

AD 1304

PROLOGUE

In the Greek province of Magnesia, in the shadow of Mount Pelion and surrounded by the ruins of the ancient city of Demetrias, two women are walking on the shore.

It is evening, an hour or so before sunset. Away out to sea, dark clouds are retreating on the eastern horizon. The day has been too wet for the couple to take their daily walk, salvaging the flotsam and jetsam from passing ships or sifting through the wreckage of any vessel unfortunate enough to fall foul of the rocks on the headland. Now, whatever they find is placed in a hand-cart they have brought along for that purpose.

The older woman's name is Kolba; the younger is Tessera, her daughter and fourth child. Their skin is darker than that of the natives of Magnesia, their hair thicker and glossier. They are newcomers to this land, refugees who have recently arrived from Anatolia by way of the many islands that separate its coast from the Greek peninsula. Kolba's people have come a long way in the ten generations since their flight from persecution in India. They have crossed the salt deserts of Persia, the Zagros Mountains and the Fertile Crescent of Mesopotamia. Kolba's ancestors continued to Syria; others of their race turned south towards Egypt. They have their own language, their own history, their own dress and their own gods.

As far as Kolba and Tessera know, their clan is the first to set foot on Greek soil. Later, their kind will multiply; they will become known to the Greek people as *Atzinganoi* – the Untouchables, and to the Italians as *Singari*.

They will be called other names too, many of them insulting and offensive. To themselves, they are the *Doum*.

The villagers of Pelion mostly leave them alone and the *Doum*, for their part, keep themselves to themselves, living in tents and taking what the land and sea freely give them. There is as yet no animosity between the two peoples and when

brought together by accident or for occasional trade and barter, their relations are polite and respectful.

The *Doum* have no great skill at either agriculture or fishing but they have their own animals, which, along with coarse bread made from crushed wild seeds, provide the bulk of their diet. They have a talent for carving wood, and for working and stitching leather, which they make into saddles and bridles for their own ponies and for barter with their neighbours.

The shore along which Kolba and Tessera walk has a broad expanse of golden sand that sweeps round the bay and out of sight beyond the rocks. The light is poor but there is enough of it for them to see that the beach is not empty. A ship has come to grief in the storm. From headland to headland, the sand is littered with debris: broken chests whose contents have spilled out, splinters of driftwood, pieces of torn sailcloth and foodstuffs spoiled by the sea. Kolba and Tessera pick their way among these offerings, prising open the whole chests with broad-bladed knives, checking for items that might be of use in their camp or that can be sold to the Greeks for extra provisions.

Kolba, who is forty-five years old, has seen several shipwrecks. Only once has she known there to be survivors. The rocks take most of them, tearing their flesh and clothing into pieces so that what remains is no longer recognisable as having once belonged to a human being.

Occasionally, the sea throws up a human corpse and then there is an opportunity to gather weapons or jewellery; not that the *Doum* have much need of the former, being unskilled in the crafts of war, but they love rings, necklaces and other trinkets. And it is no crime to take such things when their former owners no longer have any use for them.

Today, neither Kolba nor her daughter sees any bodies, living or dead. They haul two complete boxes up the beach towards the cart and then look around for other items of interest. Near the shoreline is what appears to be a bundle of clothing tied to a wooden pallet. Beside it, something glistens in the last shaft of setting sun. Full of curiosity, Tessera runs down to the sea. The object that shines is a single gold coin. She bends to pick it up and as she does so hears a sound like the wail of an animal in pain. She prods the bundle with her finger. To her astonishment it moves.

With beating heart, Tessera pulls aside some folds of cloth and finds herself looking into the face of an infant of no more than a few months old. Its cheeks are blue with cold, its lips dry and encrusted with salt, but there is no doubt it is alive.

Tessera is seventeen. She has recently given birth to a child herself but it died before drawing breath. Now she wants to pick up this other. She wants to suckle it and warm it against her own body. She finds she cannot. The infant is fastened somehow to what she realises is a fully grown woman.

Her cry brings Kolba running.

"Are they alive?"

"It's a girl," Tessera says. "She is alive but weak. The mother, I do not know."

Kolba kneels beside the bodies and touches the woman's neck.

"Her heart beats slowly," she says after a moment. "But she is badly hurt. Hold the baby while I cut her free."

She takes her knife and severs the strap of the leather sling that binds the infant's body to the mother's chest and neck. Then she steps back. Tessera sweeps the infant into her arms. She has removed her shawl, worn against the cool of the evening, and she winds it round the tiny bundle before pulling down the front of her dress and coaxing the baby to feed at her still swollen breast.

The act of cutting the sling has loosened the strange woman's robe and as Kolba tries to move her it falls away. Underneath, she wears a belt unlike any that Tessera has ever seen. It is such, the girl thinks, as a prince might wear. It is composed of two layers of leather. The one that lies next to the body and fastens round it is thick and strong. From it, on the woman's left side, hangs a scabbard designed to hold a sword. The sword is in its sheath. It too is of royal design, Tessera thinks. The hilt is a coiled metal serpent, the pommel a large ruby grasped in the snake's jaws.

The outer leather is lighter and more flexible and is stitched to the inner on the right side to form two pouches or purses. One of these is open and Tessera sees that it is filled with coins, just like the one lying in the sand.

The slight movement of the body causes two more to spill out. The girl gasps in amazement. She picks up the gold pieces and weighs them in her hand.

"I have never seen such wealth, Mother" she says. "Our family will be rich."

"We are honest people, Tessera," Kolba says. "You know it is not ours to take." She takes the coins from her daughter's hand and replaces all three in their leather pouch. "As long as this woman lives, the gold belongs to her. Should she die, it will go to the child, and we must keep it safe for her. The sword too, though it is strange that a mother should carry such a weapon.

"Run back to the camp and send your father to me. I will need fresh water, a pony and a larger cart." Kolba parts the shawl and for a few moments watches the infant. Its eyes are closed as it sucks vigorously at the foster breast. Already the blue tinge is fading from its face.

"The baby is hungry, Mother," Tessera says. "Is that not a good sign?"

"The gods are indeed smiling on us today," says Kolba. "Take good care of this tiny miracle, Daughter. I will watch over the mother so that, if she lives, they can be reunited."



Saxony, more than forty years later ...

GRETL

The Woman with the Sword

i

I was seven years old when the Black Death came to Brunswick.

We heard of it in March, the day of my accident, the day I tried to sneak a look through the window of my grandfather's laboratory. This was a little chamber, jutting out into his herb garden, where he would sometimes shut himself away for days at a time. I had often wondered what was inside.

The window was at man-height from the ground and easily reached from the garden if I climbed onto a buttress. I could already scamper up a tree as well as any boy, so a wall presented no challenge at all. The stones were rough and I had no difficulty gaining a foothold. I reached up with one hand and gripped the gnarled ivy. It was even easier than I had expected. Using both stones and plant as leverage, I pulled myself up until I could rest one foot on the projection.

From there it was a short stretch to the ledge under the window. I supported my weight with one hand on a horizontal limb of the ivy, stepped across and grasped the sill. I was just tall enough to peer over into the room.

Opa sat at a table on the left side. In front of him were a book bound in black leather and some rolled-up paper. On a second table to the right were laid freshly cut herbs, plant roots, a pestle and mortar, and some other pieces of apparatus. Above, and fixed to the wall, were shelves stacked with rows of phials, stone jars and glass containers of colourful berries.

I had asked about the room only for Opa to say it was a grown-up and dangerous place and that he would show it to me when I was ready. Never had I imagined it to be such a treasure house.

Eager to see more, I raised myself on tiptoe and pushed my face closer to the glass. I did not want to be caught spying but it was an opportunity too good to miss, a chance to see him at work and to learn the secrets he hid from us.

Opa opened the book. He picked up a quill, dipped it into an inkpot and poised it over the paper. A sudden thought seemed to distract him. He unrolled one of the scrolls and spread it out on the table. It was covered all over with drawings, the like of which I had never seen before. They were pictures of people, but with all of their fronts cut away to expose their hearts and stomachs and some other organs I did not recognise. The different parts within the outlines were coloured with blue, red and yellow dyes.

My face was now very close to the casement and my heart was beating furiously. I edged along farther to get a better view.

My grandfather looked up suddenly. Either I made a sound or my head cast a shadow into the room. I ducked out of sight. Anyway, I had seen enough and it was time to retreat.

I was careless. In my haste, I missed my footing and took a step into nothingness. My fingers lost their hold on the sill. I grabbed for the ivy but could not reach it and fell with a scream that might be heard in Hannover.

My knee hit the corner of the buttress, sending a tearing pain through my body, and I heard the ripping of cotton as my dress snagged on one of the rougher limbs of the ivy. I must have hit my head too, or fainted with shock because, when I came to my senses, I was lying in a bed of thyme, bleeding from a gash in my calf. I had never seen so much blood. It oozed out of the wound like red wine from a cracked flagon and trickled down my leg, over the straps of my sandals and between my bare toes. My petticoats were ruined beyond repair.

As my head cleared, I saw Opa standing over me. At his side knelt my mother, looking very worried. The tears welled up in my eyes as she cradled me in her arms. There was a buzzing in my ears too.

"We must do something about that cut," said Opa and grinned wickedly. "Otherwise, she will live, I think. My treatment will be the best lesson."

He took me from my mother, picked me up and carried me indoors, paying no attention that my blood was dripping on the floor. I was still dazed by the fall but remember wondering how

long it would be before my veins were emptied and, if I died, whether Opa would forgive me for spying on him. There was no time for more idle thoughts. Before I knew it, I was inside the room I had for so long wanted to see. My enthusiasm for its secrets had waned.

They sat me in a chair. Opa lifted my injured leg so that it rested on the tabletop. He fetched a needle and thread from a box on one of the shelves and without saying another word began to stitch the ragged edges of my cut. It hurt even more than the cut itself. I clamped my lips together to hold back a yell.

"Well, Gretl," said Opa, when he finished stitching, "I think you've seen enough of my work for one day." He stood back to admire his repair, then covered it with a cloth soaked in foul-smelling paste. "Now, off to bed with you!"

It was only late afternoon but I was too embarrassed and hurt to argue. Limping badly, I followed my mother upstairs to my bedroom.

Despite the throbbing in my leg, I must have slept three or four hours. I awoke to the sound of loud voices. It was dark. I slipped out of bed, hobbled to the doorway and peeped out. The passage was empty. My leg burned fiercely and every step was agony.

A tallow lamp flickered in my mother's parlour as I passed. I could hear the sound of her breathing and see her back framed in the glow from the candle. She might have been working with her needle at a seam. I slipped past hurriedly, hoping she would not look round and catch me.

The voices drifted up from below the stairhead. I crawled along to the gallery, ducked under a table and looked down. It was a favourite hiding place of mine, where I often crept after supper to spy on the adults. My grandfather knew I was there, of course. Opa knew nearly everything about my escapades, though he never told.

There were three strangers in the hall and one was holding the floor. A pale, blond northerner, he had drunk too much and was very red in the face. Behind him, the logs crackled in the hearth. I wished I could go down to warm myself. Though it was nearly spring, the evenings were still cool and, aside from the burning in my leg, I shivered in my shift.

That evening would have begun like others, with good

food and wine. When we entertained, we did it well and guests often became merry. My father and Uncle Roland were doing their best to be gracious as always, whether feeling hospitable or not. Opa was there too, sitting quietly in his favourite chair with both hands resting over the gold talisman he wore at his throat. His *Fylfot*, he called it. He always showed eagerness for the company of men from different provinces, and for his sake such travellers were tolerated. Those from the south would sometimes bring him letters, whilst to those headed towards Italy he would give packages to carry.

Women had no interest in trade or travel, or so it was supposed, and children were forbidden to stay in the hall past their perceived bedtime - especially girls. So the men were alone. But not all children obey their parents, which is just as well, for if they did, not only would the world be a sombre place indeed but many things would never be known that ought to be known.

"Our business didn't take us to Venice or Genoa," the red-faced speaker was saying, "but news travels far and fast. They say hundreds are dying from an accursed sickness. The plague. Thousands!"

"Surely not," said Roland.

"Thousands," repeated the merchant, "Agonising deaths, by all accounts. Their bodies turn black from breathing poisoned air."

Secure in my hiding place, I gave a gasp, which I was sure all six men must have heard. My father and Roland both shook their heads doubtfully. Opa glanced up in my direction and calmly took a sip of his wine.

"I see you don't believe us," said another of the men, and his red-faced colleague muttered assent. "But it's true none the less. Black boils and pus!"

"Surely it can't be as bad as that," said my father.

"Worse," argued the fellow with the red face. "We've not seen this plague for ourselves, but we met traders from the coast, and they all told the same stories."

"At least they ought to be taken with a grain of salt," said Opa. "We all breathe the same air. If it were poisoned we would all sicken and die."

"I agree with you, sir," said the third man, who seemed to have drunk rather less wine than had his companions. "We've

seen plagues before, and the numbers of dead are always exaggerated."

"Maybe so," acknowledged the second man, "but I'll confine my business to the Guild until it's all over. Venice and Genoa are no places for an honest German merchant. They say the first to contract the disease were seamen, and that the worst cases are found in these ports."

"I'll be a deal happier when I get home to Lübeck," said the one who had spoken first. "You can be sure my windows will be securely barred, and the doors double bolted at night. I'll take no chances on poisoned air!"

The talk deteriorated into arguments about guilds and barter, which I did not understand, until the three strangers announced they were ready for bed. I hoped my father and the others would follow soon, as I had spotted the remains of a pie on the table and was hungry. As soon as they were all gone, I would creep down to the hall and finish it off.

At last, my father and Roland retired, leaving Opa in his chair by the dying fire. I thought he was asleep and was wondering whether I dare risk venturing out when his eyes opened. He looked up. It was as if he could see through my table.

"You can come out now, Gretl," he called. "We are quite alone."

I scrambled out, looked along the gallery to make sure he was right and hopped down the main stair, my hand holding firmly to the rail. My calf was throbbing and very painful. I thought my grandfather was going to scold me but he smiled and beckoned me towards the table, where he sat me down and watched while I devoured the rest of the pie. He then poured a little wine, diluted it with water and handed me the goblet.

"So, you are curious about my scientific work?" he said. "Your father did much the same at your age, only he was more fortunate. He landed on his rump."

I wanted to laugh but feared further reprimand. Instead, I sipped the wine and immediately felt warm inside.

"Still," Opa went on, "six years is a good time to begin learning."

"I'm nearly seven," I objected.

"Seven then," said my grandfather. "Would you like to learn about physic and astrology, Gretl?"

I nodded.

“In that case, we’ll begin tomorrow,” said Opa. He winked and held out his hand. “But you must promise to do as you’re told and not touch anything unless I tell you to. Solemn promise?”

I gulped down the rest of the wine, laid aside the goblet and grasped the fingers of his outstretched hand.

“Solemn promise,” I said.

ii

In the morning, the merchants’ tale was the single topic of discussion.

The three men had left at dawn, cold sober and eager to reach Lübeck before the poisoned air caught up with them.

Family breakfast was the one time when we were always together, adults and children alike. Afterwards, we children usually played while the grown-ups discussed plans for the day. That day, I stayed at the table and listened. What I had heard from the gallery had given me a nightmare but I was curious about the mysterious sickness.

“I don’t believe any of it,” Aunt Matti said. “It must have been the wine talking.” She sniffed in her usual superior way.

“Don’t dismiss it too lightly,” said Opa. “Travellers’ tales always have a foundation.” He scanned the adult faces round the table. “Say nothing, any of you, in case the rumour spreads to the village and causes panic. I saw pestilence once in Italy. If something similar has struck there now, it is serious. There is no cure.”

I slid from my chair and put my arms round him as far as they would go. His tone rather frightened me. He patted my head. My mother tried to distract me with a game of *I Spy*, but I continued listening.

“These fellows who talked into the night and merrily consumed our food and wine ...” my father was saying, “... they blamed seamen. Perhaps it was the pox. Or else they handled poisoned cargo. Surely the sea air can’t be to blame?”

“I remember the sea breezes well, Lou,” Opa said. “It’s true sailors suffer pains in the belly, loose bowels and bleeding gums. Sickness and even death are common enough between landfalls. But the causes are usually rotting food and foul water. Exposure to the ocean air relieves the worst symptoms of life below deck. And the crew’s health always improves

when the vessel makes port."

"We may yet find that air is to blame," my father persisted, quite excitedly, "though not the air we breathe in."

"How so?"

"Let me explain, Father. You always tell us that our health depends on the condition of our blood and on the kind of life we lead ..."

"True enough."

"... and that there is seldom sickness in our house because we wash regularly, wear fresh clothes, eat good food, and bury our waste. In the towns, it's different. People live close together. Their rubbish and excrement clog the drains, so they sicken readily. Even when treated with proper medicine, they take longer to recover than the farmer or landowner."

He became more animated as he pursued his argument. Matti sniffed again but said nothing. Opa nodded patiently. My mother seemed interested. She broke off our game to listen.

"We suppose, do we not," said my father, "that sickness comes of drinking polluted water, eating tainted food or touching a part of someone already suffering from a disease. The physician restores the blood to a healthy condition and in doing so purges bad humours from the body. But how do these leave? In the sweat, the urine, the excrement - the very substances you say are responsible for the sickness itself."

"Not everyone agrees with my theories," Opa said. "Many side with Galen that only the letting of the blood itself can effect a cure. Still, I fancy you have not yet come to the point."

"I'm almost there," said my father. "One natural function, unlike the movement of the bowels, is exercised many thousands of times a day. Why should the expelling of breath not be another way - maybe the most important way - of driving out bad humours? And being driven out of one mouth, are they not available to be drawn in by another?"

Matti tutted. I suppose the idea of bowels and bad breath made her uncomfortable.

"It's supported by observation," my father went on. "In the country, the peasant and his wife develop a cough. No one else is affected. Not so for the tradesman in his town house. There, sickness is spread quickly to the journeyman, apprentices, and domestics."

"And how does this relate to the rumours?"

“Simple! Sailors live in small cabins or cramped decks. Whatever this plague is, it starts there. It spreads onshore in the inns and whorehouses where the men take their relaxation, before the bad humours can properly escape.”

My grandfather seemed to warm to the argument. He stroked his beard with one hand while fingering his fylfot with the other. Then he tapped his fingers on the tabletop. “You may be right,” was all he said.

My mother hugged me tight. She had grown rather pale.

“God forbid that such a plague should reach Saxony,” she said, and there was an *Amen* or two from the others. I wondered what a whorehouse was.

“It’ll not come here,” said Matti and tutted again.

My mother frowned. “But if it does, Lou, what then?”

“Then we shall find the cure!” said my father.

I think he believed it. However, he was a bad prophet though, as it turned out, he was partly right. Both as to the cause and to the outcome.

iii

Opa kept his promise and that afternoon I was allowed into his laboratory for the first time. It was the beginning of my interest in the sciences.

During the week that followed, for one hour every day, he taught me all he could about his medicines and salves. I learned the names of the substances in his bottles and jars, and how to distinguish between those that were harmless and those that were poison. This proved more difficult than I expected. Many plants and berries, and the extracts from them, while beneficial in small doses, are deadly if taken in larger quantities. Nevertheless, by the end of that first week, I was able to recognise the contents of one complete shelf of containers from their appearance alone.

Opa tested me first. After I had guessed the substance and recited its uses, he would uncover the label and show me whether I was correct. I made only one mistake. Then he mixed up the bottles and invited my mother to observe my progress. She had been worried that it was too soon for me to learn these things, but her doubts were soon lifted. With the second test, I made no mistakes at all.

By the end of April, I had memorised another shelf. I knew

the proper way to harvest herbs, how to cut and dry them and how to grind them into a powder. I had learned how to make perfumed waters with rose petals and lavender, much to my mother's delight. She hugged me and promised a treat.

There was no more talk or rumours of plague for a whole month so, in the second week of May, my grandfather took me to Hannover. That was a promise he had made hastily some weeks earlier, before the visit by the Lübeck merchants. It was to be my birthday treat, but my seventh birthday had come and gone. As it happened, my parents had begged him to reconsider, or at least to postpone the visit, and he had agreed. However, now that they perceived no real danger to me, they relented.

"I must visit the apothecary," Opa said. "And now that you are my little apprentice, it'll be an important part of your training."

We took his grey stallion, with me mounted in front of the saddle on the beast's neck. Opa managed the reins with one hand whilst holding me firmly with the other. I loved the feel of the horse's mane after it had been groomed and never tired of running my fingers through it. My leg had healed and I could ride without discomfort. The worst had been when Opa cut and removed his stitches. It hurt so much that I screamed again and again.

The sun was just peeping over the horizon when we left home. We reached Hannover by mid morning. I had not been there before and did not know what to expect.

"A hundred years ago, the city belonged to the sons of Henry the Lion," Opa said as we rode along the highway towards the southernmost gate. "And they gave it to the people by charter."

I knew a little history of course and had heard of Henry Welf, Duke of Saxony, who was called the Lion. He was an ancestor of my grandmother.

"Why?" I wanted to know.

"Why what?"

"Why did Henry's sons give Hannover to the people?"

"It's called politics, Gretl."

"What's politics?"

"Politics is about how countries and states are ruled," said

Opa. "It's a matter for study like any other. Like mathematics or physic."

He launched into an explanation, most of which went over my head. I had lost interest anyway, because I was gazing about me at the other travellers making their way into the city. There were not many on the road that day since there was neither fair nor market, but it amused me to study people's dress and to count the number of wagons and carts as we cantered past.

We entered through a tall arch and passed along the high street. I noticed a change. We were enclosed by houses and there was a stench like that of bad fish after it has lain on the midden for a week. My ears rang with the rattling and squeaking of cart wheels, the voices of tradesmen calling out from their shops and the yelping of dogs. We had dogs on the estate, but they were noble animals with sharp ears and sleek coats, unlike the mean curs of Hannover, whose fur was matted and dirty, whose ears lay flat against their skulls and whose green slit eyes gleamed with cunning and malice.

"It smells, Opa," I said, screwing up my nose, "and my head hurts from the noise."

"You'll get used to it," he laughed.

I did not think I would ever get used to it and covered my ears with my hands. Never in my life had I seen so many people and I was terrified by their proximity. The houses were tall and crooked. They seemed to reach over the whole street in an effort to embrace those on the other side. No promise however solemn, no treat however delightful, would entice me across the threshold of any of those buildings.

We turned into another road, even narrower than the high street and uncobbled. At the corner sat a beggar, a bag of bones and rags. He had only a stump for a right leg. Opa dropped a coin in his bowl as we passed. The smell was still with us but the houses were squatter, less mean in appearance and more sparsely built. Apart from the beggar's howling, the babble of sound was less menacing here and instead of holding my hands against my head, I clung tightly to the stallion's mane. Opa soothed me with the occasional stroking of my hair.

The apothecary's shop lay about half way down the lane. A wooden board hung on a spike above the door to mark the place, but it was so old and weathered that the sign was broken

and cracked and might easily have been the emblem of any of a dozen tradesmen. Next door on one side was a candlemaker, on the other a locksmith.

The inside of the shop was dingy. The air was heavy with the scents of roots and dried flowers that lay around in open containers. Like Opa's laboratory, there were shelves with jars of fruits and berries, and bottles containing coloured liquids.

The apothecary was a little man with moist eyes and a flattened nose. He made a great fuss of me with his welcomes, his bowings and his scrapings, until Opa distracted him with a cough. I might have been the first child ever to enter his shop, and royalty at that, so politely did he behave, though I fancied it was all for Opa's benefit rather than for mine.

While they disappeared into a back room to transact their business, I amused myself by identifying the substances I knew and trying to guess the others. Remembering my earlier promise and, in any case, fearing I would be poisoned, I did not open any of the bottles, though I risked wiping the outside of a few with my finger and spittle to get a better view of the contents.

I was glad to be out of the shop. The vapours were making my eyes smart. The apothecary came with us to the door. He shook Opa's hand, bowed ceremoniously to me at least three times and gave me a stick of liquorice wood to chew.

Opa hoisted me into the saddle and, with him leading the halter, we turned along the lane towards the river. There was no wall in this quarter of the town and I could see again, in the distance, the welcoming countryside.

We had already crossed the Leine, at a point where the waters are shallower and more timid, and now we recrossed it over a narrow bridge. We reached the western bank. The houses now occupied only the left side of the lane and had thinned out.

When we had drawn clear of the last one, my grandfather remounted, slapped the stallion's rump and urged him into a gallop. The wind rushed past our ears. I smelt the freshness of ripening crops and newly mown grass. I had known these things all my life and loved them. My headache cleared and I breathed freely again. Even the reek of the maturing dung heaps seemed fragrant after the cloying stench of the city.

"How would you like to meet a princess, Gretl?" Opa had

to shout to make himself heard.

I did not think he had such power but I nodded vigorously. Of course, this had been his plan all along, I supposed. Opa would honour his promise without exposing me for long to danger in the narrower lanes and disease-ridden hovels. Princess or no princess, I was only too glad to be leaving the clamour of Hannover behind.

We were riding through open fields. Ahead, the late morning sun shone on the river, twisting and wriggling across the land like a silver snake. I could see no castle or palace where royalty might reside. The only sign of human presence at all was a squat tower that peeped up above the topmost branches of a birch wood. Opa spurred us forward. As we drew closer, I saw it was a castle of sorts, though unlike anything I had imagined from his stories. It was turreted but with parts of the turret broken off. There were window holes and embrasures, but no moat. The rise on which it stood was scarcely a mound and was completely hidden by trees. The whole building was less than half the size of our manor house.

We turned east and riverward, skirting the trees. The passage between mound and riverbank was narrow at this point and the ground ahead rose to a ridge. Opa slowed to a walking pace and I could see now that the tower was derelict. A stony path led through the grove towards it and into a courtyard under a collapsed gateway. On this side, the building was covered in green slime. Some of the stones around the windows and embrasures had crumbled or had fallen out altogether. Creeping plants grew over what remained of the arch, up the walls and in and out of the gaps.

It seemed altogether sinister yet for some reason I found it difficult to tear my eyes away. I could not hide my disappointment. No beggar would live there, I thought, certainly not a princess. The place would have no defence against a mob of children, far less a rival army. I glanced up questioningly at my grandfather.

"We're not there yet," he said. "Patience!"

He urged our mount to the top of the ridge where I gasped with astonishment. On the other side lay a wide meadow. Spread across it was an encampment of tents and wagons. Near the river's edge, a dozen or so dark-skinned men, naked to the waist, were working with picks and spades. A group of

children stood nearby, watching. The youngest were naked while the older ones wore simple homespun tunics dyed with bright colours. Their arms and legs were bare.

At the other end of the camp, a fire had been made and round it sat a group of women, chattering. Two of them stirred cooking pots from which rose a delicious aroma of spices and herbs. A few more children played *Catch Me* round the wagons. Sheep, pigs, fowl and ponies roamed freely in the long grass of the meadow.

Opa made his way unchallenged along an avenue of tents towards one that was bigger than the rest and seemed to be made of a different fabric. It was near white in colour and painted on the outside with ochre-red and black pictures of strange animals and birds. The children saw us and ran towards us with great whoops and yells. They crowded round leaving scarcely any room for us to pass through.

Opa dismounted and lifted me down. He called out a few words I did not understand and, without waiting for an invitation, lifted the tent's entrance flap.

The most amazing sight met my eyes. The tent had a proper floor and was furnished like the room of a mansion. The painted decoration continued on the inside. There was a bed covered with a red blanket, a table, a stool and any number of brightly coloured cushions. In the centre was a fireplace. A fire had been lit and its smoke drifted upwards through a funnel opening in the roof. Seated beside it was the most unusual woman I had ever seen in my life.

She seemed very, very old. Her hair was silver. She had a brown, weather-beaten complexion with deep furrows on the brow. Yet her eyes were bright and she carried herself erect rather than being hunched over like the village widows. Her figure was that of a youth, plain breasted with straight hips. She was as thin as a willow branch and might, I thought, be blown and bent just as easily. Her hair too gave her a manly look. It was cut very short, as only a tradesman would have it, and grew in spikes on her crown and round her ears.

Adorning her withered wrists were bangles of various thickness and pattern with the look of gold though in such quantity I fancied they must be of some other metal. Her tunic and shirt were colourful, of different shades of red and green woven together in intricate patterns. Below, she wore a skirt of

deep blue. Most astonishing of all, she carried a short sword, sheathed at her side like that of a knight or gentleman. Of course, I had seen swords often. Opa carried one himself and both my father and uncle had one, though they never wore them about the estate. There was also a huge curved sabre hanging on two nails in our hall. But never in my life had I seen a woman with a sword.

She rose and advanced to meet us. She embraced my grandfather fondly while he, responding, kissed her on the cheek. I was too stunned to say anything, not merely by the manner of their greeting but by the woman's peculiar appearance.

I was not by nature shy but it took me some time to find my voice. Meantime, Opa said something in a tongue I did not understand, though I recognised my name.

"Welcome, Gretl," said the woman in our language." She knelt and touched her lips to my brow. Her kiss was gentle but I was embarrassed and drew away from her.

Opa patted my head.

"This is Princess Ennia," he said. "She is an honorary chief of the Singari."

I responded with my best curtsy but I was gaping at the sword. The hilt was of a yellow metal fashioned in the shape of a coiled serpent. Its wide-open jaws were fastened round a red jewel that sparkled in the light from the fire.

"You like it, Gretl?" Princess Ennia's mouth creased in a smile. " 'Tis yours! Perhaps it will bring you good fortune. Many a time, I owe my life to it." She drew the weapon from its sheath and grasping it by the blade extended the hilt towards me. I took hold of the serpent but the sword was too heavy for me and I would have dropped it had not Opa come to my rescue.

"Perhaps when you are older and have learned to use and respect it," he said. "May I keep it safe for you?"

"It's a very fine present," I said to Ennia, not knowing how else to acknowledge the gift. "Thank you."

"And I have another for you, Gretl, but that is to be a surprise when you come again."

"Do you always live here?" I asked her.

"Not always," said Ennia. "I live in many places. The Singari are travellers. They live with nature in the fields and forests. Their home is wherever there is fresh water and good

grazing.”

“Are you really a princess?”

“After a fashion! My mother was a princess, certainly, and my father noble. But that was long ago. Now, to be honorary chief is enough. ‘Tis a title given to the oldest and fiercest of the band. Some say the wisest too, though ...” She chuckled softly. “... I fear I am no wiser than the rest.”

She reminded me of a character in one of Opa’s stories and I liked her because of it. She was an outlandish creature to be sure, but kind and motherly. There was no sign of the fierceness of which she boasted. Indeed, in spite of the sword, I could not conceive of her having desire or strength to harm anyone.

I looked around the tent in awe, admiring the splendid furnishings and studying more closely the animal paintings. There were two lions, a green serpent and a black winged eagle, but my attention was captured by two creatures that might have been inhabitants of dreams. One had golden skin decorated with broad black stripes. Its jaws were wide open, displaying terrifying teeth that could have ripped open in a second any man or horse foolish enough to come within range.

By contrast, the other made me laugh. It was like a misshapen cow, with long legs and a goat’s beard. Most astonishing of all, its body grew a grotesque hump as if a sorcerer had magically transported a mountain to the middle of its back.

My grandfather and Ennia were talking but I could understand nothing of what they said. I knew Latin but this language was quite different. Their speech was nonetheless punctuated with the occasional word that I seemed to recognise. Thrice I caught a word like *morte*, which meant death, and twice I heard another that sounded like *pestis*. What I had overheard from under the table in the gallery came back to me. I frowned. Ennia saw my look and broke off in mid sentence.

“The little one too should hear and know,” she said and I knew immediately what she meant and what they had been discussing. “ ‘Twas true what they told you. It sweeps across the land like a storm.”

“So you will not travel south this year?” Opa said.

“We will winter here,” said Ennia. “If the men can make part of the tower habitable, we will take shelter there if needs

be. In autumn, we will work in the landgrave's fields and hope. This pestilence is not like a sword thrust - quick and clean - but ugly and brutal." She reached behind her back and I saw to my horror that she had another weapon hidden there, a dagger the length of my arm, and narrow as a spit. In the space of a second, it was out from her belt and in her hand. With the energy of a youth she lunged, as I thought, at my grandfather. I screamed.

Opa did not flinch. While they were talking, he had begun to wrap up the sword in a cloth that had lain on a nearby table. Now, as Princess Ennia's blade came, as it seemed to me, straight for his heart, he gripped the serpent hilt and, in a single movement too fast for my eye to catch, parried the dagger and deflected it from its path.

Ennia sighed deeply and lowered her weapon. Then she laughed, not the cackle of a hag, but a gentle restrained laugh as if time had been turned back a hundred years and she was by magic a maiden again.

"Your eye is sharp as ever, my champion," she said, and Opa laughed too. "And despite your great age, your arm has lost little of its skill."

I had not recovered from my shock and was breathing very fast indeed. My mouth was agape at the deadly game I had witnessed.

"Should a woman not be able to defend her life and honour just as a man would do?" Ennia said. "Do not fear, Gretl. I would not have struck him for the world. We have been friends too long! 'Tis a game we have often played. Perhaps when we meet again I will teach you a trick or two with the *stiletto*." She slipped the dagger back into her belt. "Now," she said, taking my arm, "come and dine with us."

She led us out of the tent and back along the avenue. The children had been waiting outside and they followed, jostling for position and jabbering continuously in their alien language. One or two girls dared to feel the material of my dress and were rewarded by Princess Ennia with a cuff on the side of the head.

By now, the men too had gathered by the cooking pots and we sat round the fire to break bread and partake of the most delicious stew I had ever tasted. When the pots were empty, one of the Singari took a wooden bowl, filled it with plant leaves and set them alight with a burning twig. The lighted mixture gave off pungent smoke and he inhaled it before

passing the bowl to his neighbour. In this way, the smoking bowl found its way round the older men in the company, and a few of the women too. Most of the children had run off to play.

I was fascinated by the smoking ritual and would have lingered, but Opa shook his head.

"It's not for you," he said when I showed an inclination to sniff the odours. "Say your thanks, Gretl. It's time to go."

I would never have argued and dropped my best curtsy as my mother had taught. Ennia kissed my cheek.

"We shall see one another soon," she said as Opa lifted me into the saddle and mounted behind me. "At midsummer. You will not forget, Gretl!"

Out of sight and hearing of the camp, I pestered Opa with questions. Who were the Singari? Who was Ennia? What was my other present to be? Why had she called him *Champion*? Did she really mean to teach me to use a sword? I hoped she would. My cousin Freddy always laughed when I said I wanted to fight him and I longed to teach him a lesson. Of course, we would never be allowed to use anything but toy swords but that did not matter; it would be enough to show him that girls were as good as boys.

I suspect that Opa had a very good idea of what was in my head for he said that, indeed, Ennia would teach me swordplay if I were willing to learn. There was no one better! But my mother would have to agree first. About the Singari he would say only that they were a race out of India.

I asked about the smoking bowls.

"Why do they do that, Opa?" I asked. "Are they sick?"

"Sick indeed, but not as you know it, Gretl. The vapours dull the aches and pains of old age and bring them pleasant dreams and visions."

"Is that not a wonderful thing?"

"I think not," he answered gravely. "And you would be unwise to copy it. Those who practise the habit lose their wits. They forget about pain and sickness. But when they wake from their dreams they are in greater pain than before, and need more of the smoke to make their lives bearable."

He was evasive about the plague, though I could tell from his look that he was worried. In my childish way, I was too, for Ennia's parting words to him were imprinted on my memory.

She had whispered them and I fancied I was not supposed to hear.

“I pray it may not travel so far,” she had said. “Still, it may come, and you should prepare as best you are able!”

“Who is Ennia really, Opa?” I asked for the twentieth time as we reached the border of our land. He had not given me a proper answer. “Is she really a princess?”

“To the world, perhaps not, Gretl,” he said. “But she is a very dear friend. That is all you need to know for now.”

My curiosity knew no bounds but I had to be satisfied. When Opa made up his mind to be silent, I could never cajole him into small talk. And I pondered long and hard about the smoking bowls, and about what it would be like to be an honorary chief of Singari and a mistress of swordplay. But there was something else on my mind and its memory made me feel chilled. The pleasure of the afternoon had driven it from my head like a fading dream.

The old tower. It must surely have been my imagination but for a twinkling as we passed it for the first time, I could have sworn I saw a man staring down at me from one of the broken window openings.

A man in a black cloak whose face was half hidden by a black hood.

