

HERO IN THE SHADOWS

WAYLANDER THE SLAYER
STALKS AN ANCIENT EVIL

DAVID GEMMELL



BALLANTINE BOOKS

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and *Hero in the Shadows***

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Hero in the Shadows

WAYLANDER THE SLAYER
STALKS AN ANCIENT EVIL

*David
Gemzell*



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Hero in the Shadows is dedicated with much love
to Broo Doherty, with thanks for the years of support,
encouragement, and flawless good humor. Be happy, Broo!

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Prologue

THE MERCENARY CAPTAIN Camran Osir reined in his mount at the crest of the hill and swung in the saddle to stare back down the forest trail. The twelve men under his command rode from the trees in single file and paused while he scanned the horizon. Removing his iron helm, Camran ran his fingers through his long blond hair, momentarily enjoying the warm breeze evaporating the sweat on his scalp. He glanced at the captive girl on the horse beside him. Her hands were tied, her dark eyes defiant. He smiled at her and saw her blanch. She knew that he was going to kill her and that her passing would be painful. He felt the warmth of blood pulsing in his loins. Then the feeling passed. His blue eyes narrowed as he gazed over the valley, seeking sign of pursuit.

Satisfied that no one was following, Camran tried to relax. He was still angry, of course, but calmed himself with the thought that his riders were ill-educated brutes with little understanding of civilized behavior.

The raid had gone well. There had been only five men in the little farming settlement, and they had been killed quickly, with no wounds or losses among his own men. Some of the women and children had managed to escape into the woods, but three young women had been taken—enough, at least, to satisfy the carnal urges of his riders. Camran himself had captured the fourth, the dark-haired girl on the swaybacked horse beside him. She had tried to run, but he had ridden her down, leaping from his horse and bearing her to the ground. She had fought silently, without panic, but one blow to the chin had rendered her unconscious, and then he had thrown her over his saddle. There was blood now on her pale cheek, and a purple bruise was showing on the side of her neck. Her faded yellow dress was torn at the shoulder and had flapped down, almost exposing her breast. Camran jerked his thoughts from her soft skin, turning his mind to more urgent concerns.

Yes, the raid had gone well until that idiot Polian had incited the others to set fire to the old farmhouse. Wanton destruction of property was anathema to a man of breeding such as Camran. It was criminally wasteful. Peasants could always be replaced, but good buildings should be treated with respect. And the farmhouse had been a good building, soundly constructed by a man who cared about quality work. Camran had been furious not only with them but with himself. Instead of merely killing the captured women, he had allowed his needs to override his common sense. He had taken his time, enjoying the screams of the first and luxuriating in the desperate pleading of the second and the subsequent cries of agony of the third. With each of them dead, he had turned his attentions to the dark-haired girl. She had not pleaded or made a sound after returning to consciousness to find her hands

and ankles bound. She was to be the richest harvest; her cries, when they came, would be the purest and sweetest.

The smoke had billowed over him just as he was unwrapping his ivory-handled skinning knives. Swinging around, he saw the fires. Leaving the bound girl where she lay, he ran back to the scene. Polian was grinning as Camran came alongside him. He was still grinning as he died, Camran's dagger plunging between his ribs, skewering his heart.

That sudden act of savagery cowed the men. "Did I not tell you?" he thundered. "Never property! Not unless directly ordered. Now, gather supplies and let's be gone."

Camran had returned to the young woman. He thought of killing her, but there would be no pleasure in it now, no slow, pounding joy as he watched the light of life fade from her eyes. Gazing down at the six small skinning knives in their silk-lined canvas pouch, he felt the dead weight of disappointment dragging at him. Carefully he rolled the pouch, tying it with black ribbon. Then he hauled the girl to her feet, cut the ropes around her ankles, and lifted her to the dead Polian's mount. Still she said nothing.

As Camran rode away, he gazed back at the burning building, and a deep sense of shame touched him. The farmhouse had not been built speedily but with great patience, the timbers lovingly fashioned, the joints fitting to perfection. Even the window frames had been carved and embellished. Destroying such a place was an act of sacrilege. His father would have been ashamed of him.

Camran's sergeant, the hulking Okrian, rode alongside him. "Wasn't in time to stop them, sir," he said.

Camran saw the fear in the man's eyes. "It is what happens when one is forced to deal with scum," he said. "Let's hope there are better men available when we reach Qumtar. We'll earn little commission from Panagyn with only eleven men."

"We'll get more, sir. Qumtar is crawling with fighters seeking employment with one or another of the houses."

"'Crawling' is probably an apt description. Not like the old days, is it?"

"Nothing ever is," said Okrian, and the two men rode in silence, each lost in thoughts of the past. Camran remembered the invasion of Drenai lands eighteen years earlier, when he had been a junior officer in the army of Vagria, serving under Kaem. It had been, Kaem had promised, the dawn of a new empire. And for a time it was true. They crushed all the armies sent against them, forcing the greatest of the Drenai generals, Egel, into the vastness of Skultik Forest and besieging the last fortress, Dros Purdol. But that had been the high point of the campaign. Under the command of the giant Karnak, Purdol had held, and Egel had broken from Skultik, descending on the Vagrian army like a storm. Kaem had been slain by the assassin, Waylander, and within two years Drenai forces had invaded Vagria. And it did not end there. Arrest warrants were issued against many of the best Vagrian officers, charging them with crimes against the populace. It was

laughable. What crime was there in killing your enemies, whether they were soldiers or farmers? But many officers were taken and hanged.

Camran had escaped north into the lands of the Gothir, but even there agents of the Drenai had continued to hunt him. So he had drifted east, across the sea into Ventria and beyond, serving in numerous armies and mercenary bands.

At thirty-seven he was now in charge of recruitment for House Bakard, one of the four ruling houses of Kydor. There was no outright war for them to fight. Not yet. But each of the houses was gathering soldiers, and there were many skirmishes in the wild lands.

News from home rarely reached Kydor, but Camran had been delighted to hear of the death of Karnak some years previously. Assassinated as he led a parade. Wonderful! Killed, apparently, by a woman wielding the bow of the legendary Waylander.

Jerking his mind once more to the present, Camran gazed back at his recruits. They were still frightened now and anxious to please, hoping that when they made camp, Camran would let them have the girl. He would soon dash those hopes. His plan was to use her, skin her, and leave the men to bury the body. He glanced once more at her and smiled. She looked at him coolly and said nothing.

Just before dusk Camran swung from the trail and selected a campsite. As the men unsaddled their mounts, he took the girl deeper into the forest. She offered no resistance as he pushed her to the ground, and she did not cry out as he took her. As he was reaching his climax, he opened his eyes and found her staring at his face, expressionless. That not only removed any pleasure from the rape, it also ruined his erection. Anger roared through him. Drawing his knife, he laid the edge on her throat.

“The Gray Man will kill you,” she said slowly, no trace of fear in her voice. The words carried certainty, and he paused.

“The Gray Man? Some demon of the night, perhaps? A protector of peasants?”

“He is coming,” she said.

He felt the prickle of fear on the nape hairs of his neck. “I suppose he is a giant or some such.”

She did not reply. A movement came from the bushes to his left. Camran surged to his feet, heart pounding, but it was Okrian.

“The men were wondering if you’d finished with her,” said the sergeant, his small eyes focusing on the peasant girl.

“No, I have not,” said Camran. “Maybe tomorrow.”

The sergeant shrugged and walked back to the campfire.

“One more day of life,” Camran told the girl. “Are you going to thank me?”

“I am going to watch you die,” she said.

Camran smiled, then punched her in the face, hurling her back to the ground. “Stupid peasant,” he said.

But her words kept coming back to him, and the following morning’s ride

found him constantly scanning the back trail. His neck was beginning to ache. Camran was about to heel his horse forward when he took one last look back. For a heartbeat only he saw a shadow moving into the trees half a mile down the trail. He blinked. Was it a horseman or merely a wandering deer? He could not be sure. Camran swore softly, then summoned two of his riders. "Go back down the trail. There may be a man following. If there is, kill him."

The men swung their mounts and rode away. Camran glanced at the girl. She was smiling.

"What's happening, sir?" asked Okrian, nudging his horse alongside Camran's mount.

"Thought I saw a rider. Let's move on."

They rode through the afternoon, stopping for an hour to walk the horses, then made camp in a sheltered hollow close to a stream. There was no sign of the two men Camran had sent out. He summoned Okrian to him. The big mercenary eased himself down alongside his captain, and Camran told him about the girl's warning.

"Gray Man?" he said. "Never heard of him. But then, I don't know this area of Kydor well. If he is following, the boys will get him. Tough lads."

"Then where are they?"

"Probably dawdling somewhere. Or, if they caught him, they're probably having a little fun with him. Perrin is said to be somewhat of an artist when it comes to the blood eagle. The men say he can open a man's ribs, pin the guts back with twigs, and still leave the poor bastard alive for hours. Now, what about the girl, sir? The men could use a little diversion."

"Aye, take her," said Camran.

Okrian hauled her up by the hair and dragged her back to the campfire. A cheer went up from the nine men gathered there. Okrian hurled her toward them. The first man rose and grabbed her as she half fell. "Let's see a little flesh," he shouted, tearing at her dress.

Suddenly the girl spun on her heel, slamming her elbow into the man's face, crushing his nose. Blood spurted over his mustache and beard, and he staggered back. The sergeant came up behind the girl, curling his arms around her and dragging her back into a tight embrace. Her head snapped back into his face, striking him on the cheekbone. He grabbed her hair and savagely twisted her head.

The first man drew a dagger and advanced toward her. "You puking bitch," he snarled. "I'm going to cut you bad. Not enough so we can't enjoy you, you little whore, but enough to make you scream like a gutted pig."

The girl, unable to move, stared with undisguised malevolence at the knifeman. She did not beg or cry out.

Suddenly there was a crunching thud. The knifeman stopped, his expression bemused. Slowly he reached up with his left hand. As he did so, he fell to his knees. His questing finger touched the black-feathered bolt jutting from the base of his skull. He tried to speak, but no words flowed. Then he pitched to his face.

For a few heartbeats no one moved. The sergeant hurled the girl to the ground and drew his sword. Another man, closer to the trees, grunted in shock and pain as a bolt speared his chest. He fell back, tried to rise, then gave out a gurgling scream as he died.

Camran, sword in hand, ran back to the fire, then charged into the undergrowth, his men fanning out around him.

All was silent, and there was no sign of an enemy.

“Make for open ground!” shouted Camran. The men ran back to their horses, saddling them swiftly. Camran grabbed the girl, forcing her to mount, then clambered up behind her and rode from the hollow.

Clouds drifted across the moon as the men raced through the forest. In the darkness they were forced to slow their flight. Camran saw a break in the trees and angled his mount toward it, emerging on a hillside. Okrian came close behind. As the other men broke clear, Camran counted them. Including himself and his sergeant, eight men were now clear of the trees. Flicking his gaze around the milling group, he counted again. The killer had taken another victim during the flight.

Okrian removed his black leather helm and rubbed his hand across his balding pate. “Shem’s balls,” he said, “we’ve lost five men and we’ve seen no one!”

Camran glanced around. They were in a circle of clear ground, but to progress in any direction, they would have to reenter the forest. “We’ll wait for the dawn,” he said, dismounting. Dragging the girl from the saddle, he swung her around. “Who is this Gray Man?” he asked.

She did not reply, and he slapped her hard. “Talk to me, you bitch,” he hissed, “or I’ll cut open your belly and strangle you with your entrails!”

“He owns all the valley,” she said. “My brother and the other men you killed farmed for him.”

“Describe him.”

“He is tall. His hair is long, mostly gray.”

“An old man?”

“He does not move like an old man,” she said. “But yes, he is old.”

“And how did you know he would be coming?”

“Last year five men attacked a settlement north of the valley. They killed a man and his wife. The Gray Man followed them. When he returned, he sent out a wagon and the bodies were brought back and displayed in the market square. Outlaws do not trouble us now. Only foreigners such as yourself would bring evil to the Gray Man’s land.”

“Does he have a name?” asked Camran.

“He is the Gray Man,” she said. “That is all I know.”

Camran moved away from her and stared back at the shadow-haunted trees. Okrian joined him. “He can’t be everywhere at once,” whispered Okrian. “Much will depend on which way we choose to travel. We were heading east, so perhaps we should change our plans.”

The mercenary captain drew a map from the pocket of his saddlebag and

opened it on the ground. They had been heading toward the eastern border and Qumtar, but now all Camran wished to see was an end to the tree line. On open ground the assassin could not overcome eight armed men. He studied the map in the moonlight. “The nearest edge of the forest is to the northeast,” he said. “Around two miles away. Once it is light, we’ll make for it.” Okrian nodded but did not reply.

“What are you thinking?”

The sergeant took a deep breath, then rubbed his hand across his face. “I was remembering the attack. Two crossbow bolts, one close upon the other. No time to reload. So either there’s two men or it must be a double-winged weapon.”

“If there’d been two men, we’d have seen some sign as we rushed the undergrowth,” said Camran. “They couldn’t both have avoided us.”

“Exactly. So it is one man who uses a double crossbow. One man, one skilled assassin who, having already killed the first two we sent, can then take out three tough men without being seen.”

“I take it there is a point to this?” muttered Camran.

“There was a man—years ago—who used such a weapon. Some say he was killed. Others claim he left the lands of the Drenai and bought himself a palace in Gothir territory. But perhaps he came instead to Kydor.”

Camran laughed. “You think we are being hunted by Waylander the Slayer?”

“I hope not.”

“Gods, man, we’re two thousand miles from Gothir. No, this is just another hunter using a similar weapon. Whoever he is, we’re ready for him now,” said Camran. “Put two men on watch and tell the rest to get some sleep.”

Camran moved to the girl, retied her hands and feet, then settled down on the ground. He had served in six campaigns and knew how important it was to rest whenever possible. Sleep did not come instantly. Instead he lay in the darkness thinking about what Okrian had said.

Waylander. Even the name made him shiver. A legend back in the days of his youth, Waylander the Assassin was said to be a demon in human form. Nothing could stop him—not walls or armed guards, not spells. It was said that the terrifying priests of the Dark Brotherhood had hunted him. All had died. Werebeasts created by a Nadir shaman were sent after him. Even those he had slain.

Camran shivered. Get a grip on yourself, he thought. Back then Waylander was said to be a man in his late thirties. If he was following them now, he would have to be a man close to sixty, and an old man could not kill and move as this one did.

No, he decided, it could not be Waylander. With that thought he slept.

He awoke suddenly and sat up. A shadow moved across him. Hurling himself to his right, he ducked and scabbled for his sword. Something struck him on the brow, and he pitched back. Okrian shouted a battle cry and sprinted forward. Camran surged to his feet, sword in hand. Clouds covered

the moon once more, but not before Camran saw a shadowy figure merge into the darkness of the trees.

“Who was on watch?” shouted Camran. “By the gods, I’ll cut his bastard eyes out!”

“No point in that,” said Okrian, pointing to a sprawled figure. Blood was pooling around the man. His throat had been slashed open. Another dead man was hunched by a boulder. “You’ve been wounded,” said Okrian. Blood was dripping from a shallow cut in Camran’s brow.

“I ducked at the right moment,” said the captain. “Otherwise his blade would have opened my throat.” He glanced at the sky. “Another hour and it will be light.” Pulling a handkerchief from his pocket, he held it to the bleeding wound on his brow.

“I think I cut him,” said Okrian. “But he moved fast.”

Camran continued to dab at his wound, but the blood was flowing freely. “You’ll have to stitch it,” he told Okrian.

“Yes, sir.” The hulking sergeant moved to his horse, removing a medicine pouch from his saddlebag. Camran sat very still as Okrian went to work. He glanced at the four other surviving conscripts, sensing their fear. Even as the sun rose, there was no lessening of tension, for now they had to ride back into the forest.

The sky was clear and bright as Camran stepped into the saddle, the hostage girl seated before him. He swung to his men. “If he attacks in daylight, we’ll kill him,” he said. “If not, we’ll be clear of the trees soon. He’ll stop following us then. He’ll not tackle six armed men on open ground.”

His words did not convince them. But then, they did not convince him, either. They moved slowly toward the trees, found the trail, then picked up the pace, Camran in the lead and Okrian just behind him. They rode for half an hour. Okrian glanced back to see two riderless horses. He shouted an alarm. Panic touched them all then, and they began to ride faster, lashing their horses.

Camran emerged from the trees and hauled on the reins. He was sweating now and could feel his heart beating wildly. Okrian and the other two surviving men drew their swords.

A rider on a dark horse moved slowly from the trees, his long black cloak drawn closely around him. The four warriors sat very still as he approached. Camran blinked back sweat. The man’s face was strong and somehow ageless. He could have been anywhere from his thirties to his fifties. His gray hair, lightly streaked with black, was shoulder length, held back from his face by a black silk band tied about his brow. He was expressionless, but his dark eyes focused on Camran.

He rode to within ten feet of them, then drew back on the reins, waiting.

Camran felt the sting of salt sweat on his cut brow. His lips were dry, and he licked them. One gray-haired man against four warriors. The man could not survive. Why, then, the terrible fear causing Camran’s belly to cramp?

In that moment the girl suddenly threw herself from the saddle. Camran

tried to grab her, missed, and swung back to face the rider. In that briefest of moments the rider's cloak flickered. His arm came up. Two crossbow bolts slammed into the riders on either side of Okrian. The first pitched from the saddle, and the second slumped forward, sliding over his horse's neck. Okrian heeled his mount forward and charged at the rider. Camran followed, his saber extended. The man's left hand flashed forward. A shining streak of silver light sped through the air, punching through Okrian's left eye socket and into his brain. His body tipped back, his blade flying from his hand. Camran's saber lanced out toward the assassin, but the man swayed in the saddle, the blade missing him by mere inches. Camran swung his mount.

Something struck him in the throat. Suddenly he couldn't breathe. Dropping his sword, he brought his hand up. Grabbing the hilt of the throwing knife, he dragged it clear of his flesh. Blood bubbled over his tunic. His horse reared, dumping him to the grass. As he lay there, choking on his own blood, a face appeared above his own.

It was the girl.

"I told you," she said.

The dying man watched in horror as her bound hands lifted the blood-drenched throwing knife, raising it above his face. "This is for the women," she said.

And the blade swept down.

WAYLANDER SWAYED IN the saddle, the weight of weariness and pain bearing down on him, washing away the anger. Blood from the gashed wound to his left shoulder had flowed over his chest and stomach, but this had halted now. The wound in his side, however, was still bleeding. He felt light-headed and gripped the saddle pommel, taking slow, deep breaths.

The village girl was kneeling by the dead raider. He heard her say something, then watched as she took up his throwing knife in her bound hands and rammed it into the man's face over and over again. Waylander looked away, his vision blurring.

Fifteen years earlier he would have hunted those men down and emerged without a scratch. Now his wounds throbbed, and with the fury gone, he felt empty, devoid of emotion. With great care he dismounted. His legs almost gave way, but he kept hold of the pommel and sagged against the steeldust gelding. Anger at his weakness flared, giving him a little strength. Reaching into his saddlebag, he pulled out a small pouch of blue linen and moved to a nearby boulder. His fingers were trembling as he opened the pouch. He sat quietly for a few heartbeats, breathing deeply, then unfastened his black cloak, letting it drop back to drape over the boulder. The girl came alongside him. Blood had splashed to her face and into her long dark hair. Waylander drew his hunting knife and cut the ropes binding her wrists. The skin beneath was raw and bleeding.

Twice he tried to sheathe his blade, but his vision was misting, and he placed the knife on the boulder beside him. The girl peered at his torn leather tunic shirt and the bloodstains on it. "You are hurt," she said. Waylander nodded. Unbuckling his belt, he reached up with his right hand and tried to pull his shirt over his head, but there was no strength left. Swiftly she stepped in, lifting the garment clear. There were two wounds: a shallow cut from the top of his left shoulder down past the collarbone, and a deeper puncture wound that had entered just above his left hip and exited at the back. Both holes were plugged with tree moss, but blood was still oozing from the wounds. Waylander reached for the crescent needle embedded in the blue linen pouch. As his fingers touched it, darkness swept over him.

When first he opened his eyes, he wondered why the needle was shining so brightly and why it was floating before his eyes. Then he realized he was staring at the crescent moon in a clear night sky. His cloak had been laid over him, and beneath his head was a pillow fashioned from a folded blanket. A fire was burning close by, and he could smell the savory scent of woodsmoke. As he tried to move, pain erupted in his shoulder, stitches stretching against

tortured flesh. He sagged back.

The girl moved alongside him, stroking his hair from his sweat-drenched brow.

Waylander closed his eyes and slept again, floating in a sea of dreams. A giant creature with the face of a wolf bore down on him. He shot two crossbow bolts into its mouth. A second came at him. With no weapons at hand, he leapt at the beast, his hands grasping for its throat. It shifted and changed, becoming a slender woman whose neck snapped as his hands gripped hard. He cried out in agony, then looked around. The first dead beast also had changed. He had become a small boy, lying dead in a meadow of spring flowers. Waylander looked at his hands. They were covered in blood, which flowed up over his arms, covering his chest and neck, streaming over his face and into his mouth, choking him. He spit it out, struggling for breath, and staggered to a nearby stream, hurling himself into it, trying to wash the blood from his face and body.

A man was sitting on the bank. "Help me!" called Waylander.

"I cannot," said the man. He stood and turned away, and Waylander saw two crossbow bolts jutting from his back.

The terrible dreams continued, dreams of blood and death.

When he awoke, it was still dark, but he felt stronger. Moving with care to protect the stitches, he rolled to his right and pushed himself to a sitting position. The second wound above his hip flared with pain, and he grunted.

"Are you feeling better?" the girl asked him.

"A little. Thank you for helping me."

She laughed and shook her head.

"What is so amusing?" he asked.

"You rode after thirteen men and suffered these wounds to come to my rescue. And you thank *me*? You are a strange man, lord. Are you hungry?" He realized that he was. In fact, he was ravenous. She took a stick and rolled three large clay balls from the fire. Cracking open the first with a sharp blow, she knelt down and examined the contents. Looking up at him, she smiled. It was a pretty smile, he thought.

"What do you have there?" he asked.

"Pigeons. I killed them yesterday. They are a little too fresh, but there was no other food. My uncle taught me how to cook them in clay, but I have not tried it in years."

"Yesterday? How long have I been sleeping?"

"On and off for three days."

Satisfied that the first pigeon was cooked, she cracked open the other two balls. The smell of roasted meat filled the air. Waylander felt almost sick with hunger. They waited impatiently until the meat had cooled, then devoured the birds. The flavor of the dark meat was strong, the texture not unlike that of aged beef.

"Who is Tanya?" she asked.

He looked at her, and his eyes were cold. "How do you know that name?"

“You cried out in your sleep.”

He did not answer at first, and she did not press him. Instead she built up the fire and sat quietly, a blanket around her shoulders.

“She was my first wife,” he said at last. “She died. Her grave is a long way from here.”

“Did you love her greatly?”

“Aye. Greatly. You are very curious.”

“How else does one find out what one wishes to know?”

“I cannot argue with that.” She was about to speak, but he raised his hand. “And let that be an end to questions on this matter,” he said.

“As you will, lord.”

“I am not a lord. I am a landowner.”

“Are you very old? Your hair is gray, and there are lines on your face. But you move like a young man.”

“What is your name?” he asked her.

“Keeva Taliana.”

“Yes, I am old, Keeva Taliana. Older than sin.”

“Then how is it that you could kill all those men? They were young and strong and fierce as devils.”

Suddenly he felt weary again. She was instantly full of concern. “You must drink lots of water,” she said. “My uncle told me that. Loss of blood, lots of water.”

“A wise man, your uncle. Did he also teach you to use your elbow as a weapon?”

“Yes. He taught me many things, none of which were terribly useful when the raiders came.” Fetching a canteen from a saddle on the ground close by, she held it out to him.

Waylander took it from her and drank deeply. “Do not be so sure,” he said. “You are alive. The others are not. You stayed cool and used your mind.”

“I was lucky,” she said, a note of anger appearing in her voice.

“Yes, you were. But you planted the seed of fear in the leader. For that he kept you alive.”

“I don’t understand.”

“You told him the Gray Man was coming.”

“You were there?”

“I was there when he told his sergeant what you had said. I was about to slay them both when the sergeant grabbed you by the hair and dragged you back to the fire. That caught me out of position. Had you not crushed that man’s nose, I would not have had time to come to your aid. So yes, you were lucky. But you made the best use of that luck.”

“I did not see you or hear you,” she said.

“Neither did they.” Then he lay back and slept again.

When he awoke, she was snuggled down alongside him, sleeping peacefully. It was pleasant to be that close to another human being, and he realized he had been alone too long. Easing himself away from her, he rose to

his feet and pulled on his boots. As he did so, a group of crows detached themselves from the bodies of the dead and rose into the air, cawing raucously. The sound woke Keeva. She sat up, smiled at him, then moved away behind the boulders. Waylander saddled two of the horses she had tethered, the effort causing his wounds to throb.

He was still angry about the first wound to his shoulder. He should have guessed the leader would send out a rear guard. They had almost taken him. The first had been crouched on a tree branch above the trail, the second hiding in the bushes. Only the scraping of the first man's boot on the bark above had alerted him. Bringing up his crossbow, he had sent a bolt into the man as he had leapt. It had entered at the belly, slicing up through the heart. The man had fallen almost on top of Waylander, his sword slashing across his shoulder. Luckily, the man had been dead as the blow struck, and there was no real force in it. The second man had lunged from the bushes, a single-bladed ax in his hand. The steeldust gelding had reared, forcing the attacker back. In that moment Waylander had sent the second bolt through the man's forehead.

You are getting old and slow, he chided himself. Two clumsy assassins and they almost had you.

It had probably been this anger that had led him to attack their camp, a need to prove to himself that he could still move as once he had. Waylander sighed. He had been lucky to escape with his life. Even so, one of the men had managed to slam a blade into his hip. An inch or so higher and he would have been disemboweled; a few inches lower and the blade would have sliced the femoral artery, killing him for sure.

Keeva returned, smiling and waving as she came. He felt a touch of guilt. He had not known at first that the raiders had a captive. He had hunted them purely because they had raided his lands. Her rescue, though it gave him great pleasure, had been merely a fluke, a fortunate happenstance.

Keeva rolled the blankets and tied them to the back of her saddle. Then she brought him his cloak and weapons. "Do you have a name, lord?" she asked. "Apart from the Gray Man."

"I am not a lord," he said, ignoring her question.

"Yes, Gray Man," she said with an impudent smile. "I will remember that."

How resilient the young are, he thought. Keeva had witnessed death and destruction, had been raped and abused, and was now miles from home in the company of a stranger. Yet she could still smile. Then he looked into her dark eyes and saw beneath the smile the traces of sorrow and fear. She was making a great effort to appear carefree, to charm him. And why not? he thought. She is a peasant girl with no rights save those her master allows her, and those are few. If Waylander were to rape and kill her, there would be no inquest and few questions asked. In essence he owned her as if she were a slave. Why would she not seek to please him?

"You are safe with me," he said.

"I know that, lord. You are a good man."