

Gisoreux de Ponthieu - Chapter Two

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A

few months after my triumphant return from the Forest of Arden and the ceremony that instated me as fully pledged defender of the Realm, my father rode to Lyonesse to take control of the Duke's fleet to battle with the Norse raiders of the Cape Sorrow. A bit more explanation of the situation might be in order: after the last incursion of Chaos in those days into the realms the Norse invaders captured a sea fort off the north coast of Lyonesse, mounted on top of a large cliff that was rampant in open sea, it was found to be impregnable by all means. From this stronghold the raiders attacked our shipping lanes and merchants, striking fast and then to withdraw cowardly into the safe caverns underneath the fortress. The King in his great wisdom realising the danger to trade along the coast sent a Royal fleet to Lyonesse at which our Duke added a flotilla of galleons. The Duke then summoned my father to command his fleet and as duty calls my father obeyed. As I've told before, this situation hastened my errand to fight a fearful enemy and my father could leave, knowing the lands would be in the hands of a good regent, monitored by a pious and just woman, my mother.

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The months beforehand I had passed with travelling my father's fief as an acting judge and architect, counselling the mayors and generals of the forts and villages that lay within the borders of our fief in the name of my father. Wherever my sword or council was needed, I would travel, searching honour and glory ceaselessly. There was a selfish cause to my never relenting travels: they kept my mind occupied. The love of my life still dominated my thoughts at every unguarded opportunity, her image ever present behind my eyelids. Sleeping became near impossible until exhaustion finally claimed me and even then my dreams were haunted with her appearance, her voice, her eyes... My revered mother of course noticed my anxiety and distracted behaviour but chose not to confront me yet. I tried to hide my discomfort but how does one hide such things from who knows you better than you know yourself? In the end I spend a lot of time in travelling and hunting: I roamed towards the neighbouring fiefs and rested there for a day, only to leave in the morrow. I can count the nights which I spent home those days on one single hand. My proud father was happy with my hard work for the glory of Roiglan and didn't seem to mind. Few days before my father would leave to take up his command, I was forced to be resident in Roiglan for days at an end: to take up the regency of my father's fief.

Roiglan is a land that is calm and secluded from any danger: the dark and corrupted influence of Mousillon in the far south doesn't normally spread so far north nor does the evil lurking in the Forest of Arden ever dare to venture outside the wooden borders for fear of a just wrath. This was to be my prison and I fell into an endless pit of boredom and restless wandering through Roiglan: I had an enormous excess on energy that needed an outlet but every day passed with the same dull routine. Sword and horse training ever became more standard, the sometimes difficult and intensive exercises were never able to wear me down enough. Those days never seem to pass as my mind had to much

free time to wander and dig up that unreal love for her.

It still amazes me how long it took my mother before confronting me with my abnormal behaviour of those summer months. It is a conversation I still remember so vivid after thirty years. It was a surprisingly cool night with grey and dark clouds looming over Roiglan. The balcony had become my shelter from the outside world over the past few weeks as no household Knight or servant dared to disturb me while I was resting there as I was gazing down at my beautiful Roiglan. Even though it had started to rain softly, I did not mind for the refreshing rain was a relief for the excruciating fire that burned my mind. Completely lost in thought, I had become cold and soaked as the drops kept on pouring on to me. Half automatically I would now and then wipe the rain and my long, wet hairs from my face. I never even heard my mother opening the balcony doors and bringing me a cloak which she softly wrapped around me with care that only a mother has. I don't know how long she stood there, silent and worried, but at long last she broke a long silence: "My son, will you look at me?" Her words brought me back to the hard, real world and obeying instantly at my mother's wish I turned and looked towards her. Some months ago we had stood here exactly like this in a different situation. Whatever she saw in the features of my weary and wet face, I'll never know but she already knew what ailed my broken heart when she asked me: "What aches your mind and heart, Gissy? Since your return from Arden you are reluctant and anxious in mind, restless and feverish in work." I knew that to hide the true nature of my pain to my mother would be folly. After a while I hesitantly replied: "You once told me that true love never dies, mother." While I threw my eyes downward not to face the truth of my mother's eyes, I continued: "I sincerely hope you were wrong for my heart would never heal and to live with a broken mind is to live half." "Who is she? She, who resisted the charms of my son and left him with a broken heart? Surely no damsel of true Bretonnian blood can resist such a noble-born son of the land?" She replied graciously while a caring smile appeared on her wizened face. After she gently stroked her palm across my face, she understood I could not speak of her at the moment she added: "Oh how it is a woman's frustrating toil to be able to protect your son from danger and sorrow yet not to be able to mend your son's heart in love. A woman who runs from her own feelings isn't worthy of love, Gissy. Best forgotten and buried. Try to rest for a while. Heart-broken is a lot like any other wound: it might sting and hurt yet it will pass." With those comforting words she went back inside, leaving me alone to ponder her words in the rain. She said exactly what I needed to hear as she knew she had. The next day I was less haunted throughout the day: she was still dominating my chain of thoughts yet I found the strength to endure.

Over the weeks I became increasingly more stable and rare were the moments when my heart would take over my mind. I was finally able to completely focus upon my duties as regent of the fief. On the thirty-third day of my father's departure I led my first battle at the helm of the Army of Roiglan. The day beforehand scouts from the edge of the Forest of Arden returned with bad omens of a gathering greenskin army at the borders. Near noon that day they had sacked the village of Flarodell, luckily after the inhabitants fled the doomed village. Near the evening my army headed out of Roiglan to meet the foul greenskin horde head on, weakened although since many Knights of the household had gone with my father. My army consisted out of three cohorts of men-at-arms and two levies of bowmen, led by a group of Knights and me. At the rally point there would be waiting the Urban Cohort of Flarodell and the mounted scouts, who were harassing the advance of the orcs and goblins. As I knew the surrounding lands I had a huge advantage to plan my strategy: halfway between the savages and us there lay two hills which formed a perfect bottleneck, so their superior numbers would be oppressed by the flanking hills. I positioned the four units of men-at-arms and the bowmen on top of the hill out of sight of the battle line of greenskins, while the Knights and I would challenge them head on. My plan was that the mounted squires would lure them into the bottleneck and into my trap: as we would charge them and tie them down, the commoners were destined to emerge on top of the hills, the archers raining death upon the hordes while the men-at-arms assaulted their vulnerable flanks. At dawn that day the Lady blessed me with the company of six Questing Knights who were equally willing to cleanse the lands from the green scourge. They were to stay next to us as bait for the trap.

It was near high noon when I first heard the terrifying sound of their despicable war drums in the distant valley. Their incessant pounding quickly grew to a loud thunder as they approached, to fill the full length of the field beyond. Here and there I saw a mounted man, firing arrows in the growing horde. Just when they were about to reach our bottleneck one of the scouts was careless and got slain by hail of orc arrows and trampled asunder by the marching host. Luckily the bait still held as they poured into the bottleneck when the sergeant of the scouts reached me: "Sir! Those green thugs are many, sir, too many! My guess: three to one of ours." He stumbled, still exhausted from the chase and trying to look calm but failing miserably. "Get your unit in their positions, Marc-Graven and hold true to your orders." I replied calmly although inwards a battle was raging between my uncertainty of their numbers and my anxiousness to destroy the green scum. Then I turned towards the Knights: some of them looked pale for them as well for me it was to be their first battle since most veterans were north battling the Norse raiders. However my confidence grew as I saw the symbols of our great and noble land: their fine armour and weaponry glinting in the sun, the banners high in the air and the calm appearance of the veteran Questers. As I drew my sword and held it up in the air, I said: "Fellow Bretonnians! They outnumber us three to one but what we lack in numbers, we make up with hard

steel and prowess. They dare to soil every inch of this sacred land by mere walking into it, their presence on our grasslands is a mockery to Bretonnia! So draw your weapon and unleash your pride for today we shall make the Lady smile as we smite these green horrors of our lands!” They all readied their lances and formed up on me as we all joined for a great prayer to the Lady:“Dear Lady, watch over us today as we cleanse your lands of the enemy that insults you with their presence. Let us be your righteous hand with fury so we can destroy this threat to our homes once and for all. Bless us as we carry out your holy work.”Strengthened by our faith in the Lady we set out in a canter. As we approached the enemy’s battle line, our canter turned into gallop while we spurred our horses. As I could distinguish their mocking and arrogant faces of their first rank, their arches unleashed a first volley of arrows. Most of the arrows chimed off our armour or got stuck in the leather barding of our faithful horses yet some found flesh, penetrating a weak spot. Slowly our horses reached their prime and while we charged, a second and a third wave of arrows landed between us.

Then we were upon them: our warhorses trampled the first ranks while our lances thrust deep in the body of accursed orcs and goblins, sending splinters from shattered lances flying. We pressed forth our momentum as we rode through their first ranks, leaving a trail of blood and mangled bodies. My sword found true every time I swung and another would fall to the ground. Everywhere the cries of wounded and living and the harsh sound of steel, meeting steel echoed through the valley. Sending another Orc down to earth with a clean blow, I saw we had been fought to a standstill and our casualties increased. At that moment I found myself between their first column and second in a true eye of the storm. Knowing the time was nigh: I made to signal to the observers on the hill. While I fended off a hasty attack of a big brute of an orc, I saw slowly appear the banners and pole-arms of the men-at-arms above the top of the hills, strengthening my heart. I made Ichwill rear on his hind legs before charging into the second group of foes. In the corners of my eyes I could see my trustworthy commoners charging down the hills into the flanks with banners flying while arrows started to descend into the green horde. Taking aback by this turn of events, some enemies –mostly goblins- seem to favour to retreat instead to stand and fight. The first group was nearly annihilated and more and more Knights joined me, battling the second group which gave way to our unstoppable advance. Foot by foot we moved deeper into the fray, mowing those down who dared to face our holy wrath.

I barely managed to see from the corner of my eye how an enormous crude axe swung sideways past me and into the spine of a Questing Knight, shredding the poor man open in a stream of bile and gore and sending his soul to the Lady. To my left there stood a seven-foot tall, foaming and crudely muscled black orc, wielding manically big axe with serrated edges and I knew this I had found the leader of this filthy mob of greenskins. With a zealous anger I haughtily accepted the challenge, knowing the Lady would guard me in this duel. He let no time go to waste as he savagely threw himself forward with his axe held up high. Realising the danger I reined Ichwill towards the giant brute instead of dodging the attack which would have resulted in my death. This evasive manoeuvre resulted in that it painfully bull-rushed my destrier and me, knocking us back several feet back and unhorsed me. The great orc luckily did not expect such an action and stumbled past us as he himself was also out of balance and his axe cleaved nothing but air and ended knee deep in the trampled grass. Ichwill immediately rose in pure state of shock and ran away to the rear, leaving me alone to deal with that giant black orc. As he pulled his axe out of the ground, I drove my sword forward and hit his knee. Without a reaction to the pain he swung his axe horizontally towards my head and I nearly avoided the sharp edge by dropping backward. With a huge feat of strength the orc readjusted his axe over his head and dropped the axe with force towards my chest. My shield blocked the axe however the impact of the blow was so huge it dislocated my elbow of my shield arm. With Lady’s luck the shield held yet the blow managed to force the air from my lungs. Gasping for breath I narrowly avoided a second rib-crushing blow by rolling to the ground but with that action the pain in my elbow became numbing and I had to drop my shield. The sheer delight in its eyes told me it was all a game to him and he laughed derisively as he pursued me while. His arrogance however bought me time to recover and get upon my feet. Odds however were slim since I lost my shield and only my longsword protected me from the giant axe. The next few minutes I had to duck and dodge to avoid the large weapon so I could enter a distance favourably for my shorter sword. Even though the pain in my chest and arm numbed my senses, I always just avoided the strong but clumsy blows from the towering orc. Suddenly the luck of combat favoured me: once more he brought his axe downward yet this time it ended into a corpse, which burst in twain in a hail of blood and gore and underneath into a sturdy old log. The orc seemed incapable for a moment to recover his cruel weapon and I quickly reacted and dealt a blow which left a deep wound in his side from which dark green blood began to pour down. Though the blow was mortal the giant seemed unencumbered and even more so enraged. He began again with a violent series of strong and directionless blows but now I had time was on my side: with every blow his strength and ferocity began to fade. Choosing the moment right, I jumped into his reach and thrust my blade upward through his cheek bone and into his small brain. This blow was the coup-de-grâce and he fell backwards, his weapon falling harmless by his side. Seeing their great and ferocious leader die by the hands of a young and puny human was enough for the remaining greenskins to turn tail and flee towards the safety of the Forest of Arden. The remaining Knights pursued them of course; cutting them mercilessly down where-ever they ran. Although I was exhausted and my muscles ached –not even mentioning my chest and arm- I glanced around and saw me

surrounded by the legions of men-at-arms. Altogether they raised their weapons, cheered and banged on their shields to herald the victory of the day. I noticed however that something in their eyes had changed during this battle: no longer was I the son of their liege yet a proud and mighty Knight, victor of a great battle. Respect now flooded in their eyes and I now commanded the loyalty from my future soldiers, which I had yearned jealously ever since I first saw their love for my father.

Our casualties were low: several Knights and twenty lowborn would not return home. We buried them respectfully in a large mound to honour the fallen while the rest gathered the orcs and their equipment in huge pyres, which burned throughout the day and night. Meanwhile the wounded were put on transports to Roiglan to herald and spread the news of the victory. My old mentor bandaged my arm after rectifying the dislocated elbow and rubbed some healing herbs ointment on my bruised chest. Near evening I recovered my shield: the axe had left its mark and had nearly destroyed the wood beyond the layer of steel beyond the skill of repairing. I left my first shield to hang at the entrance of the tomb to honour the dead. The next day we broke camp and marched home, leaving a stained and trampled battlefield, filled with glory and woe.

In the late afternoon the Army of Roiglan reached the gates of Roiglan where the festivities had already started. A cheering crowd greeted us all along the way to the mustering field where the army would be disbanded, weapons stored and equipment looked after. Rose leaves filled the sky and music followed our victory parade until the foot of the hill. There I personally paid and thanked the commoners involved in the battle, seeing also to it that any widows or orphans were taken care of. Then I ordered a crew of smiths, carpenters and woodcutters to rebuild Flarodell and the environs so the refugees could return home. At long last – it was nearing nightfall – I walked weary and tired upon the long stairs up towards the palace. My mother greeted me heartedly and insisted upon to have dinner with the rest of the nobles so I could account my glorious victory. It was no long though before sleep began to demand its toll and I had to excuse myself from the table to finally get out of my armour. I can't even remember even how I managed to reach my bed. For the first time since my faithful meeting in the woods I was completely happy for a change.

Some months passed and my duties as liege were light and relaxing for no major disturbances occurred during the last summer month and the start of autumn. When the leaves started to fall and fireplaces were lit once more, word from my father arrived at Roiglan: the campaign was nearing an end, partially due to worsening weather, partially for the victory was nearly complete save some stragglers who tried to escape the doomed fort. Not long after that message had reached us, a next one announced that our father had docked in Lyonesse victoriously with great honour and glory. My days as regent of Roiglan were nearing their end and as the first snow fell, I could welcome my father back home.

I spent the winter months at Roiglan, content to rest near my beloved father and honoured mother. Yet as the winter months passed and the snow melted, my frozen wanderlust also seemed to thaw. Again I was anxious to venture into the heart of Bretonnia, to ride alongside the shores of my beloved lands, to visit many a noble and Knight. It was on one of such travels that I met Alexander Marcel, a renowned Knight and trusted friend from L'Anguille. Our joint adventures together into the forests, caves and dungeons of Bretonnia made us best friends and companions. For years we travelled and fought together, content to spend the long winter months in either Roiglan or Castle Marcel. Our friendship wasn't meant to last however: Alexander met along our travels a beautiful and virtuous damsel by the name of Mercedes and they married next spring. We travelled together for another two to three months until news reached Alexander that his father had died, leaving him to succeed to the throne of Castle Marcel. At the end of our little fellowship I would have gladly given my life for either one of them. On the other hand I felt like the proverbial fifth wheel. After the burial of his father, I left Alexander and Mercedes at Castle Marcel for the last time, content to keep in touch through the written art of letters.

That winter I turned twenty-three years old and still hadn't chosen a spouse which frustrated my father and worried my mother. There were so many suitors in those days for both my radiant youth -my mother's words- and the renown of de Ponthieu family which made me an interesting catch. Looking into the eyes of other women however felt like betraying my heart and mind and so I tried to steer clear from any potential brides by travelling throughout Bretonnia. Fate and love had me marked however: along my travels in the rugged lands of Carcassonne I had to challenge my desires and my heart when I met Jois Alavainne.

We met while I was hunting down some plundering ratmen in the rolling hills. As I tried to follow their tracks, I heard the frightened whinny of a horse over the next hill. Fearing that another Knight had fallen into their trap, I spurred my horse and quickly reached the top. As I gazed down, I saw a Knight had just been lured into their trap and surrounded by the foul rats, which tried to unhorse her with long poles which he blocked ferociously with her sword and shield. However the way the Knight handled the sword told me he was inexperienced. As I stormed down from the hill on my trusty warhorse, they managed to pass his defence and drive a long pike through the armour plate on his chest. Bleeding from that wound he fell from his destrier which quickly scurried off as I beheaded the first accursed rat. Taken aback by my sudden arrival and cowering for their trap had failed, the rest fled back to their holes asunder. After I checked the surrounding area for any other rats, I returned to the Knight as he tried desperately to stand up again. At first glance the wound was less threatening to his life then incapacitating him yet the Knight seemed eager and anxious to stand up. Dismounting quickly to aid this brave Knight, I tried to support her yet she refused hot-tempered: "Leave me alone! I am capable to take care of my own," he said weakly as he stumbled back towards his brown warhorse which was grazing a bit further. "That wound badly needs healing and there is neither a city nor a village in miles! If you won't look after it now you'll bleed to death!" I said, undignified by his startling refusal and still believing she was male. "Just... leave me...," he staggered as his voice ever grew weaker and weaker: "alone... I'll be... fine." Those were the Knight's last stubborn words as the bloodloss overwhelmed him and he fainted. I suddenly became aware of the smell of thunder and as I raised my head I saw that a storm with dark, heavy clouds made their way over the tops of the mountain chain. It was apparent that he could not be transported far with that wound unattended to and with all strength that still lay in my arms I managed to carry him unto his horse. I remember myself muttering that he weighed surprisingly nothing under my breath. After which I led Ichwill and the other horse to an abandoned sheep shack I had discovered a bit back.

The rain was already thrashing down on us as we finally made it to the shack and I hurried to get him inside and tend to his wound. As I unchained his helmet to give him some breathing space, I was unprepared for what lay underneath! Instead of the normal rugged and harsh face of a man there flowed the long, blonde hair and soft features of a young lady. My heart stopped for a second or two as I sat beside her and gazed at her taken aback. Finally I overcame my sudden stupor and regained my mind to bandage her. Very softly, as if she was made of porcelain, I removed that encumbersome and far too large armour for her. The Knight's code never prepared me for the shame I felt when I had to open her tunic to clear the wound of filth and to put some bandages on herbs on it. Respectfully I kept her breasts covered while I cleaned her wounds and bound the herbs in place with bandages. Her slowly but steadily rising chest told me she was fast asleep and breathing easily. With a lot of respect I dressed her in her tunic again and covered her with a woollen blanket.

After this surprising and confusing encounter I needed a quick breather and I slipped outside to cool off in the rain. Though common today, the sight of a woman in full armour and carrying arms still shocked my idealistic views then. A woman in battle was completely unheard of as only male descendants can take up the sword as Knight. Since I had nothing better to do, I unsaddled Ichwill and the other horse. In the side bags of her gear I was lucky to find some dry firewood, wrapped in a blanket, and I got a small fire going in the shack. For the remainder of the storm I stood guard over her, keeping an ever watchful eye on her sleeping form and door of the shack. Her heraldry told me she was related to the ducal family of Artois, recognising the rampart boar instantly. The colours of her coat-of-arms and crest advised me this was not her armour but the recently deceased Castellán of Mont Virneux. The members of the ducal family are renowned for their hot temperament both in battle as social life and I dreaded the moment she would wake and discover that a complete stranger had taken care of her while being unconscious.

She woke an hour before the sunset, the storm had calmed down to a hail of rain, yet still reducing visibility to a few yards. First she seemed drowsy and confused but life quickly rekindled in her fiery brown eyes as she saw her armour, sword and shield lying next to her, the fireplace and me, the lone Knight who was looking at her expectantly. The rumours of her temper were not unfounded as she flared up and started yelling:

"You Lady-damned bastard, I told you to leave me alone, didn't I?" After which she fell back flat out as the sudden pressure to the head overcame her balance. She struggled back up her feet, still swearing and cursing and gathered her gear while her reaction had taken me by surprise and made me also angry: "I saved your life and this is my thanks?" She fumbled her gear and her armour felt clattering back on the floor, making her curse even more and bowing down again to take the plates of her armour. I blocked the only way out as she tried to run past me. Her tirade was even more colourful this time: "Let me through, you irritating bastard! Is it not enough you had your way with me already?" "Will you calm down for just a minute?" I replied, angered by her unjustified remark. "I will not let you pass since you are still too weak. That wound still hasn't recovered long enough to ensure a safe ride to the nearest village!" "I don't care! I just want out of here!" "Now listen to me, you hot-tempered fury! If you won't sit down and rest this instant, I will personally ride down to Artois and tell them where their wayward family member is at." Suddenly she ceased to struggle and life seemed to be drained out of her face. The only words that left her lips were: "You utter bastard." Dropping her armour, she went back to the bedroll and rolled into it, covering her head for the silent tears she tried to hide. I had remorse that I had made that threat yet it seemed the only way to keep her here so that she wouldn't die of exhaustion and blood loss in the hills. Sighing I sat down; it would be a long and weary night.

She didn't speak a word the entire night nor did she rest easy. Her breathing was haunted as if she thought I was a hunter and she, a spotted deer, trapped in a cave. Halfway through the night I decided to sit outside as an ordinary door guardian since it had ceased to rain to give her some space and chance to be alone. I shall never forget the sky that night, so high up in the hills: sparkling bright night sky with waves of stars, the one clearer than the other, and an incessant rain of flaming rocks, passing overhead.

Daylight came with a breath-taking view from the east. I took some salted meat from my supplies and took it inside. Whether she was awake and just trying to look fast asleep or actually dreaming deeply, I'll never know but she refused to acknowledge my presence. I left the food and my waterskin next to her on a wooden plate. After a while she came outside with her armour on but as she took a brave step, pain flooded her face as the shock of the weight of the armour went through her wound. Even though she remained silent and adamantly cold towards me, I said: "You look much better today." To which there came no reply as she quickly strapped her helmet on, hiding her red cheeks, her soft features and lovely eyes. Sighing in spite of such stubbornness, I mounted Ichwill as she mounted her warhorse. Not looking back she rode on to the upper hills. It must have frustrated her when she heard my horse ride by hers but she remained adamant and ignored me. To this day I do not know what held me from me riding away and leave her to her own fate. While she still didn't speak with me, I, on the other hand, explained why I followed her: "It is not wise to ride north for there are no villages in a day's ride. You can not yet endure a hard day's ride. You'll wear yourself out." Starting to get annoyed by her lack of answers, I continued nonetheless: "Anyway, I'm here to keep an eye: these parts are primitive and dangerous."

It was nearing noon and though she tried to keep up her haughty appearance by riding ahead, she was getting exhausted. Her shoulders could not hold the weight much longer as they slowly dropped underneath the armour. My brows rose in worried care, I wondered how long she would try to fight her pride before fatigue would force her to rest. Not long after that she seemed to have found what she was looking for: a small cave into which she dragged herself. She collapsed again as she tried to sit down. I ran towards her and supported her head as I pulled her helmet off, to look down in her exhausted and red eyes, void of anger. Glad to see she wasn't longer mad at me, I gently picked her up and carried her deeper inside. She rested with her back against a wall while I made a soft bedroll for her. All the time I could feel her exhausted eyes, piercing and pondering in my back. As I then began to loosen the leather straps of her armour and free her from the heavy burden, she was able to stumble upright so she could lay down in the bedroll by her own effort. She instantly fell asleep in a deep and restful sleep. I immediately tied the horses down and unsaddled them once again.

For the next four or five hours I sat at the entrance of the cave with my sword on my hips, alone with my mind. Until then I

only knew such a strong emotion for a woman from my desperate and impossible love for Enthannel but now something new seemed to bloom, a new feeling, unexplored and green as the spring's first leaf. She woke some hours before sunset, the sun now low against the distant hinterland. I did not notice her being awake until she addressed me in a soft and apologetic tone of a voice: "I'm sorry for my behaviour today and yesterday. You have only taken care of me for these two days, never wanting anything other than a kind word and I mocked your attempts and worse insulted you. For this I am sorry and hope you'll forgive me." Hesitantly she added, more silent now: "I'm very grateful." "Don't feel sorry, I'm not hurt in any way," I replied while I turned my head towards her, showing her a brave smile. Then I continued: "Rest now for a while. When you wake there will be dinner waiting." "You have done so much for me," she said, startling me while I was cooking: "and I still haven't had the honour of hearing the name of my benefactor. As some people might find that rude, I blame myself. I am Jois Alavainne." "Well, it is an honour to meet you, Shield Maiden. My humble name is Gisoreux de Ponthieu, son of Sandorin de Ponthieu of Roiglan." I graciously replied while returning to the preparations of dinner. "The honour is mine," she formally answered. For a while she just sat there, looking into the fire. From under my eyebrows I took the chance to look at her; I was glad to see that life had returned to her face and her eyes, however sad, they shone like the sea in summer, her long blonde hair elegantly fell on her shoulders. I felt a strong urge to kiss those well-formed lips but resisted to save my honour. "You called me a Shield Maiden, why?" "Because that's what you are," I replied as I had expected that question: "Many a noble expect from a woman nothing more than obedience and children while they refuse to understand that Bretonnia has ever known a great tradition in warrior-women. It takes great courage and love as a woman to take up arms and fight: we, men, are ever born with a sword in our hand, raised from cradle to land to be destined for war. But you had choice and you chose to defend our fair land to gain honour and glory. Five hundred years ago a noble and virtuous woman led us to victory at the Battle of Couronne, saving the land from destruction." "I am not a Shield Maiden, I am coward," she said, a sad tone to be heard in her voice: "That was your choice: to face whatever problem you had home or become a warrior-woman," I interrupted, not wanting to hear the remaining story for it must contain a lot of sorrow and pain. "Let me finish. You deserve to know: I trust you, Gisoreux, you have ever told the truth to me," she quickly replied, a bit angered at me interrupting. After a while and a big sigh she continued: "I was the only child of Castelan Colin Alavainne, brother to the Duke of Artois. My mother died not long after I was born. My father loved me more than anything else: his title, his family, his honour. He also knew my wish not to be married to any-one I did not love and he kept any suitors at bay until I was ready to choose a noble Knight. Alas! My father died early at the hands of the vicious beastmen, ending my hopes of finding true love: since Mont Virneux couldn't be governed by a woman alone, so states the tradition and the Duke, my uncle, searched for a husband for this unwilling bride. I escaped the next day to the only place where I felt wanted: my father's tomb. It took me not long to decide to flee my home and take the armour and horse of my father and search a life of my own." Then she felt silent and I knew this confession had been mentally draining for her: she just had to tell some-one yet at the same time she had lain her future in the hands of a stranger. Her head rested on her knees and I heard her sob. It took me a long time to gather my courage and move beside her. She did not resist when I laid my arms around her to comfort her and instantly she rested her head against my chest. We just sat there, not daring to move lest the tension between us would disappear on the evening breeze, for a few minutes which seem to pass like seconds while my heart was racing deeply in my chest as I was both confused and glad. I caught her looking up at me with those sweet, tear struck eyes. Slowly I lowered my lips towards hers and she bent her head expecting. As our lips touched, time froze and the world stopped all around us. Her lips tasted salty from her tears she had just shed not a moment ago.

After that faithful kiss she fell asleep in my arms for once since a long time completely at ease, her mental fatigue overwhelming ever since those days she escaped and our meeting. Meanwhile she left me confused and with a lot of unasked and unanswered questions. I loved her: that much was certain; "More than Enthannel? It has to be, I've seen her only once for a few minutes. The woman asleep in my arms feels like she belongs there. Has the Lady sent you, my love?"

Near nightfall I laid her upon her bedroll while I kept watch at the campfire. I blocked the entrance of the cave from view with some blankets so that no evil would see the fire nor smell it. It took me until midnight to struggle with those questions before my exhausted mind demanded rest. Looking one last time at Jois, I fell asleep and neither dreams nor nightmares awaited me in my slumber.

We stayed in the small cave for another four days until Jois had recovered from the wound. I was content to rest since my restlessness and anxiety had disappeared as fog in the morning sun by kissing her and facing that inner demon: that

emotional weariness that had built up ever since my Knighting. After the fourth day Jois decided it was time to move on: her own sense of adventure warned her for lingering too long in one place. As we broke camp, we had still some unresolved questions which desperately needed an answer. As we rode down hill, I broke the uneasy silence that had hung over us since our departure: "Where now, Jois?" "I think we'll find worthy adventure in the south. In the last village I heard that orc plunderers were prowling in that area," she said without looking back but I saw that she was trembling, fearful for the answer to the next question. "About us, Jois, and your land. Are you gonna leave them?" "I'm willing to join you on your return to Mont Virneux, dearest. I'll stay by your side forever." That name seemed to mark a weak spot and she shivered automatically. She turned and I saw there lay a layer of sadness in her eyes when she replied: "I cannot return home now, not yet. Please stay with me, Gisoreux; I'm not nearly as strong enough to face the world alone. I need you next to me." While she spoke these words with a glowing ember of love in her eyes, I hurried Ichwill next to her and took her hand. While I gently followed the features of her face with my other hand, I could not help but saying: "I'll stay as long as the sea has waves, the mountains challenge the sky and the sun warms this earth." I knew the matter wasn't resolved but I hoped to force gently a solution from her in the next few weeks, even months, years or for as long it would take.

We travelled together for over six months throughout Bretonnia. Our relation grew the ever more stronger and intimate. A relieved and careless Jois is a completely different from the one I had met: she was kind, open and impulsive. And it will be this Jois I will forever bear in my heart, love undying. She seem to enjoy her freedom and her new life well yet the burden of her lands grew ever the more heavier and I remained silent for not the break the joy she had become for me and herself. We joined many a battle as two wandering Knights: I ever watching over her in combat. After which we would take care of each other's wounds or pains. Whenever I could, I taught her the noble art of swordplay. When we would visit a town or village she would wear her helmet until it was safe: Shield Maidens still weren't a common or accepted fact in our fair lands at that time. Together we roamed the land in search for honour and glory. Yet for all my new found love there still laid a scar in my heart that just wouldn't heal nor forget. When I was with Jois I managed to chain it deep into my mind and heart however when I was alone or sleeping, my barriers weren't strong enough and I saw her mocking me from the corner of my heart. Neglecting that little feeling of betrayal and love, I tried to give all my love to Jois: I was ready to marry her and take her home to Roiglan yet I postponed as I feared she would refuse in order to remain a Shield Maiden forever. As I thought about it later: I know now that she knew my worry and tried to comfort me.

We were riding through the Forest of Chalons one faithful winter night. The forest floor was covered with a thick pack of fresh snow and a fog surrounded our ominous surroundings. A woman's cry pierced the night suddenly from up ahead. Acting immediately I drew my sword and spurred Ichwill into the night, ignorant of the impending danger. The fog obscured everything as I only could see a few feet. To make matters worse it started snowing again. Suddenly a figure loomed out of the dark. As I approached it, it turned out to be a commoner woman, impaled on a wooden spike. My stomach instantly rebelled but I managed to control the urge to throw up. I remember that I had a bad feeling about it all when I turned and saw nothing but the endless dark. Fearing the worst I quickly turned Ichwill and charged back into the dark, almost pushing Ichwill to its limits, trying to prevent the inevitable. Suddenly the trees split to form a clearing and in the far fog I saw a horse and a body lying next to it while several obscure small figures with weapons in their hand seemed to cautiously move towards the body. A cry of despair I escaped my mouth, alerting the goblins, too late for the first one as my sword hit it right across the face and he fell to the ground gurgling in his own blood. Ichwill trampled a second one while I pierced another. The remaining goblins ran for their lives into the fog, leaving me alone with her. As I dismounted too quickly, I almost fell to the hard ground, eager to see her wounds, to heal her, to be there for her. As I dropped to my knees next to her, I saw several arrows had penetrated her armour and blood welled up between the shafts and the pierced armour. She seemed unable to move but with the Lady's strength she remained conscious, a bloody smile turned on her face as her eyes locked with mine. My eyes became wet from tears as my mind overwhelmed my heart and realised the awful truth that those arrows had mortally wounded my love. With a trembling hand I gently and slowly caressed her head and hair, wiping her hair from where it lay on her sweating forehead, unable to do something else. My mind wanted to usher calming words yet my voice failed with sorrow and frustration. To my surprise she began the whisper some words which shivered me to the bones: "Gissy, my dearest Gissy, find happiness after me, swear it to me..." "No, rest your voice, you'll be fine," I said faintly as I recovered my voice yet the tears ran from my eyes now. The moon now broke through the clouds and fog, illuminating her pale face and turning the meadow in an eerie and gloomy light. Snow still fell slowly upon the ground where now the warm blood of my love reddened the pure white snow. "Don't lie to me, you always were a horrible liar," she said, remembering a previous discussion. She coughed and continued: "I'm not long for this world anymore; my only regret is never to have said yes to you. Don't be sorry for me nor grieve long: you after all gave me a new life." I clasped her both hands in mine. Every word was like a torment to my grieving and weeping soul. Her last words on this world were like daggers to my heart: "Find her and make her yours,"

Gissy, she said, not surprised at my startled reaction: "I ever knew your heart partially belonged to someone else and it would be that way forever. Don't regret that your heart didn't belong fully to me; you gave me six beautiful months, worthy of a full life. Promise me you'll find her and have the life we'll never have, promise me, my saviour..."

Those last words ever grew weaker and then she passed on, her last breath leaving her chest forever. Sorrow broke me then as I desperately asked her to wake up and come home with me. I sat there grieving until the next morning when light broke through the trees, reflected by the snow, and illuminated her lifeless body and the opening. While I dug her grave those precious few months with her once again passed my thoughts. After I softly pulled the arrows out of her body, I then laid her into the grave with every care in my body, alongside her shield and weapon. Tears began to run down again as I closed the grave and put some flat rocks on her grave, her helmet last of all. I kept a complete day's vigil to guard over her grave and trying to balance my mind and starting to try to bridge the gap of my broken heart. I felt cold to the bone the next day yet my mind was also frozen. "Goodbye, my Shield Maiden. I'll see you at the Gates. I'll never forget these past months where I had been completely happy for once. You show me love never dies."

Lochwill stood restlessly by, eager to stretch its legs as I mounted him and took the reins of Jois's horse. I did not look back as I rode away from the grave of my love, that moment being the first time I ever doubted the Lady's will and plans.

My wandering led me back home, to my city and parents. When my father and mother saw me mounting the stairs to the palace, every step as if it was a burden, they knew to leave me alone for the moment. Their surprised and worried faces when they saw their filthy and unshaven son did manage to penetrate my shield of complete apathy.

It took me eight years to overcome the loss of Jois: every day I recovered a bit from my broken heart and my apathy for my own life subsided. A year after her death life returned to normal in Roiglan: I no longer mourned her I still felt sorrow. I devoted my waking hours to the glory of Roiglan and my family. Slowly I recuperated my social life and integrated myself in the society once more. It was after the first grand tournament I met Guillaume d'Ortois, a slightly elderly grail knight, a man who would prove my equal and friend for many long years. For over two years he had spent most time in Roiglan, visiting us until he agreed to become part of the household and my personal standard bearer. He also got along well with my parents and his humour is still much appreciated in our halls. I participated in many a battle in those years in my desire to defend Bretonnia against all invaders and spoilers while Guillaume would always ride by my side, guarding my back.

My thirty-second day of birth came and went; while the sorrow completely left my heart, the image of Jois would forever rest in my thoughts. As I leaned on the balustrade of my favoured balcony I came to realise something about the love for the two women I felt. I loved them both in equal measure and with my entire heart but both in a different way. Jois resembled to me my love for Bretonnia: the lands, its people and her society. My warrior-women would forever hold a special place in my heart next to Enthaniel whom I loved and revered as I would the Lady. She symbolised perfection, the Knightly ideal and the mystical side of me. Both also were lost beyond my reach. These thoughts made me shiver as I finally understood why the Lady has granted me a heart that loves two women and for which I should not be ashamed nor confused. A complete and peaceful tranquillity came over me as I finally solved the question of the dual love that had waged war within me since the days I had met both. I could not help but smile as I turned and bid them both a good night.

The Battle at the Broken Bridge later that year was also a turning point for me and my ideals. We, Bretonnians, never cope well with defeat yet it is a lesson one has to learn sooner or later. It was near the borders of Quenelles and

Carcassonne at the same site where Gilles had fought one of his twelve famous battles near the river Brienne. I had joined a small army that was hunting for a feared band of orc raiders in the surrounding lands of Quenelles. Instead of bringing the fight to our enemy, our camp was ambushed at night from out of the woods by an unholy alliance of greenskins and the walking beasts. Outnumbered and surrounded we were quickly losing ground while Knights were cut down by cold steel. Chaos reigned within the defensive circle we had formed, flaming arrows lit the night sky, the wounded moaned and from every direction there were drums and roars. Amidst the battle sounds there was the reassuring sound of a horn, blown to warn Quenelles of the invaders. We had to realise however that any reinforcements would come too late and our general released us from our duty in order to break out every man for himself and return to the city lest we would all die for no gain. As I mounted Ichwill I was tense and anxious yet the weariness had faded for the thrill of battle. At the sign of our commander we all formed up in small groups and charged into different directions. My group quickly met the enemy and crashed into the surprised orcs. Their green blood spilled the earth as we cut our way through. What seemed like hours were mere minutes before I at last cleared the last rows of greenskins and burst away into the night, leaving the battlefield behind me, no sign of other Knights. At that moment the moon disappeared behind the clouds and the whole world turned pitch black. As I slowed Ichwill down into a canter, the sudden silence surprised me and felt unnatural after the chaos of battle. The only sound was our breathing and the sounds of his hooves pushing leaves and grass aside. Ichwill stepped restlessly on, equally eager to leave that bloody nightmare behind us yet with no moon and stars to navigate, I had no idea in which direction I was riding.

For an hour I rode on unchecked without encountering a landmark or building. I felt like I was in a dream: that unnatural silence and the ever-present darkness seem to loom towards me, engulfing me into the blackness. Suddenly a tree emerged from the dark in my path, I wanted to turn past it yet I was facing another tree. Again I tried to ride past it only to see another trunk of a tree. Every direction I turned, even back from whence I came seemed to end up into trees. Slowly I began to lose my wits as the trees also seemed to move closer on me, the sounds of branches moving in the wind passing overhead. I tried to swallow to clear my parched throat but to no avail. My heart beat faster than ever before: the fear of an unknown enemy. Slowly the moon battled its way through the rain-heavy clouds and illuminated my surroundings. It was an evil-looking, dark yellow moon which bode ill. A fog hung around me as I found myself in a clearing, surrounded by trees. Reassuringly I saw the path from whence I came and luckily it wasn't blocked by any imaginary moving trees. To my surprise I saw that my breath evaporated before my eyes and I suddenly noticed it was actually quite cold. It was eerie quiet and there seemed to be no other living soul yet I could swear I was being watched from the darkness by an unknown hunter. Not daring to cripple Ichwill on the forest floor, I dismounted so I could stretch my legs as well.

As I walked towards the path, a warrior in a full plate with scant remains of heraldry seemed to emerge from the mist, a two-hander in his hand. Two slim arrows stuck into his back, seemingly not troubling him. He did not move as I approached and called out to him nor did he answer to my questions. The man in armour stood still in front of me: my eyes were drawn towards the visor of the helmet, which held a broken crest. Deep within the visor laid the eyes of a predator: deep red and hungry. No vapours of breath emerged from the helmet, nor did he seem to be breathing at all. Firming my grip on my shield, I drew my sword: whatever this apparition was, it seemed to consider me food or worse. He recognised my defensive stance and took his sword in his two hands to steadily walk towards me, battle-ready. In one fluent move he swung his two-hander, the sheer weight apparently not disturbing nor hindering him. I raised my shield in defence and caught the blow: its strength however startled me as my arm was slammed against my body and the sounds of shattering wood resounded. He unnaturally swift renewed his attack and this time I just caught him in time with my blade. The sheer speed of the man seemed supernatural as he moved like a shadow, I having difficulty in keeping him off and meeting his every blow. Realising I could not hold him at bay forever, I quickly feinted an attack which he automatically tried to block with his sword. Yet instead of completing my attack, I used the opening to step closer, away from the deadly edges of the sword and putting me to an advantage. Or at least so I hoped: the man merely adjusted his stance and managed to quickly aim his sword at my leg. As I dodged I found myself once again within favourable distance of his two-handed sword. This man or thing was an excellent sword fighter: relentlessly attacking with no pause, all the while anticipating my every move and blow. The battle turned to worse as I found myself forced to step back across the meadow. Suddenly I felt my back against a tree and I had nowhere to escape, the finishing blow quickly following. It passed my defence and cut deep into my side, I felt my strength failing save for what energies the exhilarating battle had given me: barely enough to keep me conscious. Knowing that a seasoned warrior like him wouldn't fall for it, I felt that I had no other option but to try to fake my death and collapsed flat out on the grass, dropping my sword. Inwardly I made my peace with the Lady and said a prayer, expecting a coup de grace any time.

The fatal blow however seem to linger and under nearly-closed eyes, I saw the creature jerking his helmet off, to show

the face of man, only slightly more pale and bonnier. His red eyes were intriguing however and I felt myself unable to break the contact. The vampire knelt beside me, running his hand alongside my wound, catching my blood. The pain was excruciating yet I still played unconscious, waiting for a chance to strike. The vampire brought the gauntlet, soaked with my blood towards his mouth where his two white fangs reflected in the moonlight. It seemed to enjoy every drop of my blood that fell unto his tongue, a demonic smile appearing on his face. To my horror he then moved his head across my neck. The beast seemed to busy to hear my right arm moving towards the hilt of my sword, lying next to me in the wet grass. When I felt his teeth sunk into my neck, I felt strangely exhilarated and energised as well as nearly paralysed. It took me a strong force of will to counterattack that feeling: suddenly my hand clasped my sword and with an amazing speed I threw my hand forward to drive the pommel into the face of the bloodsucking fiend. This sudden blow seemed to stun the beast while it hissed in pain: it bought me valuable time as I sat up and ran the point of my sword through the creature. It looked at me incredulously and died, turning to dust. I immediately rose from the ground in spite of the tremendous, numbing pain in my side. Weak and stumbling I gathered my gear and put it in the saddle bags of Ichwill. The pain in my side prevented me from mounting my trusted destrier yet I took the reins and pushed recklessly through the woods, still in shock from my encounter with the nameless vampire. It wasn't long before I found an old stone structure, overcome with nature and ruinous. The symbols on this simple temple designated it as a lost temple to the Lady. Instinctively I stumbled inside, feeling safe within those sacred walls. I crawled until I could lie against the altar. Gasping for breath, I felt myself weakened as I had lost too much blood and my remaining energies seem to run dry. The last thing I saw before darkness engulfed me was the bright moon, shining through the broken stained glass, now friendly once more.

The Lady guarded over my dreams that night as I rested peacefully and long until I found myself gazing up at the sun through the broken ceiling at noon. My wounds were bandaged and purified; strange aromatic herbs covered my neck. I grabbed the herbs and saw they were rotten now, spreading a foul odour of tainted blood. The Lady had sent some-one to take care of me, only to abandon me in these strange lands. My strength however hadn't still recovered and my stomach hungrily protested my every move yet luckily the mysterious benefactor apparently anticipated something like that as I found food next to me along with fresh, cool water in an oddly-shaped leaf. It cost me a lot of trouble and pain to grab my bedroll and install it so I could rest here until I was fit again to travel again.

A day and night passed with me lying alone safe the company of my trusted companion Ichwill and sleeping within the safe boundaries of the temple. Though I found myself in strange territory I felt completely safe in the knowledge that the Lady would protect me in this holy place. The next morning I woke to find some food and water again while my wounds had been bandaged and other herbs, now also rotten, had been put on my neck. Frustrated because this servant of the Lady would not show himself, I tried to stand up to leave the temple, only to find my knees too weak to bear my aching body. The vampire-beast seemed to have drained my strength as well as he had drunk my blood. Again I found myself for the entire day in the comfort of my own loneliness. This night however I would thank my benefactor.

As the night fell over the forest, the noises of forest life died down to be replaced by the sounds of nocturnal life. I closed my eyes to appear to be asleep and waited completely silent and still. After what seemed to be hours, I heard other noises then the occasional owl or the wind running through the trees: three horses silently approaching the temple. They stopped and words were whispered between the riders. Then for a long time I heard nothing except the forest life. I dared not to open my eyes lest I would startle my friend so I kept them shut and breathed long and deep. An aroma engulfed my nostrils, a familiar one, one that had been lodged into my mind since a long time. Instinctively I smiled and laid my hand on hers while keeping my eyes shut, in a calm and silent voice I asked: "Sit by my side, Enthanniel Myrthelith." I felt her hand being jerked away, startled, and I turned my head towards to open my eyes and look upon the worried face of Enthanniel. My heart leaped as she looked more beautiful then ever: her deep blue eyes piercing mine, her long brown hair flowing like a waterfall across her back. She wore a pearly white long dress, which seems to enforce her dominating and graceful appearance I once again gently took her hand and this time she did not pull it back and instead sat down next to me: "Isha fend, you startled me, human." "It's been a long time since I last saw you, loved one." "Only for you and stop calling me like that." "Only if you start calling me with my name, Gisoreux." "I will, Gisoreux." She seemed unsure and confused yet at the same time she didn't run as she did the first time we met. Looking troubled she seemed unable to break eye contact instead she looked at me. At long last she continued: "What spell is this that makes me happy to talk to you and seeing you? What strange attraction is this? I find myself wondering at unguarded moments how or where you are? Ever since the first time we met, I've been frustratingly unable to complete the most ordinary of tasks without seeing your mocking face. Who stopped me from letting you lie here to die? What was that feeling of curiosity that makes me come here every night to mend your wounds and provide you food like a pet?" "That spell is

mine as well: it is this," And quickly I sat upright and my lips found hers. She did not struggle nor answered my loving kiss as she seemed to be torn in twain between revolt and love. After a while she answered and kissed me back, her arms encircling me. For what seemed like hours we sat there, two lovers unified.

As we broke from each other's embrace, she said exasperated: "It is love then, the one thing I thought myself being untouchable." She seemed to be sunk in thoughts while I gently massaged her hands. "This complicates everything: this is folly! How much our hearts do desire it, we can never be together. Different worlds, a gap in between: my people will hunt you for this." The moonlight reflected the tears welling up in those magnificent, endless eyes. Enthannel had gives up hope for us yet I had not; "Then I'll fight. I will not let you go, not again. These past years I felt broken and torn in two by my love for you. Now that I've found the piece that has to complete me, I will not let it be taken away from me again. I'll bring you home, my love, to my lands, where you will be worshipped and loved as a queen. Come with me, Enthannel Myrthelith, and we'll find happiness by each other's side." "What of my two guardian maidens?" She asked hesitantly, the idea of staying with me appealing to her. "I wish them no harm; they have been good to me." "Ask them to join us or to let you go, out of love for you. Make sure they understand they cannot stop us anymore." She kissed me again and then rose to her feet. Enthannel stepped outside while I — trembling because of the pain — stood up, trying to ignore the burning feeling in my side. Once on my feet the worst part was over and I was able to stumble towards the entrance where I saw her standing, explaining several things in Elven. Enthannel re-appeared, her radiant eyes on the verge of crying. As she saw how painfully it was for me to move, she came to my side and tried to support me. Grateful for the help, I tried to move a bit faster. Outside the temple, there stood three horses and two other Elven ladies, finely shaped longbows at their backs, one wiping away tears while the other looked at me with a strong hatred. However their attitude towards me warmed a bit when they saw how much Enthannel cared for me as she helped me off the stairs. Ichwill was standing a bit further, all geared and ready. As I took the reins to mount him, he affectionately pushed me with his nose. Mounting my warhorse was the most painful thing I had to do, the pain numbing and intense. It all turned black before my eyes for a moment and I nearly collapsed if not Enthannel held me upright in the saddle, looking worried: "You haven't recovered fully yet, this trip will be dangerous. We should stay here for a while." "The die is cast; if I stay, your parents will know. Don't worry I'll hold on with the help of my love for you." She smiled as she was endeared by those sweet words. Pushing Ichwill to a canter, I quickly rode away, faintly noticing that Enthannel lingered for a while before following, saying some last words to the two Elves.

I found it difficult to keep my eyes on the road, her image in the moonlight magnified to a divine appearance. Enthannel however had sunk into thought, her face worried and sad. Unable to help her to face the pain of abandoning her kin and family, I felt a bit sad too: I couldn't see me leaving my family without it destroying my heart. Reining Ichwill in, I rode next to her while I grabbed her hand to comfort her. My strong grasp brought her back to the real world as she lovingly smiled at me, indicating she would be fine. The moon was passing to the horizon and at the east I could feel the warm glow of the sun emerging. After a moment of silence, Enthannel told me that the magic that had trapped me inside the boundaries of the forest would let her pass with me.

The sun now had risen over the horizon, illuminating the way ahead. "Who dares to take a princess of this land?" Only when he spoke, I was able to see an Elf kneeling on a branch with a bow aimed at me. Surprised I thought I could see more elves of the woods sit in the top of the trees, although that also might have been a trick of my weary mind. "Father, no," said Enthannel while she laid her arms protectively around me. The Elf sleek eyes narrowed out of wonder and he seemed to ponder his daughter's reaction. "How dare you to bewitch a daughter of mine?" Anger flashed through the Elf's eyes at the thought of this insolence. Oddly I did not fear for my life since I had found my love and knew that her heart belonged to me. My lack of fear for my life surprised the elf as my face stayed resolutely calm. After a long awkward silence the Elf resumed: "Very well, Enthannel, I see you heart has been conquered by this human." Now it was my turn to be amazed for the Elf seemed to be able to read our minds to find the love for each other. He continued: "Go with our blessing, we know you'll return to us eventually," he said while glancing at me meaningful, after which he disappeared in the green leaves of the tree. A bit worried and confused about how the conversation had run, I turned towards Enthannel who still held her arms firmly around my middle. She held a sad but relieved smile as the resolution let her stay by my side but at the same time, she felt banished from the woodland realm.

Our journey to Roiglan was a calm one and I found myself looking up at my city and home before long. Enthanniel seemed to be taken by the view upon my fair city and it relieved me that she found her new home likeable and intriguing. In the further months she would fall in love with my city as her cheerful and loyal people and its rural calm bewitched her as my beloved home does with every visitor, no matter what roots or race.

My return was a tumultuous one as word quickly spread of the return of the young lord and heir. Soon the streets were filled with joyous and intrigued citizens, crowding and twirling as the city guard tried their best to keep in control, to catch a glimpse of the fair being next to me. Even the richer merchants and nobles broke from their chores to gaze down upon the heir and the unknown radiant and beautiful Elf, riding next to him. Enthanniel meanwhile was overwhelmed by sheer size of the city and the numerous of folk, dancing and singing for the return of their lord. I saw that she tried to make her look herself little and inconspicuous by casting her gaze downwards. With a reassuringly smile I gently took her left hand and caressed it to support her. As she looked up, she smiled shyly back to me. It is still one of the visions that haunts and forever will stay my dreams to that day: the moment when love became adoration and respect of both me and her.

The mass of people changed into a veritable feast that accompanied Enthanniel and me to the motte. There we dismounted under the gaze of hundreds of people and slowly we started to climb the stone stairs to the palace above. I was going through the same emotions as Enthanniel a few moments ago: my certitude dropped to a low as all kind of doubts raced my mind. My father and mother stood outside the palace with the entire household watching as we appeared on the grounds. As we walked towards them, I once again took the hand of Enthanniel while concentrating on the reaction of my parents. My father's eyebrows rose slightly and my mother smiled as she saw the truth in my eyes. We stopped just in front of them and for several seconds I found myself unable to speak as they were gauging my love. It was my father who interrupted the painful silence: "Welcome, the two of you, let's step inside for it is much too cold to just stand here." My heart leaped at the hidden message behind his words and I replied: "Honoured father, revered mother, this is the fair lady Enthanniel from the woodland realm of Loren. She conquered my heart and as she refused to give it back, I had to bring her back and love her." My parents stepped aside to let Enthanniel enter the Great Hall, followed by my mother who gently took her by the arm to guide her through the palace. As my father intended to step into the hall, I said to him: "Father?" "Yes, son." "Thank you." "Wh…?" as he tried to finish his sentence I took him in my arms. My father acted first surprised but then threw his arms around me as well. We stood there for minutes as I thanked him for my life. Every day as I reminisce of him during the long evenings, it is that image that seems to push itself forward from the depths of my mind.

The actual marriage was postponed until after the winter when the Lady would revive my beloved lands in shades of green. Those last winter months seem to last forever to me and Enthanniel as the last boundary we had to cross was time. Slowly time crept by and she became more familiar with her new home and its kind people. She got on really well with the kind character of my mother yet was still shy to my father which resembled the Bretonnian culture to her to which she still had to adapt. My fair lady loved to explore the surrounding lands in the wintertime on horseback with just the two of us, especially the estuary of "Engle. We also visited all cities and villages belonging to the fief in those snow-filled days as she felt that her duty compelled her to show the loyal serfs of Roiglan their future baroness. The people noticed her passion for her new duties and took it to their hearts as they were honoured to being visited by the Elven maiden of the heir.

As time as always irrevocably passes, the snow melted to make way for the first spring storms at the coast. The roads were more worn and muddy than normal and the wedding was again postponed until the roads were more suited for travel as many merchants and nobles were expected for the ceremonies. It took weeks to complete the old rituals and habits of my status as heir of a barony of our society. It took a week of travel to Lyonesse where we would meet my future lieges, Duke Adalhard and our most gracious King to demand their permissions in short ceremonies to become betrothed to my future Lady. Then we had to visit one by one the cities of the fief, Portus and Gladius, for the ceremonies to ask the approval of the city council and people in a huge evening banquet and feast. And the last week we had to endure the seven-day long feast in Roiglan itself: every evening Enthanniel and I would move a seat closer to the middle of the table until we would sit next to each other at the seventh day between my loving parents. Though it was most gratifying to see the love for my family from the nobles, merchants and commoners, it was exhausting and stressing also. All those allegiances and promises that had to be sworn and renewed again on the day of my ascension as baron were

time-consuming and tedious sometimes.

At long last my day of days came: a bright and shiny blue sky awoke me on the day of my marriage to my love. In the morning we were expected in the cathedral of the Lady to receive the blessing of our beloved sovereign goddess. The cathedral was festively decorated with banners and tapestries of gold, argent and purple. The benches around the altar were filled with the highest nobility of Lyonesse and Roiglan, dressed in the finest garments and ceremonial armours. My father guided me to the centre where the altar and the symbolic chalice stood while my mother –by absence of her real parents- took Enthannel by the hand and brought her from the opposite end of the cathedral. We both kneeled and lay one hand on the altar while the other was soaked in the water of the chalice while her fingers touched mine. The damsel, Sylvina, commanded us to bow our head in silent prayer and started the ceremony in the traditional words. From underneath my eyebrows I looked upon my fair beauty and once again I was paralysed by her appearance. The silken green dress, the festive ribbons in her chestnut brown hair, the jade and aventurine jewellery and most of all her immortal features made me believe for an instance that she had become an incarnation of the Lady. Transfixed I endured the remainder of ceremony while looking at her and before I knew it, some-one gripped my hand and laid it in hers as the end of the ceremony. Near midday we stepped out into a warm and bright sun to present ourselves to the people which awaited us outside. A great roar of cheers and music erupted as we walked outside hand in hand. The lunch took place at the great square with the commoners feasting and drinking all around us. For the first time since last night we were able to be together. Hours passed as the celebrations continued, addled by the continuous supply of wine from Bordeleaux, fish from Portus and meat from Carcassonne. Dinner took place in a select company in the Great Hall: I remember Alexander and Mercedes being there as well as several other friends I had met in adventure and travel. After proceeding in the first dance, we bade our guests a good night and left the Hall arm in arm.

Those years are amongst the happiest of my life: with my love at my side I felt like I would endure and outlast anything. My father though aging and nearing his seventieth birthday remained a noble ruler with eye for the common folk and the administration of the fief. Roiglan prospered and grew to a new high since the days of allegiance to Mousillon. As I've stated before Roiglan is a safe and calm domain as only the Forest of Arden remains troublesome every once in a while. I can count the times that I had to ride out and lead the Army of Roiglan -due to my father's age- to face a foe in the field on one hand, mostly greenskins or ratmen. To this day I count myself lucky to be blessed with children thrice and that they remained healthy and strong. Ann, my daughter and eldest, was born in midwinter 1525: she was a difficult birth and for some months we had to fear for her life yet the resilience of my family and the immortal strength of Enthannel pulled through in the end. Two years later my love gave birth to my first son and heir to the barony, Guillaume in honour of my trusted and good friend. 1528 brought me heartache and one more blessing in the same year: the birth of my second son Geruld was indeed a blessing beyond words. However 1528 brought me much pain and sorrow, more on this in the next chapter.