

Volume 1: When Kingdoms Fall

Chapter 1 — Prelude

The dull throbbing of the Trail Blazer 5000 slightly vibrated the water pitcher and glasses on the chrome-plated table. Governor Andrzej Bohater carefully adjusted his green collar and uniform, a last minute inspection before the impending, all important first meeting of his High Council. The huge space ship was making its final approach to their destination, Ashford-5, a remote, marginally inhabitable world in the outer rim of the galaxy. The thirty-one year old man with coal black hair, eyes, and moustache, would be taking charge of this group, the Imperial Settlement Force Thirty-three, the moment the huge ship landed. Andrzej was fresh out of the Academy on Rigel-3, as were all of his immediate subordinate ministers and wife, Irena, twenty-nine. She also had the distinctive black hair and eyes, as did all of those from Rigel-3, along with their characteristic light grey or olive-colored skin tones.

“Relax, this will go just as you have planned, dear. Shall I fill the glasses? They should be here any minute. We are about to land. I can tell from the vibrations,” she asked, flashing him a flirting smile. For a moment, Andrzej was distracted by her bright red lips, matching inch long nails, and dark eye shadow. He wished that they could have spent more time in their bed this morning, but the ship’s captain had informed him that they would be landing at 15:00 and he had to officiate this first, official meeting of his cabinet.

Irena was also his Construction Minister. Her job was to get their new landing facilities built rapidly. After all, they all needed housing. Three months in a space ship had been fatiguing, with so little to do. He’d spent most of the time with his wife in their cabin’s bed. He took his seat at the head of the chrome-plated table and watched his curvaceous wife finishing pouring the water. Such a woman, he thought to himself. Just as she took her seat to his immediate left, the others began filing in, taking their places around the table.

General Janek Jerzy, the eldest of the party at thirty-four, took his seat at the governor’s right. He was in charge of their two hundred Drugi or security soldiers, but Governor Andrzej hoped that they would not be needed. His Psychman, Doctor Cezar Gerwazy, twenty-eight, strolled in, accompanied by his wife, Jolanta, twenty-seven, who acted as his assistant. If there were any trouble, the Psychman would see that it was terminally handled. The governor’s critically important Minister of Mining, Jurek Kacper, twenty-six, entered behind them with his wife and their Refining Minister, Kassia, hanging on his arm. They made a pair, Andrzej thought, as he mentally undressed the shapely woman.

Doctor Zosia Wiola, their resident physician, came in next. For a moment, Andrzej felt a pang of sympathy for her. She was just about the ugliest woman he’d ever seen, but a most competent medical doctor. She was twenty-five and like the rest of his ministers, fresh out of Rigel-3's Academy, Medical Section in her case. She was armed with all the very latest methods and treatments. Although she was most competent, the governor hoped that her services would

only be minimally needed here on Ashford-5. She was unmarried, naturally, the governor thought.

Two other single women brought up the rear, Dita Eva, twenty-three, and Luzia Lina, twenty-four. Dita was his Social-Anthropology Minister, while Luzia was his Native Relations Minister. Everyone had coal black hair and eyes, indicative of those from Rigel-3. Dita was attractive, but tended to overdo her makeup, while Luzia was rather plain looking. After the two women took their seats, Governor Andrzej rose.

Sounding rather pompous as befitting a governor, he began, “Welcome to our first official meeting of the Imperial Settlement Force Thirty-three. As you probably know already, we are on our final approach to Ashford-5. Our objective is to establish a proper mining facility here on Ashford-5. Travel here in the outer rim consumes a lot of fuel and the Imperial Planet Scouts have reported that Ashford-5 is loaded with psi-crystals which are desperately needed by the Imperium. We will be setting up a vital refueling station and space port here on Ashford-5.” Of course, everyone already knew all of this, but it was his duty to spell these details out for the official record, which began with this meeting.

“You have all been handpicked for this exciting challenge,” he continued. Well, he was exaggerating slightly. Everyone was fresh out of their various academies on Rigel-3. Times were hard throughout the Imperium and this assignment offered all of them a significant career boost — that is, if they made good on this project. Psi-crystals were the key ingredient in the fuel used by all of the ships in the Imperial space fleet. If they turned this backward planet into a major refinery and supply depot, certainly the Imperium would take note of their achievements. “When we succeed here on Ashford-5, I don’t have to tell you that all of our careers will skyrocket. I expect nothing but your very best work in the coming days, weeks, and months.” He didn’t say years because everyone of them hoped and prayed that they’d be promoted to more civilized planets long before a year had passed. Many nodded their agreement with him.

“Now then, the Imperial Directive #5, of which you are all familiar I am sure, says that we must not interfere in the local culture, politics, and social affairs of the natives. Ordinarily, we would be bound by this directive. However, in the case of Ashford-5, the obtaining of the psi-crystals supersedes this directive. Fuel is absolutely vital out here in the rim. Thus, we have Imperial Orders to do whatever it takes to get the mining and refining of psi-crystals up and running as rapidly as possible.”

Murmurs came from both Dita and Luzia. Dita broke in, “As your Social-Anthropologist Minister, I want to go on record as being against wholesale violation of the Imperial Directive #5. We could do irreparable harm to the indigenous life forms on Ashford-5, Governor Andrzej.”

“I agree with Dita. We should tread carefully on these primitives,” added Luzia.

Andrzej frowned, “Yes, of course, duly noted. Make no mistake, we are dealing with

primitives here, quite primitive if the scouting reports are accurate, and I have no doubt that they are correct. The obtaining of psi-crystals is absolutely vital to the Imperium and we must do what we need to get this colony producing the much needed fuel. However, that said, I am not saying that we wantonly eliminate these primitives, Dita. Rather, we will do what is needed and no more, but I shall stand for no disruptions from our mining targets as set forth in the official documents of our charge. So Dita, I am leaving the cultural aspects in your capable hands. Which reminds me, Luzia, are you prepared to handle the necessary primitive native relations?”

“Aye, Governor, I am fully prepared to handle any and all such negotiations. I have the ULAT’s programmed and ready to go. Of course, their linguistic data is based solely upon the initial scouting reports. Expect me to be updating them as I get more familiar with their language idiosyncracies,” she reported. The ULAT was their Universal Language Translator device, a small portable box which fed other people’s words into their ears, while speaking their own words from a small speaker within the box — a highly useful invention now in widespread use throughout the entire portion of the galaxy occupied by the Imperium.

“Excellent, excellent, Luzia. Now then, General Janek, are you and your men set to secure our landing site?”

“Absolutely. The primitives will pose no serious threat whatsoever, you may rest assured of that fact!” he replied antagonistically. “We will have a perimeter established minutes upon landing. From there, we will fan out and setup a defensive wall entirely around the initial site. How soon after that are we to expand out for the miners?”

He was looking for a fight, Dita sensed. She thought, *Against Drugi, what chance have these primitives got?* This bothered her considerably. They were about to entirely up heave the existing culture on this planet, something that she personally detested. Dita had spent years studying to be an observer not a disrupter of other cultures, especially primitive ones.

“My teams will be ready to head out to the survey-indicated potential sites the moment that you give us the okay,” Minister Jurek hastily answered. Then he launched into an explanation. “Ashford-5 is a most peculiar planet.” Dita wondered why. She cursed a little, knowing that she’d paid little attention to the geological discussions Jurek had held during their long trip here. “It is a planet almost wholly without any elements beyond gold in the classic Periodic Chart of Universal Elements found on most all inhabitable worlds. The survey has shown that gold here is extremely rare and precious, though hard to find.”

Now it makes sense. I wondered why the survey reports indicated that copper and silver were the main currency among the primitives. I always presumed gold would be. So gold is rare here, strange. I wonder why? Dita thought, but decided not to pursue it here in the meeting.

“The primitives have evolved enough to make forged weapons from a low grade steel. However, most metallic ores are relatively rare on this world. While there is some tin, there is

virtually no element heavier than tin here, save for the rare gold deposits. There is an abundance of silicates in many forms here, one of which are our precious psi-crystals, which makes this world so extremely valuable to the Imperium. The survey crews have mapped out locations of heavier deposits of these precious crystals. We will begin by checking out the largest of these. Of course, we will need Drugi for our protection and Luzia ought to tag along to interface with the primitives. At least one site is close to one of their settlements.”

“Excellent, let’s plan to head out first thing in the morning. I want to give Irena time to get her construction crews going first. It might be wise to see if the primitives come to greet us as we land. Probably they won’t, but before I send out Luzia, I want to make sure,” the governor advised.

“Do my Drugi have complete freedom of action?” General Janek asked. By this, everyone knew that he meant did he have permission to exterminate any resisters, protestors, or trouble makers.

“As a last resort, use stun settings, general. That’s why we have our own Psychman with us. Apprehend them and bring them to Cezar for Behaviourial Modification or a full Mind Wipe, if needed,” Governor Andrzej explicitly said, hoping to appease Dita somewhat. He knew that she was totally against the abolition of the Imperial Directive #5, but he had to do what was needed to get the precious psi-crystals flowing into the refinery.

Not wanting to be left out entirely, the Refining Minister, Kassia, spoke up. “As soon as Irena has finished her basic construction, my crew will begin setting up the first of our planned three refineries.”

“How come the delay?” Governor Andrzej asked, slightly confused. He wished that he had paid more attention to the initial plans. Why did the refinery constructions need to be delayed?

“We need stable power sources and water supplies, governor,” she answered, guessing that he’d totally ignored her papers that she’d sent in with the initial plans. *Well, she thought, that’s nothing new. He seldom gets involved with the details, but always takes the credit for them. Bosses, I hate them.*

“Oh, yes, yes, I forgot,” he hastily justified. “Everyone, I know that you will all do your jobs admirably. Yes, I know that conditions here in this backwater, primitive planet are going to be quite trying and certainly not what any of us are used to, but chin up! Let’s do a really good job of it. I am sure that if we do, we will only be here a short while before we are all promoted and can return to civilization. Now then, I believe we will be landing in a few minutes. I suggest that we get to our quarters and strap in, though the landing ought to be a smooth one. Meeting dismissed.”

As if on cue, the intercom activated. The captain announced, “We will be landing within ten minutes. Everyone, you are ordered to make yourselves secure for landing. That is all.”

Chapter 2 — King Aaran Wycombe

Tierra was the name that the inhabitants called their continent and world, though at this time, the year 1000, they did not know that there was a difference between the two. Tierra was bat-shaped, some six thousand miles east-west and four thousand north-south at it's middle, shrinking to three thousand along its wings. The tall and forbidding Goza Mountains divided the Westerlings from the Midlands, while the rugged Buku Hills separated the Midlands from the Easterlings. While there was a distinctive physical separation between these thirds of the continent, their customs were rather similar throughout, though their languages varied somewhat. Trading routes between the three areas paralleled the southern coastline.

Each section of Tierra was ruled by local kings. Four kings divided up the Westerlings, while four controlled the Easterlings. The Midlands, somewhat larger in size, had seven kings. All fifteen kings were constantly jostling with each other for control of more and more territory. Wars were commonplace, though at this time, only two were ongoing. The Westerlings' Kingdom of Alavera was battling its southern neighbor, the Kingdom of Trujillo. Here in the Midlands, the Kingdom of Bettingham was on the down side of its war with its northern neighbor, the Kingdom of Rockton. Many referred to this time period as its Great Realignment.

Down in the extreme southern portion of the Midlands lay the Kingdom of Bashir. Here in the hot lands, the Church of God was firmly entrenched, commonly called the COG. They had established their own Mother City, called Valcia, where the Archbishop sought to bring religion to all of Tierra. Each kingdom had its own bishop, who controlled the churches there. From the larger churches, priests fanned out into the many smaller towns and villages, preaching the gospel of COG. At this time, the COG was slowly gaining influence among the many kings and nobles. Their main attack was against the many local "witches."

Even tiny hamlets had their own local witch. While the COG assigned all manner of wild satanic magical spells to these women, in fact, the women were merely closely attuned to the healing nature of the lands around them. They could trace their lineage back a thousand years and were wise when it came to the healing properties of plants. When a villager was injured or sick, they went to their local witch for assistance. Often they received a potion which speeded their healing. True, some were known to also distribute poisons and other nefarious potions.

To counter these heretic witches, the COG founded and supported the Medical Academy in Valcia. At this time, every king had their own official COG doctor, whose skills were rapidly becoming accepted in these courts. However, the kings knew better than to outlaw their own local witches. Of course, if you were to ask Archbishop Mata Hatta, who ruled over the entire COG, what his ultimate objective was, he'd tell you total control of Tierra. He was wise enough to realize that he would not likely live to see his objective met, but he continued to lay the foundations that he fully expected would ultimately achieve his objective.

Just north of the Kingdom of Bashir lay the Kingdom of Bettingham. Farther north, the Wyndl River divided the Kingdom of Bettingham from the Kingdom of Rockton. It was the largest river on Tierra, running from its mountain streams in the northern portion of the Goza Mountains, southeast to nearly the southern tip of Bashir, close to four thousand miles long. Rockton's army was predominately mounted soldiers, striking hard across the Wyndl and then retreating. Bettingham's army was mostly foot soldiers, who were hard pressed to stop the cavalry.

King Aaran Wycombe, now forty-two, ruled from his capital city of Wycombe, home to some twenty thousand and located in the south-central portion of Bettingham. Wycombe lay two hundred miles due southeast of the landing site of the space ship and their new base on the mountain called Beja and the Plateau Grado. The second largest city of nearly ten thousand, Wyth, lay in the foothills of the mountains, barely a hundred miles north of Beja. King Aaran was a ruthless and greatly feared ruler, who struck fear in his enemies as well as his own subjects.

King Aaran's wife was Misty, forty years old. She, like all of her family, had yellow curly hair and blue eyes. In her youth, she was quite pretty, but as she approached middle age, time and the hands of her husband had taken their toll. Their eldest son, Prince Norwood, a handsome twenty-two year old, was far to the north leading their northern defenses. Palmer, a year younger, was still being trained by his father's sword master, but he desperately wanted to see some action. Their eldest daughter, Ally, twenty, had her mother's beauty. Her long curly hair fell to her waist, but she was also strong willed, often defying her father's wishes. Her younger sister, April was just eighteen and she took after their mother, being quiet and retired by nature.

King Aaran resided in Castle Wycombe, a grey stone fortress sitting on a hill beside the sprawling town. A wooden palisade wound its way around the outer edges of the city and adjoining the castle on its eastern side. Also at the king's court was Bishop Gil Granville, forty-five, who's temper rivaled that of the king. Besides overseeing the COG here in Bettingham, he worked to further the church's influence at court. He'd achieved much of that goal by having brought Doctor Corey Forrest to Wycombe. The young doctor, barely twenty-five, had a sadistic streak which dovetailed nicely with the king and bishop. Doctor Corey was also something of an innovator and inventor of all things dealing with bodies. He'd perfected the Forrest surgical blades, which greatly aided surgery everywhere. However, he also perfected the Amputator de la Mano specifically to assist King Aaran in doling out his unique brand of justice.

Thieves were a common problem among all of the fifteen kingdoms. King Aaran had finally solved it in Wycombe, thanks in part to Doctor Corey. Anyone caught thieving had one or both hands inserted into the mechanical device. When the good doctor activated the pull lever, the sterile, extremely sharp blades efficiently separated the wrist from the arm bone's joint. A blast of exceedingly hot air from the modified blacksmith bellows seared the stub with minimal loss of blood. Within a year, thieves took their trade elsewhere. Besides, anyone seeing a one handed person knew instantly that he or she was a convicted thief. Embolden by his success,

King Aaran used his new tool against others who crossed him in anyway.

Today, King Aaran was fuming. “Who the hell stole the church’s tithes bag of silver this time?” Bishop Gil Granville had just reported the theft. “If I haven’t got enough to worry about with this war against the vile Rockton raiders, now we have thieves robbing the Church of God. Well, who did it? Captain?” He gave his City Guards Captain a stare that could kill.

Not facing the king, Bishop Gil could not resist a fleeting smile. This was child’s play. Manipulating King Aaran was extremely easily done. Seldom does an angry man ever see the truth. Aaran was no exception. Bishop Gil was steadily implementing his COG agenda. One of his primary goals was the elimination of the influence of the witches here in Bettingham. In fact, the bag of silver had not been stolen. He only claimed that it had been and quietly reported to the captain that it had been taken by the local witch Babs Wynne.

“Sire, the priest believes that it was the witch Babs Wynne,” he reported what he’d been told. That he had not done any investigation of his own seldom figured into the justice doled out by King Aaran, so why bother, the captain thought.

“Damnable witches again. Send for Doctor Corey immediately!” King Aaran yelled. He paced his throne room and took a lengthy swill of ale, calming his nerves. Shortly, the small framed doctor came running into the throne room.

“Ah, good doctor. It seems another witch has been stealing from the COG. Babs Wynne this time. What do we know about her?”

Queen Misty spoke up, “Dear, she helped deliver our children, don’t you remember?”

He slapped her hard across her face, bringing tears to her eyes. “Don’t ever put me down in front of men! But you do have a point, Misty. She did bring our four children into this world. Okay, I will be kind to her, but she needs to pay. I know, doesn’t she have a daughter?”

Bishop Gil could not believe his good luck. He quickly said, “Why yes, Sire, in fact she does have a twenty-one year old daughter, another witch like her mother.” Could he possibly kill two birds with one strike?

“Captain, execute Babs! We will be merciful only because she was of valuable service to us in the past. However, she must pay — set an example, if we are ever going to put an end to thievery in Bettingham. Doctor, take both of her daughter’s hands. That will set a powerful example. We will not stand for thievery! Period! Now get going!” He wished that he could put an end to this war with Rockton as easily as this.

“Yes Sire,” Doctor Corey replied with a wry smile, echoed by Bishop Gil as well. He and the captain jogged out of the throne room, but slowed to a walk once beyond sight of the king.

Meanwhile, a red bruise began appearing on Misty's face. "Excuse me, My Lord," she whimpered, covering her face with her hand. She bowed politely and left, heading to her room, hoping that she still had some of the healing salve from Babs. *What am I going to do without Babs?* She began to worry. For years she depended upon the good witch to help heal her many injuries suffered at the hands of her husband. She found the small pot and lamented that there was so little of it left. She made a mental note to have some of her serving women make discrete inquiries in order to locate another healing witch in Wycombe. Perhaps, she thought, she should keep this a secret from Aaran.

"Mom! Did dad hit you again?" Ally asked antagonistically. She'd come walking into her mother's chambers to complain about her own dire situation, but saw the swelling on Misty's face. "Here, let me rub the salve on it for you." She took the precious pot from her mother's hands and began to apply the healing ointment. "Damn dad anyway!"

"Dear, you must not be so hard on your father. Lord knows he has so much to handle these days, what with the war and now our own witch turning thief on us," Misty tried to dissuade her daughter from speaking ill of her husband. *Lord, knows that I must have deserved this slap. I did speak out against him and I ought to not have. What am I going to do without Babs? She delivered my four babies.*

"I just heard. News like that travels fast, mom, but I just don't believe it. Why would Babs steal from the COG? It doesn't make any sense. You and I both know that the bishop hates the good witches around here and is doing his best to get rid of them. I wouldn't put it past the bishop to have framed poor Babs. She's very likely totally innocent," Ally declared forcefully. *Damn him anyway. Mom's going to have a big bruise on her face again. My god, Babs delivered all of us and this is her reward for years of service to us? My own dad is the wickedest man I've ever heard of, but what can I do to stop him? Why don't the other men do something to stop him?*

"Well Ally, there is nothing that we can do about that, dear. Babs ought not have so riled up the COG, I suppose," Misty attempted to invent a reason for Babs to be guilty of something. After all, she knew that the healer and witch was about to be executed. Well, at least she had done that much for Babs. Being killed outright was certainly better than losing one's hands and being marked as a thief in everyone's eyes for the rest of their lives. "I was able to get your father to show Babs some mercy, dear." She thought, *Well, it will be merciful. She will have a quick death, that's something. No one can live without their hands, so I guess Aaran is being kind to her.*

"Mercy? You mean having her murdered instead of mutilated? Some mercy," Ally declared hostilely. "There, you are all fixed up. Bad bruise, though. Why do you let dad hit you all the time, mom? He has broken both your arms and given you countless beatings." Her mind drifted back over the many years that she'd witnessed her mother's many beatings and the two times that her arm had been actually broken by her father, whom she now detested. *Why hasn't Norwood stepped in to put a stop to it? Or even Palmer?* She sighed and realized that her

brothers dare not defy their father either. She recalled something that Norwood had told her in private just before he left to take command of their soldiers up by Wyth in the north. *Dad's a tyrant, but a powerful one. You watch yourself, Ally. One day he will give his throne to me and then I will set things right. Well, maybe you might, Norwood, but Babs will be long dead by then.*

“Dear, it is not as bad as you are making it out to be — really it isn’t. Besides, it is my own fault. I put him down in front of the other men and so I deserved it, really I did,” Queen Misty replied, again making light of the situation and finding a reason for Aaran to have struck her so hard. *I have to get Ally calmed down. It really isn’t anything to get so worked up about, not really.*

Ally put her hands on her hips. “Mom! One of these days, he’s going to go too far and kill you! I hope that one day you will finally have had enough of his brutality towards you!” She pivoted on her heels and headed for the door, having forgotten entirely what she had come to ask her mother about. *Damn dad anyway!*

She sat in her room fuming, imagining all manner of “ends” for her father, but none of them by her own hands. Ally was a mere young woman, ripe now for marrying. She’d spent all her life cooped up in the castle. Well, that wasn’t entirely true. She often went riding in the nearby fields and even once tried falconry. Most of her time had been spent learning to read and write and to perform wifely duties, sewing, cooking, and cleaning. “You must be prepared to care for your husband when you are married,” her mother had often explained patiently to her. Untold hours, she’d spent watching her brothers being trained by their father’s sword master, all the while wishing that she could be so trained as well, but King Aaran would never let her get near a blade. Often, she had wondered why? Of life beyond the stone walls of the castle, she knew next to nothing.

Now her thoughts drifted back to what she had originally gone to see her mother about — marriage. Her father had been increasingly talking of finding a suitable husband for her. She knew that most of the women that worked here in the castle had married husbands who offered them either a higher social standing or a better position, though a few chose their mates for love alone. Strong willed, Ally wanted to marry for love, but more frequently now, her father talked of arranging a marriage for her. So far, she’d been able to put him off by declaring each of his suggestions was a “fat pig” and that she’d have no part of the proposed man. The surprise invasion from the Kingdom of Rockton had been her temporary salvation. King Aaran was totally preoccupied with the ill-going war that began in the early spring.

An hour later, Ally was herself summoned to her dad’s court. She dare not defy him and ignore an official summons. When she got there, she found that Palmer, April, and her mother were already there, along with the bishop and several guards. Plus, she saw a stranger was present and seated before her father. *What is up?* she wondered. The man had brown hair and thus was not likely from Bettingham. Here in this kingdom, blonde hair was commonplace, not brown. *Can he be from Rockton?*

“Princess Ally,” King Aaran used her formal title, “this is King Addam Chester’s emissary. He comes with an offer of peace. If I hand over our northern town of Wyth to King Chester and marry you, Princess Ally, to his eldest son, Prince Orson, then King Chester will end this war. I’ve decided to accept his offer.”

Ally’s ire rose to a new height. “I will not marry Orson! He is a fat pig! You might as well go ahead and kill me right now! There is no way on Tierra that I will ever marry our enemy!” Ally’s face tightened in anger, blood vessels in her neck throbbed visibly. Involuntarily, Queen Misty covered her face with her hands, as if to deflect the mighty blow that would *surely* follow. *Our enemy? Hideous! Kill me now. You can’t be my father!*

King Aaran’s face blazed, he clenched his fists. Only because the emissary was sitting across from him did he restrain himself from smashing his wayward daughter in her face. Between clenched teeth, he said to the emissary, “Ignore the bitch! Women are all bitches and must be put in their places. Orson will have his hands full with this one! She’ll marry him or spend the rest of her days in our dungeon living with the rats while dining on bread and water. Come by tomorrow and pick her up. Of course, there will be *no* dowery.”

“King Chester has not requested a dowery. Consider Wyth her dowery. I will relay the news to the king and he will send a carriage for the princess in the morning. Pleasure doing business with you King Aaran.” He rose, bowed respectfully, and left.

Ally flew out of the room as fast as her legs could run. Once in her own room, she bolted the door and dove onto her bed, bawling like an injured child. *How dare he! How dare he!* A bit later, her mother knocked on her door, “Ally dear. It’s mom. Surely you can see the great benefits this will bring to us all. The war will be over. Think of the lives that you will be saving. It is a woman’s *place* to do as her Lord wishes. Ally? Ally dear?” Ally ignored her mother and continued to sob into her pillow. Her world was being crushed! Her mind now added images of stabbing both her father and the young enemy prince, whom she had never seen.

Sometime later, her sister, April knocked. Ally begrudgingly let her inside. “Are you okay, sis?” Ally nodded, her eyes were blood shot. “Mom is right, you know. Marrying that Orson prince will end the war and bring peace to Bettingham. That’s something, isn’t it?” she asked.

“Then you marry that fat slob!” Ally lashed out at meek April, but regretted her outburst. April fought to keep from crying. Ally melted, “Come here, sis.” She threw her arms around April. *God, no I am being like dad, hurting those closest to me!*

“What are you going to do?” April asked timidly. In her mind, ending the war might be reward enough to go through with the marriage. *Perhaps the prince will not be as bad as dad.*

“I don’t know yet, but there is no way I am going to go through with it,” Ally declared yet

again.

“But dad will throw you in the dungeon. I know he will,” April protested, fearing that their father would do just that!

“How true! The bastard!” Ally spat on the floor. “You’d better go to mom and help her now. She’ll be trying to get things ready for tomorrow.” Ally couldn’t take anymore from her sister. She needed to think.

“You, you are going to do it then?” April asked hesitatingly.

Ally thought fast. *Whatever I say to April will surely find its way to mom and dad within minutes of April leaving my room. I need time.* “Yes, I’ll do it. What choice do I have?” She shrugged her shoulders in a mock resignation.

April bought it. “None, really,” April replied meekly. She rose and left. Ally was certain that her sister would report such to her mother. Meanwhile, Ally headed to Palmer’s room. An idea slowly formed.

“Hi, tough break, sis,” Palmer said sympathetically as she entered. Already, he had tried to imagine Ally married to a foreign prince, but couldn’t accept it. He knew that he could not defy his father on her behalf. Certainly not on such an important decision as this one was, ending the war to boot. Still, he knew that he too needed to get away from the castle and his father, just as Norwood had. Yet, the opportunity to do so continued to elude him. *I hope she doesn’t take it too badly.*

“Wouldn’t be *if* there was even *one* man in this family,” Ally retorted. “Let me borrow some of your clothes, please.”

“Huh? Why?” Palmer asked. His face flushed. *I know that she thinks I ought to stand up for her with dad, but I can’t! He’ll punish me too. Why does she want my clothes?*

“I need a shirt, pants, and boots.”

“I get it, you are running away!” Palmer glanced about, making sure no one was eavesdropping on them. He whispered, “Good thinking!” He rummaged through his trunks and found suitable clothes for her, wrapping them up in a bed sheet so that they would not be so obvious. *She’s got more gumption than I ever imagined! Somehow, I have to follow her lead!* “Here, take this too, you might need it.” He added a dagger. “And this too,” he gave her his money pouch. “It’s not a whole lot, you know dad, but it’s something. Good luck. Where will you go?” The dagger was quite valuable in and of itself, considering how rare steel was on Tierra.

“Best that you don’t know, Palmer. That way, you can’t be forced to tell what you don’t know. I don’t want you facing dad’s wrath. Thanks.” *How can I tell him that I have absolutely no idea where I can go?* She gave him a big hug, opened his door, peered out. Seeing no one was around, she swiftly ran back to her bedroom and locked the door once more.

She changed into his clothes and looked at her appearance in her mirror. Her bosom and long hair gave her away. For a time, she considered cutting off her hair, which had never been cut before. While she was a bit vain about her golden locks, that wasn’t the reason. If she did cut them, they’d find them and know that she was fleeing disguised as a man. While Palmer may eventually be forced to tell their father that she had borrowed some of his clothes, by then, she hoped to be far away, out of the city. *I need to buy myself some time*, she thought and rummaged around for an alternative. An old hat worked, she stuffed her locks up inside it, with enough dangling down to appear to be manlike. She then took of his shirt and wrapped her bosom tightly in part of an old blouse. Now with his shirt on, her youthful endowment was not quite so pronounced and it would have to do. Strapping on the dagger, she again checked her appearance. She thought that she’d pass as perhaps a slightly effeminate man. This was the best she could manage and now she began to work on how to escape from the castle.

If I take a horse, that will be noted at once. I go on foot, she reasoned. *If I go late at night, I have the best chance of sneaking away in the dark. Sure hope that I don’t run across any thieves in the dark streets, though.* Now she waited. A maid knocked to announce supper. She called out, “I’m not hungry. I am trying to get everything packed before morning.”

“Surely you will let us help you. Can I send for Sally?” Sally was Ally’s personal servant.

“No, I want to do this last thing myself. Thanks anyway.” She listened and heard the woman’s footsteps leaving and relaxed. Now she waited. Her mind went uncommonly blank. *If I think about what I am about to do, my nerve will fail me. Think nothing, think nothing*, she told herself and stared at her ceiling.

Around midnight, she finally ventured to open her door. The hall was clear. She gathered up a dirty sheet and stole down the hall. Ally knew that the first floor would be heavily manned by the night guards. However, the window of the king’s study overlooked the outer walls. As she had imagined in her room, she looped the sheet around a chair and slipped it out of the window. Carefully lowering herself, her feet finally touched the walkway along the top of the outer walls. She pulled the sheet on through the chair and smiled. Thus far, it was working. Again, she wrapped the sheet around a parapet stone and slipped over the side of the wall. Hand over hand, she lowered herself to the ground, forced to drop the last three feet as the sheet gave out. She froze, hoping no one heard the slight noise. Hearing nothing, she wadded up the sheet and struck out for the streets of Wycombe, depositing the sheet behind a water barrel.

She was unnerved slightly by the near total darkness. Tierra’s two moons, the bright and white Echador and the pale blue Palidez, had not yet risen. Her overactive imagination had

thieves, soldiers, and assassins hiding in every dark recess. As she stealthily moved slowly down the first street, she gained a bit more confidence. Of course, she had not really thought that she'd actually get this far. Now that she was out of the castle, where was she going to go?

I need to get as far away from here as possible, she thought and headed for the eastern outskirts of the city. Of course, there were the wooden outer walls to circumvent and she had no idea about how to do that just yet. She continued walking towards the outer walls, several miles distant across the whole town. Soon the adrenaline rush was gone and she felt tired, but continued walking. Her mind drifted to the eventful day and somehow returned to the fate of Babs Wynne, the old woman who had delivered her and her siblings. She'd never failed to come when the queen asked, always helping her mother. She recalled how she'd come and set her mother's broken arm, twice actually, though she also told Queen Misty to leave Aaran before he killed her. Of course, her mother had not listened, only saying that she deserved having her arm broken. For a time, Ally wondered what her mother had done that made her so feel like she had to have all manner of punishment inflicted upon herself. On that, she had no idea, but she must have done something bad. She had no idea that her mother had slipped the poison into the Bettingham's heir to the throne, which enabled Aaran to usurp the throne from the Bettingham clan. She had only heard rumors that somehow Aaran had stolen the throne from the founding Bettinghams.

Babs was now likely dead, a mercy killing. *Wait, her daughter!* Ally remembered that she had a daughter about her own age, Aurora. Her father had ordered the removal of her hands, the poor woman would be totally helpless. The reality of that idea shocked Ally and she immediately formed a new plan. She firmly decided. *I've got to get to Aurora and see if I can help her somehow.* Babs had a small herb shop at the eastern edge of the city, close to the wooden walls. How to find it in the darkness was her problem. She'd only been there once, no twice, she corrected herself. The last time she'd gone to fetch Babs to help set her mother's second broken arm. *I am so worthless, I've hardly ever been out of the castle!*

After a frustrating hour, she finally found the place. Both Echador and Palidez had now risen. In the moonlight, the shop was plainly marked — Babs' dead body hung from a rope tied to one of her shop's outer support pillars that faced the street. *Damn dad to Hell!* Tears swelled up. She knew that her father would leave the dead woman hanging there for several days as a reminder and warning to all thieves in Wycombe. *Aurora! Where's her daughter?* Stark reality hit her again.

The front door was ajar and she crept into the darkened room. The smell of various herbs was overpowering, just as she remembered it. *Where is Aurora? Is she bleeding to death? Do I dare call out?* She decided against that, choosing to observe instead. Feeling her way along, she neared the back of the shop and found a light coming from under a crack of a door. Now she had to decide whether to open it or knock first. That decision was made for her. A soft female voice coming from beyond the door said, "Come on it, but be quiet though."

Ally jerked with surprise, but steeled herself and opened the door. She blinked, as her eyes shifted from night vision to the lantern-lit combination kitchen and diningroom of the Wynne's. "Come on it, best shut the door behind you. It is not safe around here." Ally saw an old woman dressed in a worn, black cotton dress sitting at a table. She looked haggard, her grey streaked blonde hair was disheveled from the bun atop her head. Drooping eyes suggested that she was overly tired. "She's alive, if that what you are wanting to know," she added.

How does she know what I want? Oh, I'm about her age. She must think that I am a girlfriend of Aurora's. "I'm so sorry this happened," Ally began, not knowing what she really could say. "You know the king and his violent temper. Who are you?"

"Best ask that of you first. You are a strange young man," the old woman said softly, then caught herself. "Say, you are not a young man, are you? Come, sit down. I am or was a dear friend of Babs. You look strangely familiar. I am Phyllis Roundtree."

Ally did as asked. "If — if you know who I am, then I would be putting you in grave danger, I'm afraid," she replied, uncertain whether or not to entirely trust this woman whom she had never seen.

Something she said struck a cord in the elderly woman, who cracked a smile, revealing several missing front teeth. Almost breaking into a cackle, Phyllis replied, "Child, I am already in grave danger just by staying in Wycombe! If I wanted safety, I would have fled already with the others. No, they will get nothing useful out of me. I am old and dying, I'm afraid to say. You look quite familiar, I've seen you before. Somewhere around Wycombe. Take your hat off."

Ally hesitated, if she did, her long, curly blonde tresses would likely give her away. Still, she dare not refuse the woman. She took her hat off and allowed her long hair to slip down, tossing her head slightly. "You *are* Princess Ally!" Phyllis exclaimed, adding, "well, I thought so. Dear, if your father finds you here, he'll go into a rage and beat you like he does his wife."

"Oh, I expect he'll do a whole lot more than that if he finds me now. I've run away," Ally sighed, glad to have at least spoken these words to another human being. She found herself telling Phyllis all about what had happened, ending with, "I am so sorry about Babs and Aurora. I came here tonight to see if there was anything I might do to help her, Aurora, I mean. I don't know why I am doing this. I have to flee far from here myself. The hue and cry will go up in the morning, I'm sure of that."

Phyllis stared long into Ally's eyes and at last reached a decision. "Child, do you *really* want to help poor Aurora?"

"Well, yes, but I don't really know what I can do, but I have to *try*. It was my despicable father who did this to her and her mother. I owe it to Babs. She delivered all we children and helped mom countless times. I have to at least *try* to help Aurora, somehow," Ally tried to

explain her feelings and rationale. Aurora's situation seemed to dwarf that of her own at this instant.

"Okay then. So be it." There was a strong hint of finality in her voice. "Come with me," she rose, slowly, flickers of pain creased the old woman's face. Age was taking its toll on the woman. She opened the door to Aurora's bedroom and Ally saw another young woman sitting beside the ill-sleeping Aurora. She looked up.

"This is my niece, Zoe Roundtree. Zoe, this is Princess Ally, she's come to help Aurora. Step outside, dear, we need to talk." Slowly, Phyllis made her way back to the table and sat down.

"Aunt Phyllis! What is *she* doing here?" Zoe said in an accusatory tone, glaring hatred at Ally.

"She's running away and has come to help Aurora. Babs delivered her and her siblings and always helped our queen. Princess Ally feels obligated to help her daughter. Ally, tell her what happened yesterday afternoon, please," Phyllis asked.

Ally complied and related the events. "I have got to get out of Wycombe soon. They'll discover that I've escaped within hours now. All hell is going to break loose after that," Ally explained, growing more worried by the minute. "Maybe my being here is not such a good idea, if I bring more of dad's wrath on all of you."

Zoe's attitude softened a little. "Well, okay, if my aunt says to trust you, then I will too. Aunt Phyllis, are we ready?"

"Yes, here is the bag of psi-powder that I've prepared. You are to mix it in her drink and see that she gets a teaspoon of it three times a day. There ought to be enough to get her to the others. I've packed those saddlebags with food and other herbs. Unless you feel comfortable about it, I would not change her bandages unless they get wet or an emergency arises. Get her to the others as fast as you can manage, Zoe. Brad should be here with the horses shortly," Phyllis replied.

"I'm sorry, I don't have a horse. Where are we going? How can we get out of the city gates?" Ally asked. "The guards will surely stop us."

Phyllis ignored her and continued sternly, "You and Zoe are charged with getting Aurora safely to Wyth, where many of the younger witches of Wycombe have fled. Zoe's younger brother, Brad, is bringing the horses, two of them," Phyllis answered.

"Won't we need three horses?" Ally asked. "I suppose that I can walk."

“No, Brad is not going with Zoe. I anticipated that another would be coming along with Zoe and Aurora. Zoe will ride double, holding Aurora. Ally, you will ride point and carry the supplies. I hear him now. Ally, lend Zoe a hand getting Aurora up and onto the horse. I’ll meet with Brad out front and prepare the exit,” Phyllis ordered.

How could she know that I was coming? I only decided that a short while ago? Ally wondered, but quickly followed Zoe into the bedroom. There lay Aurora, her arms wrapped in red stained bandages. She fought from gagging herself. This was more horrible than she’d imagined!

Zoe and Ally lifted the semi-unconscious woman up and mostly walked her out of the bedroom and through the shop portion. Outside, it was still dark, but in the dual moonlight, Ally saw Phyllis standing beside two horses and a young man, perhaps but a boy still, who held the reigns. “Sis, I wish that I could come with you. Say, who is with you?” he asked.

Ally replied, “Best that you do not know. Give us a hand, please.” The three lifted the handless woman up and into the saddle. While Ally kept her from falling, Zoe climbed up behind her. Brad then ducked inside and brought out the stuffed saddle bags and secured them to the other horse. Ally mounted and wondered how they were going to get out of the walled city. *I’m supposed to lead the way, but how?*

Zoe saw Ally’s confusion and whispered, “Aunt Phyllis will get us out. Watch.” A note of extreme pride was in the young woman’s voice. Ally heard Phyllis chanting and suddenly a gap appeared in the wooden walls beside the shop. “Follow me, be quick about it while she holds the gate open.” Ally stared in disbelief at the mysterious gap that had just appeared in the walls. She swore that it was not there before. *What is going on?* She looked back as she followed Zoe’s mare through the gap and saw Phyllis collapsing, but Brad was there and he caught her. He waved and the wooden wall reappeared. They were now on the other side and outside of the city. Ally had a million questions, but now was not the time. She followed after Zoe, who seemed to know the proper direction to travel. In the dark, Ally did not. Zoe decided that she didn’t fully trust the daughter of the man who had murdered Babs and mutilated Aurora. Hence, she didn’t tell Ally that long ago, for just such a night as this, the witches cut that opening in the walls and hid it with a believable illusion.

Before long, Ally saw that they were on the northwest road that led eventually to Wyth, some three hundred fifty miles ahead. She relaxed for the first time since she had heard of her proposed marriage to Prince Orsen Chester. Not long after that, the sun rose and she moved up beside Zoe and Aurora. Zoe was twenty and blonde, as were most natives of Bettingham. She was also pretty, Ally observed. She now got a good look at Aurora. The woman’s arms ended a pair of heavy white bandage wraps and her heart went out to the poor woman. *Perhaps dad was merciful to Babs*, she thought. *How can Aurora live like this?* Aurora was also pretty, but her white cotton dress was blood soaked and her eyes were red and swollen.

Zoe saw her looking at them. “Our king is an evil, vicious, wicked man. I hope someone kills him soon. No one should have to live life like this! I’d kill him myself if I could! Hope you can live with this!” She was still antagonistic towards the king’s daughter.

“I can’t really. It’s — it’s more terrible than I imagined. I’m with you all the way, Zoe. He’s beaten mom, broken her arms twice now. He has an awful temper. Did Babs really steal the COG’s silver like the bishop claimed?”

“Don’t be silly, princess! Babs never stole a thing in her life. The damnable COG is trying hard to kill off all of we witches. He simply made the whole thing up. Babs refused to abandon Wycombe when the others left. She ought to have gone and this would not have happened.”

“Are you a witch too?” Ally asked, rather surprised that the young woman might be. She didn’t fit her imagined ideas of what witches ought to look like, namely Babs.

“Aunt Phyllis is and she is training me. She’s too old and feeble to make this long journey and I stayed behind to both learn from her and to help her. I’ve had my bags packed for months now, planning to leave at the first opportunity. Well, this is not *quite* like I had imagined it. Brad is going to look after Aunt Phyllis now. I hope the bastard king doesn’t hang her too!” Zoe replied, spitting on the ground. “Come on, we had best get off the main road now.” She gently neck reigned her mare to the right.

“Cross country?” Ally asked.

“Yes, safer this way. You do look like a young man, from a distance and as long as you don’t speak,” Zoe advised her. “Did you think of the disguise?”

“Yes, I’m doing the best I can to not get recognized. I am sure that dad is in a fit of rage about now. I am hoping that he will spend hours scouring the city before he sends his soldiers out here looking for me.”

“Another reason for us to be off the main road,” Zoe agreed. “So what are you going to do now?” Zoe decided to chat with the princess. “This must be vastly different than your nice, orderly princess world.” She couldn’t help tossing a dig at her.

“Well, yes, but I promise to keep up. I’ve a dagger and will do all I can to protect you and Aurora. Honestly, my planning hasn’t even gotten this far. I expected to never be able to get as far as I did get. It’s just as I was sneaking through the streets last night, I somehow thought of Aurora and knew that I had to come and help her. After that, I don’t have any ideas. Stay low and out of sight, I suppose. Perhaps I will be able to stay with Aurora and help her with things. Honestly, I don’t see how she is going to be able to do anything any longer. She’s going to need me as long as she lives. Perhaps if I cut my hair like a man’s I might be able to pass as one and

get a job to support Aurora somehow. One thing is for sure, I am *not* going to abandon her now.”

Zoe looked at her closely. “You are serious about this, aren’t you?”

“Absolutely. It is the very least that I can do for all that Babs has done for me and mom.”

After that, Zoe’s view of Ally changed markedly, accepting her companionship. “Well, we are heading for the witches who recently moved to Wyth. They will help heal Aurora’s arms. Right now, her lower arms are a god-awful mess. At least, Aunt Phyllis believes that there are no infections, but that can easily change. The psi-powders are supposed to help her fight off any infections and the pain until we can get her to the witches. Honestly, though, I am more worried about her mental state,” Zoe admitted.

“She watched her mother get hanged for a crime that she wasn’t guilty of and then endured the terror of the mad Doctor’s wicked machine. I cannot imagine the pain that she must have felt, first with the severing of her hands and then the searing heat that staunched the bleeding from her stumps. Couple that with what she must be feeling about being totally helpless for the rest of her life and I wouldn’t be surprised if she tried to end her life somehow. Honestly, I can’t blame her if she did. Ally, if she regains consciousness, we need to be alert for that.”

“God, it is worse than I ever imagined. Dad’s done this wicked thing to so many men and women now. I wish he’d have to experience what he has had done to them,” Ally declared rather vehemently. Zoe chuckled. They rode on in silence for a time.

Later, Zoe explained, “We are going to have to make at least fifty miles each day if we are to get her there in seven days. We are lucky that it is summertime. We’ve got long days. Pray that it doesn’t rain, that would soak into her bandages. Still, we don’t dare even trot, the bouncing might reopen her wounds. I hope you don’t get too saddle sore.” Ally smiled and hoped so too. Already she had ridden longer than she ever had in her life.

Around noon, they halted beneath the shade of an oak thicket. A small creek trickled past them. In the distance, they could just barely see the main road. Here Zoe stopped. “Okay, Ally, hold her steady while I get off. Then, let’s see if we can lift her down.”

Mechanically, Aurora lifted her arms and she was pulled off the horse. She came to a little as they moved her to a soft patch of leaves, where she could sit and lean against a tree. She whined, “My arms are throbbing. I hurt so. Mom is dead, please kill me too, please. I can’t live like this,” Aurora moaned in pain, tears began flowing down her face once more.

“We have to get some lunch and psi-powders in you, Aurora. We’re not going to let you die on us. Be brave,” Zoe whispered. She and Ally fixed themselves a light lunch, rationing their meager food supplies. Water was plentiful, though and Zoe carefully measured and mixed the powder. She held the mug up to Aurora’s lips while Ally alternated holding a sandwich for her to

eat. “Come on, you have to eat. Your body needs it,” Zoe coaxed Aurora. By now, the woman was hungry and her body ate mechanically, though her will to live was gone.

While they were eating, they heard galloping horses. In the distance, they spotted soldiers galloping up the main road. “Damn, they must be looking for me. If they find us, I will lead them away from you two. Save Aurora, Zoe,” Ally declared. Zoe nodded, her respect for Ally was steadily increasing.

They waited a while and then packed up. “Maybe I can get up,” Aurora said as they led her to the horses. Zoe whispered to Ally that this was the psi-powders kicking in. She was weak but did manage much of the work mounting, though the two helped her keep her balance.

Once Zoe was safely mounted behind Aurora, Ally mounted herself and Zoe led the way once more, much to Ally’s relief. She had no idea where she was now at, save somewhere in Bettingham. *Damn my ignorance! My life has been a pathetic, worthless one, but I have got this **one** chance to really help and I’m going to help Aurora or die trying!*

The frequency of the farmsteads began to dwindle steadily during the long afternoon. By dusk, they had put fifty miles behind them. For the next three hundred miles they could expect to encounter only small towns, villages, and hamlets. The kingdom was sparsely populated out beyond the major two cities of Bettingham, as it was in all of the kingdoms. Pioneering farmsteads still were present, but life in the wilds was dangerous.

Roving bandits, raids by the king’s soldiers, and even attacks by enemy king’s soldiers were a constant threat to those who chose to live far from the major cities. Yet wild animals were a much more serious threat. Wolves and bears raided human settlements with some frequency. However, the greatest threat of all was from the giant breed of lions found on Tierra, known as the Montaña Beasts. These carnivores grew to nearly ten feet tall with huge canines and claws which could rip a man to shreds in mere seconds, a horse in three times that. Swift and sure hunters, they often tracked their prey for miles before striking at the most opportune time. Montaña Beasts were greatly feared throughout all Tierra.

Near the more heavily populated areas, the kings sent out regular patrols in hopes of driving the Montaña Beasts from those areas. Over these many years, such proved successful. Still, now that the three had left Wycombe behind them, these Montaña Beasts would be a threat as well. Thus far, Zoe had not seen any signs of them on the ground. Their paw prints were hard to miss. Zoe didn’t tell Ally that this trip was full of danger. *No need to worry the princess needlessly.* Besides, if a Montaña Beast picked up their scent, the best that they could hope to do would be to outrun it — the usual human reaction that often proved successful. Perhaps a very well armed band of soldiers might have some slight chance of wounding this vicious hunter at the very top of the food chain.

Towards evening, Zoe explained, “We don’t dare risk asking a farmer to spend the night

in his barn, Ally. Aurora's wounds could easily get infected there. Besides, the soldiers are likely to start searching off road for you as well. We'll make due over there by that creek. It is isolated enough, but no fires. We don't want to draw attention to ourselves," Zoe explained as they halted.

When Aurora was finally on the ground, she was in another bout of grief, the psi-powders had worn off. Still, Zoe had Ally put her arms around the woman and walk her some. "She needs to exercise a little. So do you, your legs look like they are going to collapse any second."

"No kidding, they feel like mush," Ally replied.

"You'll get your horse legs soon enough, Ally," Zoe answered, setting about fixing a light supper and Aurora's psi-powdered water. There was just enough light to barely see to do this.

While stretching their legs, Aurora again moaned from the pain and cried. "Mom is dead! I can't live like this. Please, kill me too or let me die," she wailed.

"Aurora, you can't. You must be *brave* and show everyone that you can surmount this! If you die, then they win. You have to *live*, Aurora. I will help you *always*," Ally promised, trying anything to get Aurora calmed down.

"How? How? How like this?" she raised her stumps up a little, though that only caused them to throb all the more. She quickly lowered them again.

"I don't know, Aurora, I really don't, but somehow we must manage. You can depend on me," she consoled her.

"I know you, don't I?" Aurora at last began looking at whom she was with for the first time.

"I'm Ally, okay, Princess Ally Wycombe. I've run away from my despot dad and king who did this to you. Somehow, Aurora, Zoe and I are going to get you to safety and then, well, I don't know what, but I am *always* going to look after you and help you. Together, we can overcome all this, I *know* it."

"Princess Ally? You look like a guy, but I know your voice. How? How can this *ever* be all right? If you want to show me mercy, use your dagger. Cut my throat or stab me in my heart. I'd do it myself, but now I can't even do that simple thing."

"Oh don't be silly. I will do no such thing. We're going to survive, Aurora, you and I and Zoe, we're going to survive this *somehow*. Okay, I admit, I don't know how. Come on, Zoe has our food ready. I'm starving, how about you?"

"I am really hungry and thirsty. Can you wipe my face a little?" Once again, Aurora

started bawling as she suddenly realized that she couldn't even do this simple thing again.

“Sure, but once your arms have healed, I'm sure that you can wipe your own face. Meantime, we have to keep the bandages dry.” She wiped Aurora's tears and they sat down to eat. First, Zoe had her drink all of her potion, then Ally slowly fed her their cold supper.

“One of us ought to stand guard while the rest sleeps,” Ally suggested when they had finished. *I have to think like Norwood and Palmer now. What would they do? I wish I had paid more attention to them.*

“No need, I can at least handle that much,” Zoe replied. She chanted a little and added, “There, if any trouble comes our way, I ought to be alerted and be awakened by my little spell. Come on, let's get some sleep. I'm dead tired.” Ally wondered what Zoe had done and what she meant, but was too tired to ask.

The next morning, they rose at first light, hastily fixing a little to eat. Just then, they heard soldiers not far away. Ally drew her dagger and stood before Zoe and Aurora. Voices could just barely be heard, causing them to panic slightly. *I simply must defend these two. I have the dagger and I simply must. Ally, try to remember all those fighting moves that Palmer does on the practice field,* she told herself. After a worrisome few minutes they drifted off in another direction. As quietly and as quickly as they could, they packed up and headed off once more.

As they headed out, Zoe whispered, “That was too close for comfort, Ally. You were right. The bastard king must be raving mad to have his soldiers searching *this* far afield. We best be more careful.”

They rode for a few more miles when suddenly the three were taken by complete surprise. A dozen soldiers sprang out of the nearby trees, pointing crossbows at the three. One yelled, “Princess Ally! Stop where you are or we will shoot you!”

Ally thought faster than she ever thought it was possible to think. In the blink of an eye, she'd analyzed what avenues that she could take and then acted on the one that was the most promising. Jumping off her horse, she kicked Zoe's horse, startling it and the horse bolted. As she seemed to be falling off her horse in slow motion, she landed a kick on it's rear as well, spooking her mare too. Somehow she landed upright on her feet as the two spooked horses galloped passed the surprised ring of soldiers! “Okay, I surrender,” she called out, raising her hands in the air, further distracting the soldiers. With all her might, she hoped and prayed that they would not chase after Zoe and Aurora.

“Let them go, we don't have any orders about those thieves,” the sergeant in charge barked, as several turned to find their horses and give chase. Ally realize that Aurora's missing hands suggested to the sergeant that she was a tried and convicted thief. “We have what we came for. Bill, go alert Doctor Forrest now. Tie her up, lead her back to the road.” Rough hands

grabbed her, snatching her dagger out of its scabbard, then pinning her arms behind her. She felt the taut ropes as a man wrapped her wrists securely and tied them. Another poked her in the right direction and Ally walked that way. She said nothing and the soldiers merely joked over the rewards that they fully expected to receive when they brought the princess back to King Aaran tomorrow. Ally's thoughts all were on Zoe and Aurora. Had they gotten away? It looked that way now and then her mind went blank, accepting her fate. Soon, her life would be ended, but she'd at least saved those two from her father's wrath.

When they reached the road, they lifted her onto a horse and headed back down the road towards Wycombe, now some sixty miles distant. However, an hour later, they pulled into the hamlet of Whistlewaters and stopped at the small inn there. Ally was unceremoniously lifted down and forced inside the inn. Her heart raced and she involuntarily gasped as she saw Doctor Corey Forrest was there along with his Amputator de la Mano. He grinned wickedly and said, "Well, well, the wayward princess herself. You have made your father angrier than anyone has ever seen before, to say nothing of jeopardizing his peace treaty. By King Aaran's orders, you are to be punished most severely such that you can never do this again, not to him nor to your betrothed, if he will still desire you. Untie her. Put her arms in there," he ordered.

Suddenly, she realized that he was not going to kill her, no, it was a far worse fate than that! Ally struggled as did everyone who faced this awful machine of Doctor Corey's, but the men were far stronger than she. Soon her arms were forced inside the machine. "Relax, Princess, you won't feel a thing, not at first. I am a humane doctor. I take the care of my patients and their health sincerely. I can't have you dying on me, the king would have my hide. You will feel this pin prick. It is numbing your lower arms and hands." She felt a bee sting in each arm.

"You'll pay for this, you butcher!" Ally screamed at him, wishing there was some way she could do just that.

After a few minutes, he asked her if she felt this. She felt nothing as he inserted a large needle into her right index finger nearly an inch. "Now you will feel a bit of pressure. That is normal, the machine is finding the precise location of where your hands join your arms at your wrists. Ah, there, feel it?" Ally nodded, biting her lip, bracing herself for intense pain. Doctor Corey pulled his lever down. The pressure seemed enormous, but suddenly it was gone as were her hands, cleanly and surgically severed. She saw her own blood flowing out and passed out. Thus, she missed the huge blast of flames staunching her wounds. She also missed watching Doctor Corey tightly bandaging her two stumps.

She awoke, she guessed, perhaps an hour later. She was still in the inn, sitting in the same chair as before. Ally looked down at her arms, her hands were gone, only bloody bandages marked where her wrists had been. She screamed both from shock and the pain. The anesthesia had worn off. *How could my bastard father have done this to me? Now I've failed at the only thing that I have ever chosen to do. I can't live up to my vow to help Aurora survive! God! The pain!*