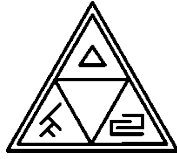


THE GAMBLER'S FORTUNE
The Third Tale of Einarinn
Juliet E McKenna



Chapter One

Songs of the Common People
Being gathered on travels throughout the Tormalin Empire
in the reigns of Castan the Gracious and Nemith the Wily,
by Maitresse Dyesse Den Parisot.

The House of Den Parisot has dwelt in the Nyme valley since the days of the earliest Emperors. As the wisdom of Tormalin advances to embrace ever wider lands, the men of the House work ceaselessly in the service of their Name and Den Parisot responsibilities now run from farthest East to the very fringes of the Great Forest. The bonds of affection between my husband and myself were so sorely tested when these obligations drew him from home that I resolved to go on the road in his company. While fulfilling my wifely duties on our travels, I made a study of the tales and music we heard and present them here for a wider audience. Music is always a proper occupation for women, from the lullay that soothes the fractious babe, to the genteel airs we teach our daughters, to the round songs we share in good fellowship. In these songs gleaned from the commonalty of the Empire, I have found beguiling melody, tales to provoke tears and laughter and no little wisdom. Much of value and beauty has been found across the Empire to ornament the great Houses of Tormalin and music is but a less tangible wealth to enrich us.

I present these songs as an entertainment, and too, as evident proof of all that unites the Empire, however many leagues might divide its peoples. While we beseech Drianon's blessing on our fields of wheat, so the people of the boundless plains commit their mares and foals to her care. I have been welcomed in Ostrin's name to the leathern tents of cattle herds, just as devoutly as on the threshold of the Imperial palace. Divine authority pays no heed to bounds of time or distance and the same is true of music. A song of woodland birds sung to a babe beneath the leaves of the wildwood will beguile a silk-swathed princeling just as happily. Stirring adventures from northern mountains will warm the blood of youths in the cohorts and teach them much of courage and duty besides.

Harmony delights the ear more than the solitary voice. A threefold cord is not so easily broken as a single strand. Brothers united in common purpose fare better than those divided by rivalry or suspicion. Such truths are acknowledged the length and breadth of the Empire, You will find these and more besides in this collection.



*Selerima, Western Ensaimin,
First Day of the Spring Fair, Morning*

There's a certain kind of man whose common-sense shrinks almost exactly as fast as his self-conceit swells. Perhaps it's an inevitable law of nature, one of those things Rationalists will bore on about, given half a chance. Whatever, there are enough of them about, especially at festivals, to let me turn a rune - or in this case a nutshell - for profit any time I choose.

I leaned forward and smiled confidently. 'You've been watching close now, haven't you, friend? Care to risk another penny on it?'

The stout man's eyes flickered upwards to my face, halting for a breath at the tempting ruffle of my loose laced shirt and as his gaze left the crumb strewn tabletop, my fingers moved unseen beneath my other hand to make sure I'd be taking his coin once again.

I'd say I've got it this time,' he chuckled, confidence gleaming in his eyes like the fancy braid on his cuffs. Still smiling, I held his eyes with mine although a whisper of cold air on the nape of my neck stirred the hairs like those of a wary cat. A door behind me was being held open for some reason pressing enough to let the tavern waste its heat on the chilly spring day outside.

The merchant made up his mind and reached for the middle of the three nutshells. I laid a soft hand on his hairy fingers. 'Copper to choose, silver to see,' I dimpled, all innocent charm.

'Fair enough, girlie. I've got you this time.' He tossed a copper onto the table and snatched boldly at his chosen shell. As he gaped at the bare wood beneath, I managed a look of wide-eyed startlement to match his own surprise. Several onlookers laughed but I never do that, not since my early days on the road. A disgruntled cowherd once backhanded me across the face, losing his sense of humour along with his meagre hoard of pennies.

'Saedrin's stones, I could have sworn I had it that time!' The merchant rubbed a fat hand over sweaty jowls and reached again. As I spread a warning hand over the shells, I heard the scrape of nailed boots coming down on flagstones with a measured tread.

'Silver to see, you know the game,' I braced myself in my chair, unnoticed but ready to rise.

Frustration never lets them not know. The merchant tossed an ill tempered and tarnished penny at me, which I swept briskly into my pocket. As he picked up one shell then the other to reveal the errant kernel, I let the eager bystanders close in to the table.

'But how, by all that's holy-' the luckless mark looked up, exasperated, but the townsfolk in their holiday best had me effectively concealed from view. I edged away. A tug at the laces drew my shirt to a more respectable neatness and I paused for a moment in the shadow of the stairwell to reverse my jerkin unseen. Unhurried, I pulled the far door closed behind me as I shrugged into dun homespun, pulling the gaudy scarf from my head and stuffing it in a breeches pocket. There was no mistaking the bellow of a Watch sergeant behind me, asking who had been running the game. Various gullible fair-goers whose coin jingled in my purse would doubtless be eager enough to give him a description. A woman unremarkable of height or build, they'd say, but with a bright red jerkin and a headscarf patterned in yellow and crimson imperfectly concealing her straight black locks. The Watch were welcome to try and find me to demand a cut of the coin with that scent to follow. Using my fingers, I combed through the soft auburn waves of my hair and plucked out a few errant wisps of dyed

horsehair. I let these fall inconspicuously onto a brazier burning incense in the doorway of a little shrine to Halcarion. The smoke could carry my thanks to the Moon Maiden, for keeping my luck bright for another day.

Five chimes rang from the nearby Wool Audit Hall and a hurrying peddler bumped into my back as I halted. I scowled at him; suspicious hands checking purse and belt pouch but a second glance showed he was no pickpocket.

‘Your pardon, fair festival’ he muttered, trying unsuccessfully to keep to the flagway, the gutters were already choked with dung and garbage. The holiday was barely started but the city’s population was doubling or trebling for the Equinox fair. Still, by the end of five days’ celebrations there would be drunks and paupers enough buying their way out the Watch’s lock-up by clearing the streets.

Tall wooden houses loomed over the cobbled street, three and four storeys high; each stepped a little further out. The newly lime washed plaster of the walls shone bright against the dark oak beams in the spring sunshine. Shutters swung open above my head as some busy housewife hung featherbeds out to air. Dust billowed from open doorways as floors were swept clean for the festivities. Memories ten years or more past teased me. I could almost have been back in Vanam, Selerima’s nearest rival among the great trading cities dotted among the patchwork of fiefdoms that make up Ensaumin. But I had taken myself off from my so-called home and fallen by Halcarion’s grace into the far more rewarding, if more risky life of chance and gaming. I was no harried housemaid, roused before dawn to scrub and fettle. Looking down at my well-kept hands, remembering them red with toil and a winter’s chilblains, I rebuked myself and slipped off the gaudy ring I’d been wearing as I separated the local clods from their coin. Some Watchman more alert than most might just be looking for such a bauble.

A more distant tower struck its own brazen version of noon with a handful of rising notes. I gathered my wits; the myriad opportunities of the fair were distracting me. This was no time to be yearning for a high-stakes game of runes or raven. The game I was setting the board for promised to set me up for life, if I made the play successfully. I just needed the final pair of pieces. Walking briskly past the tuppenny liquor houses where I’d spent that morning turning a pretty profit, I took a narrow alley to the off-hand and came out onto the broad, sunlight sweep of the highroad. There it was, the lofty tower of the Guilds’ Conclave Hall, decked out with flags and pennants to proclaim Selerima’s wealth and power to all and sundry flocking to the fair from ten days travel in any direction. All the adornments couldn’t disguise the ramparts, the watchtowers and the high narrow embrasures for the crossbow men though. It might be a handful of generations since Selerima last had to fight for its rights but the city fathers still make sure young men do their militia drills in the exercise halls maintained by each guild. I wondered about trying my luck in a few of them. No, no one would be shooting bales of old hay full of arrows with all the fun of the fair to be had.

If the Conclave Tower was to my sword-hand, I needed to go up hill. I wove through excited crowds with practised ease to the luxuriously appointed, stone-built inn where I was currently sleeping. Sleeping very well too, on soft goose feathers and crisp linen, a meek lass hurrying to light my fire and bring hot water for my washstand first thing every morning. High spirits put a spring in my step as I sauntered towards the gentlefolk’s parlour.

‘Livak, at last! I was wondering where you had got to.’ My current travelling companion hurried down the stairs. The dour expression on his thin face did nothing to dampen my sunny mood.

‘You could have left a note or message,’ complained Usara mildly, raising a hand to summon wine. We seated ourselves at an expensively polished table.

‘It’s only just past noon.’ I nodded to the boy who filled my goblet and earned himself a copper to ensure a discreet withdrawal. ‘The streets are busy, hadn’t you noticed? Sorry,

you're not used to big cities or festival crowds, are you?' I blinked mock contrition over the rim of the elegant crystal.

Usara answered me with a half smile. 'Have you managed to find these friends of yours?'

'Not just yet.' I shook my head, unconcerned. 'I've left messages at the likely taverns, the more adventurous brothels. They're bound to arrive sometime today or tomorrow.'

Usara frowned. 'This is all very vague and uncertain. How can you be sure they're even coming to Selerima?'

'I know because Charoleia told me they were coming here. They wouldn't lie to her and she has no reason to lie to me; we're friends and that means we trust each other.' I took a sip of excellent Tormalin wine. Selerima might have shaken off the honour of being the Old Empire's most westerly city long since but merchants have always maintained links with the East and for more than the convenience of a common language. This vintage had been carried clear across the civilised world to delight discerning patrons at this elegant hostelry. The flagons had probably travelled nearly as many leagues as me.

Usara ran a hand over his thinning sandy hair. 'That's all very well but what if something unexpected has occurred? You've no way of knowing, so I think it's best if I-'

'No,' I leaned forward in my chair and cut off his words with an emphatic sweep of one hand. 'I'm the big dog with the brass collar here. This is my game and I say how we play it. You're only here as a favour to your master by the grace of mine.'

Usara's lips thinned with irritation as a faint wash of colour rose in on his high cheekbones. I judged it wise to give a little carefully judged ground. 'We'll give Sorgrad and Sorgren until tomorrow evening to contact us. If we've had no word by then, we'll think again.'

The annoyance faded reluctantly from Usara's pale complexion. 'What now?'

'We eat,' I gestured to the maidservant waiting patiently by the hatch to the serving room. I could see a wonderful range of delicacies brought up from the kitchens being suitably plated up and garnished and our table was soon spread with an elegant array of creamware dishes. I savoured the enticing aromas, always gratified to be eating the sort of food I'd grown up seeing carried up the back stairs by footmen and the house steward. The girl brought fine white bread, the first, sweet, grass-fed mutton, seethed pigeon breast with its broth thickened with egg and herbs, a grand salad of spinach and cresses, decorated with nuts, raisins, pickled buds and crystallised flowers, lightly sauced with verjuice and green oil. Usara seemed rather less impressed than me but he probably ate like this every noon, not just on high days and holidays like we lesser folk.

He wiped his mouth on a brocaded napkin. 'What have you been doing this morning?'

'As I said, leaving word in likely places.' I didn't see any need to tell Usara I was topping up my purse. I wasn't paying for any of this luxurious living but I needed a reason to be hanging around in the taprooms, didn't I? 'How about you?'

'I've been round every Guild Hall asking for entry to their libraries or archives,' scowled Usara, 'but the liverymen are entirely taken up with the Fair.'

That was chafing him like an ill-fitting boot, being used to instant respect and unquestioning co-operation. I stifled a smile with my own napkin. 'The festival's only five days long. You can look at the archives or whatever after that. It's taken us the best part of a season to get here so a few more days won't tip the balance either way.'

Usara nodded mutely but I could see dissatisfaction lurking in his warm brown eyes as we applied ourselves to our meal. I had better do something before he took himself off on his own initiative. I wasn't having him toss a random rune to spoil my plans. Using a licked finger to collect the last sweet crumbs of a curd tartlet, I pushed aside my plate. 'Let's see what kind of show this city puts on.'

'You think we'll find these friends of yours in these crowds?' Usara would never have

been so openly scornful when we'd started on the long journey from Toremal. Well, it was about time he felt at ease with me.

'There aren't that many Mountain men in the cities, so I suppose we might,' I said. 'They mostly just trade with villages on the edges of the uplands. But no, Sorgrad and 'Gren prefer to go unnoticed. You don't get far in our line of work if you stick in people's memories.'

Usara looked sceptical for a moment then favoured me with a sudden bright smile. 'It's got to be more interesting than sitting here all afternoon. As you say, we don't see spectacles like this in Hadrumal.'

His words were lost in a carillon of bells from every side of the city. We hurried out to the broad front steps of the inn and found the flagway packed tight with people. Watchmen burnished for the festival were clearing stragglers out of the way. Standing on my toes, I could just see the first of the huge guild symbols being carried high by journeymen of the trade. Then a heavily built man with a lavishly plumed hat blocked my view entirely. I tugged at Usara's arm. 'Let's find somewhere better to stand.'

Not much taller than me and scant measures heavier; he was similarly struggling to get a sight of the procession. Judicious use of elbows and brooch pin got us to an alley entry where the jutting foundation stones of a Tormalin-built hall gave us a vantage point. I gave Usara a hand up and we saw a massive pair of scissors was bobbing down the highroad. The wood was painted and gilded to look like metal, incidentally demonstrating the wealth of the Tailor's Guild of course. Liverymen bowing and waving in fur-trimmed robes followed the journeymen sweating under the honour of their burden. Finally the warden of the guild appeared, carried aloft in his padded chair on the shoulders of apprentices, presumably chosen for even height and stout muscles. Louder cheers identified loyal craftsmen keen to show allegiance and have their fealty noticed by the masters of their trade.

Fullers and dyers followed with an unexciting display of cloth on tenterhooks teased and harried by rising breezes. The skimmers and furriers came next, garnering far more approval from the masses with journeymen wearing monstrous heads; wolves with mad silver eyes and crimson tongues lolling over bloodstained teeth, bears with snarling, foam flecked jaws. One lithe figure dressed as a cunning marten complete with mask and tail dodged among them while another in the long leather apron of his trade pursued him with a knife as long as my arm mocked up out of wood and paint. I laughed along with everyone else.

'This makes festivals in Hadrumal look a bit staid.' Usara bent close to my ear to make himself heard.

'Selerima puts on nearly as good a show as Vanam,' I shouted appreciatively.

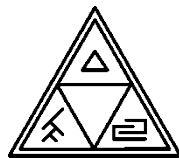
Tanners followed next, then leather workers. The procession wore on, each guild's standard raised above the Great Gate before they dispersed to feasting at their own audit hall. The banners proclaimed the myriad skills and trades earning coin for the cities of Ensaimin strung along the rivers, bringing valuables from mountains and forests and dotted the length of the Great West Road that carries all manner of staples and luxuries to the ancient Kingdom of Solura in the West, to the diminished Tormalin Empire in the East and for anyone in between with silver to spend. Saddlers, fusters and lorriners gave way to coopers and joiners; pewterers and cutlers were followed by blacksmiths who disdained the counterfeits of the other guilds. Journeymen carried a massive hammer wrought of polished wood and gleaming steel between them, muscles rippling.

The goldsmiths alone of the crafts allowed women in their procession, prosperous wives and haughty daughters on the arms of the liverymen, decked out with rings by the handful, necklaces and earrings jingling, brooches and pins securing dark blue gowns and head-dresses. To my mind the effect was rather spoiled by the glowering of heavyset apprentices marching alongside, before and behind, each swinging a hefty cudgel. I don't suppose it was any coincidence that the blade smiths followed; daggers, swords and steels bright in the

sunshine as apprentices brandished their trial-pieces in flourishes threatening to take off any greedy hands. I wondered idly if the ladies would be still wearing their finery at the guild feast and how hard it might be to find a maidservant's dowdy dress.

Finally the fitful breeze brought a tempting scent over the heads of the throng. Silversmiths and copper workers got scant attention as the crowd turned expectantly to the bakers and brewers, the butchers and grocers. A massive loaf carried high above the heads of the throng was an impressive sight and the heady smell of yeast from vats of ale being wheeled along even managed to outdo the sweaty odours of unwashed bodies. Links of cooked sausage joined buns and sweetmeats tossed out on either side, cheap earthenware beakers of beer were handed around. The crowds began to move again, people filling the road as the last craft passed, eager to get a share of the largesse and save the price of a meal. Peddlers and pie men appeared with jugglers and entertainers. All were looking for a share in the festival pennies hoarded through the latter half of winter and the first half of spring. Some canny minstrel raised some boastful song proclaiming Selerima's might and bright pennies pattered into his upturned hat.

It was pleasant to stand aloof, no need to scramble for bread and meat, the days long past when I would salvage a meal from the gutters, brushing off the soiled straw and nameless filth. 'Come on,' I caught at Usara's sleeve as he stared, rapt, after the parade. 'Let's get down to the fairground and see the fun there.'



Selerima, Western Ensaimin, First Afternoon of the Spring Fair

'Where do we go next, Jeirran?'

'You've tried every assay house, every tinsmith?' Jeirran planted booted feet firmly on the cobbles, defying the stream of locals flowing past intent on holiday amusements. 'What about pewterers, there must be plenty of those?'

His three companions were less certain in their stance. All had the fair hair and pale eyes common to Mountain Men but their faces showed shared blood as well, the same solid features and sturdy frames.

The two men exchanged a somewhat hesitant glance before the elder spoke up. 'Three places out of five are shuttered up for festival. Where we can get an answer, no-one will do business.' Irritation overcame his reluctance to speak. 'Not with us anyway. They all say the same thing, Jeirran; they buy their metal from the traders who come down from the hills.'

'And did you find out what prices they're paying? Five times what Degran and his cronies are paying us, I'll wager,' interrupted Jeirran, exasperated. 'You explained it exactly as I told you to, Keisyl? We can deliver finer ingots for a fifth less cost?'

'And they say show us your ingots,' the older brother retorted. 'No one's interested in ore samples. We need to bring down metal-.'

'The ore samples show the quality of what we offer!' Jeirran broke in. 'We'll smelt the ores and deliver the tin but we need coin to meet our needs. Are you sure you explained it properly?'

'Yes, Jeirran, we're sure.' The younger broke off to scowl after a burly fair-goer barging past with scant apology. 'Those that didn't laugh in our faces told us to talk to the metalworkers' guilds, said they might be interested in staking us for a share in the profits.'

'The guildhalls are shut for the festival but it might be worth staying on -,' Keisyl lifted

his voice above the hubbub of the crowds. The girl hushed him but he patted her arm. 'There's not one in a hundred here understands what we're saying, Eirys. Don't fret.'

'The whole point of dealing direct with the lowlands is to keep all the profits for ourselves.' Jeirran did not bother to hide his contempt. 'We could find three trustworthy kindreds inside a day's travel who'd be more than happy to take a share in return for timber props and furnace charcoal, spare sons to dig the ore like as not. Make a deal like that and you sign away any hope of filling your coffers or making a decent marriage before Maewelin claims your bones!'

'Half shares in worked metal has to be better than whole claim on ore ten measures underground and no way to reach it!' the younger brother objected with some heat, folding muscular arms over a brawny chest.

'Do you ever listen to a word I say, Teiriol?' Jeirran turned on him. 'If we can be sure of selling the metal down here, we can buy in what we need to put in a deep mine ourselves, hire in labour like the lowlanders. That way we keep all the profit.'

'I don't like discussing our business in the open street like this!' In the girl's face, the broad foreheads and square jaws of the men were softened to an appealing oval framed with delicate curls artfully drawn forward from the knot of her golden hair, but her lip was quivering in an ominous pout as she drew in her skirts, trying to keep the others between herself and the townsfolk. 'I want to go back to the boarding house,' she burst out. 'I'm fed up with being jostled and stared at. You shouldn't treat me so, Jeirran, I'm your wife and I deserve better. It's downright disrespectful and -.'

'Very well, as you wish.' Jeirran clasped his hands behind his back, knuckles white as he sought to contain his frustration. 'Keisyl, take your sister back to our rooms, if you please.'

'I want Teiriol to come with me,' the girl interrupted petulantly.

'As you wish. Keisyl and I will see you at sundown. Oh, Eirys, don't start crying!' he snapped with exasperation.

'I'm sorry.' Her flower-blue eyes brimmed with tears, the pale rose of her complexion vanishing under an unappealing bloom of scarlet. 'I'm sorry but I don't like it here. It's noisy and dirty and the people are rude and -'

'Come on,' Teiriol put a comforting arm around his sister's shaking shoulders and led her away on the inner side of the flagway where she was protected by the buildings on one side and himself on the other. Eirys pulled up the hood of her fur-trimmed cape and clutched it tight. Teiriol spared a fulminating backward glance at Jeirran. Keisyl watched them go, his expression a mixture of relief and concern.

'Why did you insist she come?' sighed Keisyl, running a hand over close-cropped blonde hair. He loosened his own cape with blunt fingered hands to reveal a creamy linen shirt bright with embroidery. Weariness shadowed the pale skin beneath his azure eyes. 'I'm sure it's not fitting to expose her to all this barbarity.'

'I wasn't about to leave her at home,' spat Jeirran. 'Your mother's spent every day since Solstice telling Eirys any three men she could name would care better for her lands. Give Ismenia half a chance and she'll be telling Eirys to repudiate me inside a half a year of marriage.' Rising colour threw his golden beard into unflattering relief. Neatly trimmed around full lips, it did little to soften a square jaw set above a bullish neck. Jeirran's hair was longer than Keisyl's, swept back from a wide, high forehead to curl down to his collar in wiry yellow waves. For all the bluntness of his features, he was undeniably handsome and carried himself with that knowledge.

'I don't think Mother will be any too impressed if you bring her home with some foul lowlander disease.' Keisyl glared at Jeirran, sufficiently taller to make it an effective tactic. A couple of seasons' seniority added to the harshness of his tone. A ragged lad with startled eyes ducked past, clutching a loaf to his chest.

‘There’s no reason to imagine dangers like that, not this early in the year.’ Jeirran forced himself to a more conciliatory stance. ‘We’re keeping ourselves to ourselves and we’ll be back in our own air soon enough. That should cheer Eirys up.’

‘And what will we have to show for our trouble?’ demanded Keisyl. ‘You’ve been telling us all winter this Fair was the only place to come and trade for better prices. So far, no-one will even take a look at our ores, let alone discuss a deal.’

‘So these people are too stupid to see buying without a middleman adding his profit saves them coin! I’ll try some of these so-called smiths myself tomorrow. I speak lowlander tongue better than you and it’s about time you tried to entertain Eirys. Today, we find a buyer for the furs. If necessary we’ll use that coin to buy what we need. We can drive a decent digging into the back of the lode and make a start ourselves.’ Jeirran nodded firmly. ‘We’ll bring ingots next year, so fine even these clods can’t ignore them. There’s more than one way of snaring a coney.’

A child bright in her holiday best turned her beribboned head at meaningless words in unknown accents. She tugged at her mother’s skirts, but the woman hustled her away, sparing a glance of surprise and suspicion at the men.

Keisyl smiled at the child. ‘How do we go about that, when every furrier will be as intent on his holiday as everyone else?’

‘There are plenty of merchants dealing in hides and skins at this fair,’ Jeirran stated confidently. ‘I was talking to some while we waited to pass the gates.’

Keisyl’s expression brightened. ‘Why didn’t you make a deal there and then?’

‘None of Degran’s men wintering in the valley bottom thought to mention a ban on all trading before the official opening of the fair.’ Grievance soured Jeirran’s voice.

‘So when is that?’ Keisyl’s question was lost as a heedless group of youths chased a stray dog past. Even the shortest of the ebullient boys a good head taller than either Mountain man, though not the tallest was as broad in the shoulder. ‘When is that?’ he repeated.

‘The man at the rooming house said it’s after the guilds’ procession is done.’ Jeirran set his jaw and forced his way through the busy street, upland muscles earning him irritated glances that he ignored. ‘The fairground’s down by the river, this way.’

Moving with the flow of the crowd soon brought the Mountain Men to the Water Gate. A sudden surge carried them through the clogged arches and they found they were outside the walls. Jeirran’s expression cleared a little to see blue sky uncluttered by looming buildings. Scant moments later the crowd ground to a halt and a fierce scowl carved its habitual lines between his pale eyebrows.

‘What now?’ he hissed at Keisyl’s shoulder. The other man muttered an oath and lifted himself on the toes of his boots to try and see but the expectant throng hemmed them in uncomfortably. The murmur rose to a new pitch of excitement before a shrill of brassy trumpets demanded silence. By the waterside, an unseen fruity voice was lifted in formal declamation.

‘For-Spring is past; we give thanks to Halcarion for the renewal of seed and beast. Aft-Spring is coming; we beseech Arimelin to send us good luck and good counsel. Remember this feast is sacred to Raeonin and let every man deal fairly or face due judgement.’

A great cheer rang out, startling a flock of mottled birds from the willow crowned islets barely visible in the broad, spring-swollen river. A great leather glove, tall as a half-grown child, bobbed and waved above the heads of the crowd until its pole dropped home into the waiting socket. The people surged past into the fairground, eager for bargains from brightly coloured booths and gawking at entertainments offered on all sides.

‘See a wonder or two, my lady? You look like a daring young man! Spend a copper to see creatures half man and half beast?’ A crier hovered in front a gaudy tent painted with improbable scenes of forest and mountain, darting this way and that. ‘Freaks of magic or of

nature - you decide! Sir, how about you?’

‘Come on, we’re here to do business, not put copper in some charlatan’s purse.’ Jeirran caught Keisyl’s arm as he wavered. ‘We don’t have coin to waste gawking at misbegotten lowlanders.’ Jeirran glared at a hawker waving crudely carved puppets bright with tatters of cloth.

‘Have you any idea where we should go?’ Keisyl looked down the five already trampled lanes spreading out from the fair’s standard. Each was lined with eager sellers, merchants working from the back of wains piled high with wares, modest traders with barrows and tables, peasants looking to sell the paltry fruits of winter evenings’ labours from threadbare blankets spread on the damp ground.

‘We’ll try down here,’ said Jeirran decisively, pointing to stalls groaning beneath bolts of fine cloth, peddlers touting ribbons and lace, beads and buttons busy in between. He pushed through brightly dressed women towards larger, more sombre booths beyond. Stern-faced men were examining piles of hides and furs laid on broad trestle tables, sharp scents of dye and tanning rising above the green odour of crushed grass.

Jeirran spared Keisyl with a nod of satisfaction. ‘Here, tell me, what is the price you ask for these skins?’

‘What that’s you say?’ The skinny stallholder turned from a customer, cupping a hand as tanned as his wares to one prominent ear.

‘I thought you said you spoke lowlander tongue better than me or Teiriol,’ Keisyl stuck his hands through his tooled leather belt and scowled at the Seleriman. Jeirran repeated his question carefully and the leather merchant flipped the edge of a skin to show figures chalked on the underside, looking down his long nose with faint contempt.

‘See, this is three, five times what Degran Lackhand pays in the valley bottom,’ Jeirran hissed to Keisyl, stabbing a finger at the numbers. He checked quickly through the heap of hides, shoving the top ones aside as they slid and hampered him. ‘The quality’s nowhere near as fine as ours.’

‘What’s that you say? Not got a civilised tongue in your head?’ The lanky trader planted hands on the hips of his buff jerkin with some irritation. ‘Are you looking to buy or not?’

‘Where do you purchase your hides?’ demanded Jeirran, brushing chalk dust from his fingers.

‘None of your business.’ The merchant scowled under black brows but a prosperous townsman claimed his attention with a wave of a jingling purse and a ludicrously low offer for a russet and white cowhide.

‘It’s just as I’ve been telling you. One winter’s worth of trapping sold direct to a merchant here will net more coin than we’d get in three seasons waiting on Degran.’ Jeirran crossed to a stall heaped with soft bundles of rolled furs. ‘Look! Your mother wouldn’t use this to line a hound’s winter boots, I’d scarce bother bringing it in from the hills. Down here, it’s fetching more than Degran pays for miniver!’

‘That’s no great deal if we have to waste half a season tramping all the way down here and back again.’ Keisyl shook his head. ‘We agreed to help you on the snare lines over winter as long as you helped us at the diggings in the summer. We should be clearing the workings by now, not haggling with lowlanders.’

Jeirran ignored him. ‘We’ll get a good price then use some of the coin for trinkets and fancies. Eirys is always nagging for treats from the traders. Enough gewgaws will keep your mother sweet as well.’ He turned on Keisyl. ‘And we want to keep your mother sweet, don’t we? Otherwise she’ll be looking round for a husband for Theilyn, like as not, walking her round this coming Solstice.’

‘Theilyn’s too young to marry for a good few years yet.’ Keisyl shook his head but a shadow of concern darkened his blue eyes.

‘But she’s not too young to be betrothed.’ Jeirran insisted. ‘What if your mother finds some family with a gang of sons all eager to offer their labour to help the one who’s going to be getting the prize? Who’s to say she won’t let them start working the diggings instead of you and Teiriol?’

‘We have the right to those workings until Theilyn’s wed, no day less,’ objected Keisyl.

‘Then you’d better make sure you’re bringing in enough to keep your mother sweet. And you need enough coin in hand to woo a girl with decent lands of her own once Theilyn’s eye does start looking out a spot to set her own hearthstone, you and Teiriol both. You won’t get that scratching pits where the lode surfaces. Stripping out easy tin and cutting trees to smelt it may have been good enough for your father but there are no more surface seams to be had, are there? You need to dig deep ore and you need fuel. It’ll be thrice three years before there’s any new growth to speak of in your coppices and you’re not touching the old growth, not while I’m husbanding them. Those woods are Eirys’s endowment; it’s my duty to provide for our children out of their bounty. You could show a little gratitude; I should be concentrating on Eirys’s business, not spending time and effort helping you two make something of Theilyn’s portion. You need to drive in a proper mine and that means shoring and charcoal furnaces and if you’re not going to strike a shares-deal for what you need, you’ll have to pay coin on the settling stone. Where are you going to get that gold, unless I’m willing to come in with you, for Eirys’s sake?’ Jeirran’s eyes burned

‘So find someone to buy the furs.’ Keisyl clenched empty hands eloquently. ‘Do something besides just telling me things I already know!’

Jeirran dug in the satchel slung beneath his cape. Pulling out a handful of neatly trimmed squares of fur and leather, he caught at the moss coloured sleeve of the man across the trestle. ‘Here, what do you think of these?’

‘I think I’m selling, not buying, friend.’ The busy merchant swept a meaty hand across his board. ‘Get your moth-bitten rubbish off my goods.’

Jeirran stooped to recover his sample pieces, face scarlet with indignation. ‘Your loss, fool!’ Pushing through the jostling masses, he headed for the next fur trader, a hatchet faced man with a shock of grey hair swept back from shrewd hazel eyes.

‘What can I do for you, friend?’ The man spared Jeirran a quick glance as he rummaged in the pocket of his calico apron, brushing stray hairs from his jerkin sleeve with the other hand.

‘Would you like to buy fine furs?’ Jeirran proffered a silky white strip. ‘Better quality than anything you’ve got here.’

‘Mountain fox is it?’ The man took the fur and sniffed at it, turning it over to see how well it was cured. ‘What are you asking?’ His eyes scanned the crowd.

‘Ten marks the pelt and we have a good supply with us.’ Jeirran nodded triumphantly at Keisyl.

‘Guild rate is five marks the pelt and that only for top quality. There you go, mistress, that will trim a gown or a hood to perfection, fair festival to you.’ The merchant abruptly turned his back to sell a fluffy red squirrel skin to a sharp eyed woman in blue whose maid was already laden with purchases. ‘Anyway, Mountain Man, I don’t do deals outside the audit hall! Do you think I’m some kind of idiot? Yes, sir, what are you looking for?’

Eager customers forced them away from the busy trader and his unmistakable dismissal. Keisyl looked puzzled but Jeirran set his jaw obstinately, smoothing the ruffled fur round his hand. ‘Come on, let’s try over there.’