heard it, shook the ground beneath their feet.

Caras halted.

“Far enough?” he suggested.

Kierce paused and sniffed.

“Probably.”

Caras unloaded the deer and dragged it forwards between the trees. As he returned to the horses and Kierce deposited his kill with Caras’s the dragon materialised through the gloom of the forest. Both men paused and watched it, Caras marvelling that such a huge creature could be so difficult to see. It appeared almost out of nowhere, its semi-transparent skin rippling with the changing colours of the woodland around it as it headed towards them at its characteristic, indefatigable lumbering run.

Dragon skin was a delicate membrane covering the rock-hard carapace that protected their bulky bodies. Caras had once seen an image, brought by a Caiivorian trader, of a man wearing a cloak of dragon-skin, his arms outstretched so that he looked as if he bore iridescent wings on his back. It was extraordinary, but it made no great sense to Caras. Wings or not, the man could not fly. Dragon skin was fragile, translucent and as useless for practical clothing as it was for wings – it turned brittle and lost all its colour within a few days of removal from the dragon’s body. Since dragon meat was reputed to be as foul a thing as anyone could wish to taste and dragons were only found in Shehaios, it was also difficult to obtain. Killing a creature for its skin alone was not an act that made any sense to a Shaihen. Life was taken to sustain life. Not for any other reason.

“Kierce – .” Caras suggested deferentially, since Kierce was still standing beside the deer carcasses watching the dragon.

“She won’t be remotely interested in me – .” began Kierce and broke off with a sudden exclamation of horror as the dragon opened its long snout to display its magnificent set of ridged teeth.

A noise like an earthquake surged over them, resonated through their bones and shook their teeth in their heads. Kierce recoiled from the dragon, his face contorted in disgust. Caras turned his head aside as the reek of the dragon’s breath reached him. A smile began to break across his face as he looked back at Kierce, stumbling towards his horse, choking and retching.

Kierce so rarely misjudged an animal, Caras found it reassuringly human that he could still get it wrong. Even his horse edged back from him in disbelief, throwing up his head and curling his top lip at the appalling stench that accompanied his master.

“I can do without comments from you,” muttered Kierce, swinging himself onto the horse’s back. “That’s the last time I invite a dragon to dinner.”

They turned away from the feeding dragon, Caras shaking with laughter.

Kierce regarded him with some chagrin.

“Careful, Caras. Anyone might think you were starting to enjoy the journey.”

Caras shook his head.

“It’s too long since we’ve done this.”

“Speak for yourself.”

“I was,” Caras admitted. “Nothing like the threat of being eaten to make you appreciate being alive.”

Kierce grunted.

“So long as you’re not a deer.”

“Or a dragon,” added Caras, reflectively and then, in answer to Kierce’s wry look, “Wake up, gorge yourself on whatever falls over in front of you and go back to sleep again? Not much of a life, is it?”

Kierce laughed. “And foul breath to go with it. No Caras, when you put it like that, it isn’t much of a life!”

By the time they had made their way through the forest and picked up the direction of their journey again, the day was beginning to draw to a close. They came over a ridge above the tree line once more, and found themselves looking down on a small huddle of yellow stone buildings grouped around a yard. Smoke drifted from a hole in the turf roof, forming a peaceful and inviting scene in the cool of the waning day.

“Now with a bit of luck,” said Kierce. “There’s our dinner.”

“If they let you in. You still stink of dragon.”

“Well, maybe they’ll throw me a haunch or two through the door. It’s the only way I’ll catch any more meat until it wears off. Every creature for miles is going to run from me.” He turned towards the Holding. “Come on, let’s try our luck.”

They rode down the slope towards the Holding. It still looked very quiet. It occurred to Caras that in most Holdings at this time of day there would be people returning from fields or folds, people attending to the domestic stock before the night fell. Kierce evidently shared his misgivings. A few yards short of the Holding, he came to a halt.

“Something doesn’t smell right here.”

“That’s you.”

“Apart from me.” Kierce hesitated. “Stay here, I’ll take a look.”

Caras shrugged. “Take a look if you like, I’ll go on to the house, see if it’s anything we can help with.”

Without waiting for Kierce to reply, he rode forwards and dismounted outside the farmstead’s boundary wall. As he entered the yard he saw a dark-haired girl, just old enough to

be a woman, come out of the house carrying an empty basket. Caras strode cheerfully towards her.

"Good evening, my lady. We're travelling to the Haven, and wondered if we might impose upon the hospitality of your Holder for the night – ."

He broke off as the girl dropped the basket, grabbed his shoulders and pushed him away.

"Go!" she whispered, urgently. "Get out of here – you're in great danger - !"

Caras fell back a step in surprise, then put his hand on the girl's arm.

"Why? What danger - ?"

She threw a distracted glance across her shoulder. Caras followed her gaze, and saw someone else emerge from the house behind her.

Caras was considered a big man by Shaihen standards, but the figure that loomed behind the girl was a head taller than he was and looked twice as broad. His long and tangled fair hair hung in knotted braids and he wore plaid wrapped around his loins beneath a loose-fitting woollen shirt. Caras hardly needed to see the tattooed imitation of a wildcat's stripes on the man's forehead and nose to know that he was looking at a Caiivorian tribesman who belonged on the other side of the mountains.

The Caiivorian started as he saw Caras. He was half undressed, armed only with a heavy dagger not much different to Caras's hunting knife. He drew it instantly. Caras began to back away, taking the girl by the hand.

"Come on!"

"It's too late... ."

The girl hung back. Caras glanced over his shoulder and saw Kierce ride to a halt outside the yard entrance.

The Caiivorian shouted something, and started towards them.

Caras clamped his hand firmly around the girl's.

"Come on!"

He turned and ran for the gate, pulling her with him. He was only half-aware of the hunting spear flying past him as he fled, but he heard the Caiivorian's roar of pain and fury. Out of the yard, he swept the girl onto his horse, and leapt up behind her. Only then did he look back.

The Caiivorian lay on the ground screaming curses at them, Kierce's spear through his thigh. Other men of his kind were tumbling through the door of the Holder's house.

Caras drove his heels into his horse and let it run. He was aware of Kierce loosing another spear before he turned to follow, and then both of them were away as fast as the horses could carry them across the darkening hillside into the safety of the mountains.

He wrapped his arm around the girl to keep her secure.

"Do they have horses?"

She shook her head. "A couple of ponies. Nothing to match these."

"The Spirit protects us."

They let the horses gallop until they could run no further, then turned and began to climb. There was no sign of pursuit, but they pushed on until the weary horses began to founder on the steep, broken ground.

Exhausted, they halted in the shelter of a rocky outcrop. Spatters of rain came down on the gathering dusk. It was going to be another cheerless night. Caras dismounted and helped the girl down. As Kierce swung off his horse in front of him, Caras saw him stumble as if one leg had given way beneath him.

"It's nothing," snapped Kierce, before he could speak. "Do what you can with this place. I'll see if they've followed us. Don't light a fire until I come back – just in case."

He turned back on foot down the way they had come. Caras watched him with some concern, aware that he still seemed to be favouring one leg. By the time the gloom swallowed him up, however, he looked as if he was moving with his usual assured agility.

Caras turned back to the girl. She was shivering – whether from fear or cold he couldn't tell – and her breath was coming in shuddering gasps just short of sobs. He fetched a fur from his pack.

"Caras ti' Leath, of Arhaios," he said, taking her hand gently as he wrapped the warm covering around her. "Mervecc is wilder than I remember it."

"Lord Caras!"

He had never heard his name uttered with such a weight of anguish and relief. She sank down onto the ground, tears welling in her eyes, her hand locked on his forearm.

"Oh, Lord Caras, you don't know what's happened to us."

Caras folded her into his arms as she gave in to the sobs wracking her body.

"It's all right," he said, soothingly. "We'll look after you. You're all right now."

He held her while she wept as he had never heard anyone weep before, let alone one so young. She wept for the broken heart of her Holding, her family and herself, all of them ravaged by the men who had swept down on them from the wilderness they had believed all their lives to be their protection.

In stumbling, half-coherent words she described to Caras the killing of her mother, grandparents, siblings and cousins. The Holder's pregnant wife and her elderly parents were the only adults in the house when the Caiivorians fell on it. Everyone else was out on the land, about their work. Lasa, the girl he had rescued, was the eldest of the children and the only one they spared. Caras did not need her to tell him why, nor how they had used her.

Kierce returned while Caras still sat with her, but he did not interrupt, even to reproach him for the rudimentary attention he had paid to their horses. He joined them silently and set about building a fire, from which Caras deduced that they were out of immediate danger.

The girl told them how her father and uncle came running back to Prassan, their Holding, as soon as they realised what was happening there; how they gathered their people and attempted to drive off the Caiivorians. She told him how frightened she had been that they would all be slaughtered as those they were vainly attempting to rescue had been. The Holder lost two more of his people in the unequal fight before he cut his losses and fled back into the hills. She did not say what she had felt as she watched them leave, knowing what fate they left her to.

Kierce brought them a meagre meal made from the grain and dried meat they carried with them, augmented with an infusion of herbs. Caras's nose also detected a modest contribution from the leather bottle of distilled malt barley liquor, which Kierce usually guarded with single-minded jealousy.

"We'll take you to them," said Kierce, handing her the bowl of hot broth.

"Do you know where to find them?" asked Caras.

Lasa dipped a spoon into the bowl and stirred it listlessly. She nodded.

"There's a cave in the hills. When we're up on the high slopes with the stock, we sometimes shelter there. People used to live there. It has pictures in it - ." She broke off, and collected herself. "I think that's where they would go."

Caras hesitated. A cave in the mountains hardly seemed a fit refuge for a girl who had suffered what Lasa had suffered, but neither was this wet hillside. He couldn't trust that the next farm they came across would be in friendly hands either, and they were still several days from Mervecc Holding.

"At least she would be with her people," said Kierce. "We can't take Prassan back, Caras. Not just the two of us."

"How many are still at your Holding?" asked Caras.

"Too many to fight! Please, Lord Caras. They will kill you!"

Lasa gripped his arm fiercely. He read the renewed rush of fear in her eyes, and knew it was fear for him. The title of Oreath was one of the greatest and oldest seats on the Holders

Council; he was well aware that Lasa knew who he was, but he was touched that she thought he might be brave, or foolhardy, enough to hurl himself blindly on a Caiivorian sword.

"It's all right," he reassured her. "But I need to know what your people are up against. How much help they'll need."

The girl released his arm in some relief.

"There are about twenty or thirty most of the time. Sometimes more. There were more when they first came. There are only ten there all the time, the ones who..." Once again, she had to break off and collect herself. "The rest come and go. And there's a boy, he's there all the time too. I think he's a kind of captive, I'm not sure. He's Caiivorian, he used to tell me what to do, but they... they were always hitting him, too, and shouting commands at him, though he... it seemed as if he had... grown used to it. They hit him, he hit me. But at least he didn't -."

She broke off and clamped her teeth over her lower lip.

"Eat," said Kierce, gently. "No-one's going to hurt you any more."

She looked at Kierce uncertainly. Caras watched the fear ease from her face as her eyes met Kierce's eyes.

Even this girl smiled at him. She had no doubt heard of him. The songs which conveyed news between the Holdings of Shehaios sang the praises of Kierce ti' Gaeroch's unsurpassed skill in his calling, his affinity with the mountains, his ability to sense danger and his skill as a hunter.

Kierce smiled back, the man the wolf cubs played with.

"The victory is in surviving, Lasa. Eat."

"That... scent... Have you...?"

"It's very difficult to slay a dragon, and kind of pointless. You can't eat it, you can't wear its skin. I didn't kill it, Lady Lasa, I fed it. I'm afraid dragons have no manners."

He moved back and laid a hand on Caras's shoulder.

"Though more, perhaps, than some Caiivorian tribes," he murmured. "You'd better stay with her. You make her feel safe. Tomorrow we'll take her to her people."

"And then we'll take this tale to the King at the Haven," said Caras. He tossed the dregs of the herb tea onto the fire where they hissed angrily back at him. "And to his Caiivorian Queen. I'd like to know just what it is Rainur is marrying."