



## ONE



Thunder rumbled from the foothills four leagues away. The mules brayed and pulled back their ears. The caravan plodded to a halt.

Woldirek of House Hansar, mounted on a gray gelding, tugged the reins closer. His horse stopped and he turned a steady gaze up and down the caravan.

The forty mules formed a line of brown contrasting against the landscape's thousand shades of gray. Gray gravel trodden into gray soil marked the track the caravan followed. On either side, boulder-strewn slopes rose, then turned sharply upward into the looming mountains of barren granite. The mountains' siblings stood shoulder to shoulder, in lines stretching to south and north as far as the eye could see. The Treeless Mountains, bare-headed as old bald men laid out on their funeral pyres. The caravan trod the only pass through the mountains.

The muleteers called "Haisay" and tapped crops against the mules' hindquarters. The mules switched their tails and their muscles rippled. Yet still they shook their heads, their eyes showing whites, and stood their ground as if a Life had changed their forelegs into tree trunks.

Stubborn beasts, but not stupid ones. Something troubled them.

“What in the hell has gotten into the mules?” Abreast of Woldirek, Torran stood up in the stirrups. His blond hair contrasted with his stallion’s dark brown pelt and the dull gray-green of lichen-splotched boulders. He raised a hand to ward the sun from his eyes, and shouted to Elbret, the lead muleteer. “Your damned beasts have heard thunder before, nay?”

Woldirek angled his head upward to Torran. “It’s not the thunder has them spooked, brother.”

Torran reseated himself. His mouth tightened and his eyebrows arched upward. “Your old tutor made you an expert on mules, did he?” His tone echoed through two decades of memory, back to their nursemaid’s skirts, and smothered Woldirek into silence.

Back to Elbret turned Torran, showing only a profile mixed of a sharp jaw and nose and fleshy cheek. To the lead muleteer, Torran shouted again. “Get them moving! All the treasures of the western shores are worth nothing till we sell them in the marketplace!”

Elbret swiftly bowed his head and touched his cap. “Begging your pardon, son of the house, we’ll get this lot going, won’t take but a tick.” He kneed the donkey he rode and turned toward his nearest men, then brandished his switch. “Get ‘em going, or I’ll cane your sorry rumps!”

With shouts of “Haisay” mingled with curses and the *thwack* of switches, the muleteers drove their animals forward. The track headed upslope, toward the summit of the pass, winding around jumbled boulders. The mules trudged, heads lowered, and with each step their cargoes swayed across their backs.

Treasures of the western shores, for the most part. Silks from Quochapalo, vanilla from Shumilot. An ounce of each should sell for fifty fennies, a skilled laborer’s monthly wage, in the market back home in Sparrenfor. In contrast, three mules bore particolored cattle horn from the Kolokeros plains. They would be fortunate to sell the horn for one-one-hundredth as much as the silks and vanilla.

Woldirek narrowed his eyes and compressed his lips. Torran’s idea to buy five hundred pounds of horn, the morning after its seller plied him with distilled wine and a harlot bedecked with thick makeup and glass-beaded dress. Torran had probably taken a purse from the seller as well, somewhere out of Woldirek’s sight.

At least Torran had enough respect for their house's creed to hide from his younger brother his taking of a kickback.

More thunder rumbled in the distance. Torran sniffed out a breath, then nodded at the line of mules plodding ahead. "Well, well, my expert on mules, looks like nothing's spooked them after all."

Woldirek's shoulders hunched. "Bandits betimes lurk hereabouts."

Torran pinched his thumb and forefinger along his jaws toward his chin, then curled up his hand with a flourish. "Betimes, yes." He twisted in the saddle and called toward the rear of the caravan. "Captain, all is clear?"

The captain of the caravan's men-at-arms, Fritriyk, with cropped brown beard and a helmet crowned with a ruff of stiffened horsehair, looked back at them through eyes locked into a narrow aspect. "My outriders spy no one for a league or more, son of the house."

"Confirming what we can see with our own eyes," Torran said to Woldirek. He waved the back of his hand at the rocky landscape. "The nearest bandit is the caravanserai-keeper in the last village. Four greatfennies a mule and two a man to sleep in straw, with only bread and water to slake us?"

"House Koforan invested wisely when they bought village caravanserais along the track," Woldirek said.

Only this track, through this pass, allowed caravans to travel between Sparrenfor and Larpektis. By buying caravanserais, House Koforan forced its rivals to either pay exorbitant rates for accommodation or sleep under the stars, without walls or wells. For every mule load its rivals carried, House Koforan would turn a profit.

The mules plodded on, and their horses clopped slowly on the packed, rocky earth. "House Koforan." Torran's voice turned wistful. "Soon enough I'll marry with them."

Woldirek turned away. Better Torran to be the subject of marriage negotiations than him.

"Shilmay's a beauty, I hear," Torran said. "Don't you?"

"A beauty. I'm sure."

"A beauty, indeed," Torran said. "With hair like golden flax, and soft as silk, and I haven't even gotten to what tops her head yet!" His guffaws echoed off the steep slopes.

As if Torran, or any man, could know an intimate detail of Shilmay's body. "More gold and soft than any harlot's, at any rate."

“What, little brother? Warvis offered you one on our last night in Larpektis, same as he offered me, so don’t blame me if you weren’t man enough to rise to the occasion.”

Normally Woldirek suffered his brother’s insults in silence. Something, though, stirred in him now. Perhaps the same premonition that earlier spooked the mules. “He set her on you so you’d take that particolored horn off his hands at higher than market price. Plus that’s three mules we couldn’t load with distilled wine and sell for ten times greater a price. You get a cup to dribble your juice into and our house loses money. It’s unconscionable.”

Torran pushed his hand through the air toward Woldirek. He looked away. “Bah, every caravan leader takes perks like that.”

“Every? Is that how our house has risen to its current station? Or is it by remembering our forefathers’ wisdom, *the merchant allows each person to excel at his chosen work, and trade the overflowing fruits of his excellen—*”

Eyes intent, his brother leaned in and shoved his hand into Woldirek’s face.

Woldirek clutched the reins and squeezed his knees against his gelding. Heart thudding, he pulled himself back upright, and glowered at his brother.

“Those are words we tell credulous servants and priests who believe their own nonsense.” Torran’s breath huffed in and out his nostrils. “No wonder Father thinks you’re a fool.”

Woldirek’s cheeks burned. His hands turned into white fists and he looked away. He shut his eyes and breathed. His face cooled. His hands relaxed.

Father would judge him worthy. Someday.

From the north, thunder rumbled, the loudest since the mules went skittish.

Woldirek snapped his head around and opened his eyes. Thin clouds abolished his shadow. A league away, the roiling purple thundercloud crept closer to the pass. A touch of cool wind heralded it.

More thunder rumbled to them. The mules bent back their ears. One slowed its step, then another.

Elbret swore a harsh oath. The mule drivers hissed “Haisay!” and lashed their beasts. The train of mules trudged onward.

Matching the movement on the ground, in the air, a shimmer darted against the clouding sky, then coalesced in front of Torran's stallion.

An indistinct shape, a rough outline of a human-like form, defined by thicker and thinner currents of air. Woldirek focused in turn on something like an arm, a leg, a wing, a face. Focusing on one part of the shape, however, brought all the others into greater vagueness. The patchwork of impressions evoked a youthful adult male, face haggard and belly sunken. Thalush, an Air, employed by the house and paid a few grains of dust per day.

The elementals' true forms were simply patterns in their native domains. Without thinking, they took on human form to better parlay with people. So Woldirek's old tutor, Denkran, had taught, and no other theory of the elementals struck Woldirek as more true.

Another rumble of thunder. The human-like form flinched, as if a narrow and punctuated breath of wind struck a diffuse cloud of smoke. Half a breath later, it reformed.

"Son of the house," Thalush whispered to Torran, "I must move away from the coming storm. Have you a message for your father? I could deliver it now."

Torran scowled. "The message I have for him I'll deliver myself. You can't use that as an excuse to stay dry. What are you, a paper so fine you'll dissolve at the touch of rain?"

Its wings and arms jutted to the side, and Thalush bowed its head. Immobile, yet still it floated in mid-air. "Son of the house, I don't know what paper is," it whispered. "Yet I perceive enough of your question to tell you true. No, one drop of rain, or one thousand, would pass through me like a wind through the branches of a tree. But the coming thunder I cannot abide."

Woldirek straightened his back. "We know this."

"We do?" Torran's voice pierced Woldirek's hearing like an icy spike.

"My tutor Denkran made me expert on many things." Woldirek turned to Thalush and turned his voice kindly yet firm. "Get to a safe distance and come back to us after the storm passes."

"Yes." Torran smirked at Thalush, then brushed his hand over his coat's other sleeve. Dust motes landed on his sleeve during the day's journey drifted in the air. "You need to eat."

Thalush extended its hand through the drifting motes, passed its hand to its mouth. The dust danced along swirling paths, then disappeared. "I will return as soon as is safe, son of the house, honored one." Its wings flapped, pushing Thalush away from Torran and Woldirek. The thicker and thinner currents defining its human-like limbs flowed together. It rose into the air and went eastward, up the slope toward the crest of the pass. It dissolved into a shimmering, globular mass, and rapidly faded from sight.

Woldirek's gelding suddenly shied to the right, away from his brother. Torran's stallion showed its teeth and snorted, pawing the packed dirt with its forefoot. Its right eye darted back, as if trying to see something behind it and between the two men.

"Dorleth," Woldirek held his voice level as he turned his head.

"Dorleth?" Torran spoke in a ragged tone. His hand drifted toward his sword's hilt, scabbarded at his waist. "Yes, Dorleth, what do you want?"

"Gentlemen." Dorleth's voice came as a bleak whisper, like a nocturnal autumn wind through mouldering bones in Larpektis' city of the dead. The Shadow's voice sounded like a darkened echo of the Air's, and similarly mirrored were its form and Thalush's. Dorleth appeared as a dark shimmer of roughly human shape. From the corner of Woldirek's eye, its feet looked to touch the ground. Illusion—Shadows had no need to walk like men. He focused on the Shadow's lower legs, and saw only blind spots in the center of his gaze.

Woldirek looked up, over Dorleth's shoulder, and glimpsed sidelong a cadaverous face.

Shadows had no power over men or animals. Though he knew that, a shiver still ran down Woldirek's back.

Torran's horse snorted louder and pawed the dirt. "I said, what do you want?" Torran growled.

"I shall not disturb your horses more," Dorleth said. "I too must tuck myself away from the coming storm."

Woldirek swallowed, pitched his voice levelly. "We desire nothing more than for you to remain safe."

A gyration in the dark shimmer. Dorleth looked directly at him. "You are a polite gentleman," it said. Lightning flashed on a boulder-strewn slope two leagues to the north. "Rarely does a man express any concern for our safety." Thunder from the lightning flash pealed over

them and echoed off the southern slope overlooking the pass. "The time has come to tuck myself away."

Dorleth vanished then, into the ground, as if dark liquid comprised the elemental and the packed dirt held pores enough to absorb it. Then the track reverted to its usual aspect, as if the Shadow had never been.

With soft words and pressure on the reins, Woldirek turned his gelding upslope. His horse clopped forward one step, another.

The track curved around a massive boulder, then ran straight the last hundred paces to the high point of the pass. Three mounted men-at-arms waited at the summit, each studying some different portion of the mountain faces climbing upward. The wind tugged at their cloaks, rippling the Hansar livery, field green below, mountain gray above, separated by a wavy band as blue as the Enelar River, adorned with a walled city of gold. Fritriyk spurred his horse and passed Woldirek and Torran. His ruffed helmet bobbed with each of his horse's steps.

A cool gust chilled Woldirek's face and carried the tang of the impending storm. Torran twisted in his saddle. The thick purplish storm cloud slithered up the foothills and lower slopes, still a league away.

"What we must first do for our house is get us over the summit before the thunderstorm hits," Torran went on. "Haisay, haisay!" he shouted to the muleteers. The men replied with raised switches and the same word shouted back with forced enthusiasm.

Torran set his stallion to a quick trot forward and posted his body up and down with the stallion's gait. Woldirek matched his brother's pace, but not his easy horsemanship. Woldirek bounced on the gelding's back. One rough bounce pinched his testicles. His halberd, slung over his shoulder on a carrying strap, rubbed its shaft against his boiled leather shirt.

After passing half a dozen mules and three muleteers, Torran halted his stallion at the summit of the pass. Fritriyk and the men-at-arms touched the front of their helmets. An easy smile played on Torran's lips. "Halfway home," he said.

"Indeed, son of the house," Fritriyk said.

Woldirek stopped his gelding two paces below the highest point of the pass. A line of bricks crossed the track at the summit, laid by the merchants of Sparrenfor and Larpektis decades past. A drop of rain falling on the near side of the bricks would trickle back down the way

the caravan had come, bound for the Burbosh River and the western sea. Another drop, twin to the first, falling on the far side of the bricks would flow to the Enelar River and the eastern sea.

“All clear?” Torran asked Fritriyk.

“Still no one for a league or more.”

The pass was perhaps a hundred paces wide between the jutting mountains to north and south. The bald gray slopes, gnarled and rough as an old blacksmith’s hands, climbed toward snow-clad pinnacles. Between the mountains, to either side of the track, a field of boulders loomed, with smaller, shin-high rocks spread densely between the giant ones. Dark green and sickly gray lichen mottled the boulders.

The wind moaned. Clouds overhead thickened. Woldirek pulled his cloak tighter over his shoulders. Another ten days to Sparrenfor and his family’s house. Even the cold regard of his father would be warmer than the Treeless Mountains.

Another rumble of thunder climbed the approaches to the pass.

A slap struck Woldirek’s upper arm. Torran held his right hand near his side, coiled to spring out again. “There’s no sight to see, younger brother. Move before we get wetter than we need to be.”

Woldirek turned his gaze toward his brother. “Certainly, Tor....” Motion caught his eye.

Torran scowled. “I said, move.”

He couldn’t. Woldirek raised his hand toward the strewn boulders on the northern flank of the track. Men in rough clothing and face paint, in shades of granite gray and lichen green, scrambled atop the tallest boulders.

The air filled with the *whoof-whoof-whoof* of spinning slings.





## TWO



“Bandits to north!” Woldirek shouted.

The bandits loosed their slings. Rounded rocks sped through the air.

A crunch sounded nearby. “Gah!”

Woldirek turned. Fritriyk’s face showed the stark whites of his eyes and blood poured down his cheek. He slumped in his saddle, leaning to the side. His hands clutched for the reins and missed. He toppled off his horse and slammed into the ground. Off rolled his helmet, exposing sweat-matted hair. Fritriyk’s eyes quivered but showed no sign he noticed what he saw.

“What?” Torran said. “What?” His mouth gaped and he stared at Fritriyk’s bloody face.

Another chorus of *whoof-whoof-whoof* came from the boulder field. The bandits seated more rocks in their slings and spun them up to fling at the caravan.

“Dismount!” Woldirek shouted. He swung his left leg over the gelding’s back and jumped down. He unslung his halberd and shouted,

“Use your horse for cover!”

“What?” Torran wrenched his gaze from Fritriyk. Like a frightened child, he searched Woldirek’s face. “He’s a good stallion.”

“Better a stone hits him than you!” Woldirek shouted. The bandits loosed their slings.

“Wha—aigh!” Torran’s left arm suddenly fell limply against his side. His right hand reached over to clasp it.

“Dismount!” Woldirek shouted. Between him and the bandits, his gelding suddenly shrieked. It lifted its left foreleg and hobbled on the other three.

Torran’s stallion reared and snorted. Eyes wide, mouth opening and closing on air, Torran dug his fingers into the stallion’s mane, plainly desperate to hang on.

Leading the caravan would be beyond Torran.

Woldirek’s blood ran cool. The periphery of his vision filled with gyrating gray spots. Yet he could see plainly one thing.

The caravan needed a leader.

Some of the muleteers guided their mules off the track to the south, picking their way over small rocks between the boulders. A slung stone caught one mule in the back of the head. It collapsed in a keening heap. Its cries knifed Woldirek’s ears.

Other muleteers stayed on the track. They huddled behind their beasts and tapped the hollows of mules’ knees to get them lying down. These men lacked the training to fight bandits, so better for all that they hunkered down.

The men-at-arms, on the other hand, had trained for fights. Yet one look at them and Woldirek grimaced. The three men-at-arms nearby had dismounted, but like Torran a moment earlier, their gazes clung to their fallen commander.

Woldirek’s gaze turned to righteous fire. He crouched behind his gelding and went to them. “We can’t help Fritriyk now. We must help ourselves!” In his two hands, he brandished the halberd. Book study with Denkran and drills with House Hansar’s chief trainer flowed through him. “Charge the ambush!”

One of the men-at-arms, burly and crooked-nosed Ingus, snapped alert. He nodded and reached for the hilt of his sword. “Come on,” he said to his fellows. “The young son of the house has it right. We won’t live through this if we stand gaping!”

Round stones whizzed by and smacked boulders behind them.

The third man-at-arms carried a crossbow over his shoulder. His broad face showed no sign he remembered his weapon.

“Shoot your bolts!” Woldirek shouted at him.

The crossbowman blinked, then angled his head to Woldirek.

“Even a miss will drive the slingers off the boulders! They won’t see us go into the boulder field to outflank them!”

A nod, then the crossbowman set his mouth in a firm line. He pulled the weapon off his shoulder and bent his right leg. He looped the string over the draw-hook on his belt, stepped on the riser, and straightened his leg. He hefted the cocked crossbow and pulled a bolt from his bandolier.

“Good!” Woldirek said. To burly Ingus and the other swordsman, lean-limbed and pock-faced Delret, he said, “Follow me!”

“S-sir?” Delret said.

“I am a son of Levenerts Hansar. I will lead!”

Woldirek peered under one of the horses. Clad in camouflaged garb and face paint, a bandit atop a boulder ten paces away seated his next stone in his sling and spun it toward readiness. *Whoof-whoof—*

A metallic clack sounded close to Woldirek’s ear. The bandit’s spinning sling slowed. The stone dropped out of the sling cradle and clacked off the boulder. The bandit clutched at his throat, sank to his knees, and tumbled off the boulder to the stony ground.

“Follow me!” Woldirek told Ingus and Delret. At a crouch, he ran up the track. One footfall landed on the line of bricks marking the high point. Drops of blood would flow opposite ways same as water.

The track sloped away on the eastern side. He angled across it. Two large boulders about three paces apart, with only one small stone in the mouth of the passage between them. Good enough. He ran between the boulders and stopped. Delret and Ingus joined him a moment later.

Woldirek leaned against a boulder. The rough granite pressed through his cloak and boiled leather armor. His lungs ached and he pulled in large breaths of the thin mountain air. The ache remained. The men-at-arms’ heaving chests showed they felt the same. Queasiness climbed his throat. The bandits had an advantage, better endurance from acclimation to the thin air—

*Then defeat them quickly.*

Though his heart knocked in his neck, he gestured to Ingus and Delret. "Onward."

Deeper in the boulder field, Woldirek's attention narrowed to thin slices of vision between the giant rocks and the echoing sounds of the fight. Horses and mules whinnied and screamed. Men's voices shouted orders, directions, curses at the gods, heart-rending cries for their mothers.

Woldirek's breath roared in his ears. He held his halberd in trembling hands. The first drops of rain stung his face.

He rounded a corner. Two bandits started, eyes wide and mouths slack. One dropped his sling and with his right hand pawed at his belt for a small axe.

Woldirek charged. He jabbed his halberd's steel spike into the bandit's abdomen, over and over in a frenzy of motion. He pierced cloth, skin, soft organs.

The bandit fell on his rump. Sweat sheened his pallid face. His quivering mouth opened—if he spoke, Woldirek didn't hear—and he raised his hands.

Woldirek swung his halberd's blade. Sharp steel sliced into the bandit's right wrist. His hand dangled uselessly. He screamed and clutched his broken wrist with his free hand. "I yield, yield," he said in the local tongue, a dialect of Larpektisian. Then his voice broke into incoherent sobs.

"You won't need this," Woldirek said around gasping breaths. He reached for the bandit's axe, still at his belt. Woldirek's hand shook like a trembling bird. As if a thick mitten swathed his hand, he fumbled with the axe. Finally he got enough grip to pull it from the bandit's belt.

The bandit breathed quickly and shallowly. He winced at each inhalation. Sweat poured down his unlined face and shivers racked him. Damaged organs, bleeding in his belly. The bandit might die before the men-at-arms could execute him.

Chest heaving, Woldirek glanced up. Delret and Ingus stood over the other bandit, who lay on his side. Blood gushed from stab wounds onto the hard, rocky ground. The metallic tang burned Woldirek's nose. The bandit's fist pounded the ground. He moaned and tried to pull himself up, then moaned again and collapsed. In his craggy face, life ebbed from his eyes.

The rain pelted Woldirek. “More than these two,” he said to Ingus and Delret. “We must slay or drive off the rest of the bandits.”

Hard men, with hard faces, but now they turned wider eyes to him and nodded with simple certitude. “Yes, son of the house.”

Deeper he led the men-at-arms. Around the next boulder, no bandits. He exhaled, then started at motion above.

Atop a boulder, a bandit stood in profile. The bandit spun up a sling *whoof-whoof* with his right hand. His left clutched at a crossbow bolt lodged in his chest. He could still loose his stone at a man-at-arms—at Torran—

Woldirek jumped up and swung his halberd blade against the back of the bandit’s legs. The bandit grunted and tumbled backward off the boulder. One end of the sling arced through the air. The bandit’s left hand fell away from his chest and brought the crossbow bolt with it. Blood welled from his chest. His back slammed against the ground.

One of the men-at-arms slashed the bandit’s throat. Blood poured out. The bandit’s chest spasmed in some last reflexive grasp for breath. His limbs twitched, and kept twitching, and kept twi—

Stone smacked stone half a pace from Woldirek’s head. A sharp fragment whizzed past his ear. Woldirek ducked, too late. The bandit’s sling stone, loosed wildly when Woldirek swept his feet out from under him, fallen to the ground. Fallen fast enough to crush his skull through his boiled leather helmet.

No death was instantaneous enough to keep a dying man from one last counterattack.

Woldirek stood taller. Fear sloughed off him. Fate might take him, but hadn’t yet. “Forward, men.”

Delret and Ingus nodded as they pulled in breaths.

The sounds of battle subsided for a moment. Into the lull came haggard voices shouting in the local dialect. “Hey off, hey off!”

“They’re running,” one man-at-arms said. He looked up with tired eyes.

“And every one we kill now will buy Hansar caravans five journeys in peace!” Woldirek said. His lungs ached and his limbs burned. “Move, both of you!” Despite his heaving chest, he went forward. Ingus and Delret would follow.

The rain pounded down. Woldirek’s boots squelched in the muddy ground. Shouts echoed through the boulder field, seemingly growing

distant. But that could be a trick of how sound traveled amid the gigantic rocks. Even if most bandits did retreat, one or two might form a rear guard, to give their comrades time to flee.

He went along a large boulder. Shadow played on the side of one nearby. On the other side of the large boulder, leather creaked. A bandit's boots? Briny stink of sweat. From the man behind the large boulder, or from his own body?

Woldirek pulled back his halberd, ready to stab with the spike. He ran around the boulder and shouted "Hansar!"

He halted the halberd's spike a handsbreadth from a man-at-arms' chest.

The man breathed raggedly. His wide gaze went from the halberd spike to Woldirek's face. "I serve!" He saluted with his sword. His leather armor creaked with his arm's motion.

"You serve well," Woldirek said. "Where are the bandits?"

The man-at-arms scabbarded his sword. "I'll go up and look, son of the house." He groped for a handhold high on the large boulder. Woldirek interlaced his fingers under one of the man's feet and lifted him the rest of the way up.

Woldirek cocked his head for the *whoof-whoof* of rotating slings. Silence.

Atop the boulder, the man-at-arms stood in stark silhouette. "Nothing I see, son of the house." He pivoted around the boulder top. "Wait. Six bandits, afoot, running to west."

"Pull me up," Woldirek said. He put his left foot on the boulder's rough granite side and stretched his left arm toward the man-at-arms. The man-at-arms clasped his hand. Behind him, the two men-at-arms shoved his free foot and bent leg.

On the boulder, Woldirek looked down the track to the west. Running figures in cool gray and mottled green stood out against the packed earth. One paused and looked back. At two hundred paces, the bandit's face showed only as a pale splotch suggesting youth. A darker line along his jaw could be shadow or a thin wisp of beard.

A moment later, the bandit turned and sprinted to catch up with his fellows.

"Men!" Woldirek shouted through the rain, toward men-at-arms standing amid the thinned line of mules and horses on the track. "Mount and pursue!" He juttied his finger after the fleeing bandits.

Four men raised swords and lances, then mounted their horses. They galloped off. The sodden track muffled their horses' footfalls.

Woldirek used his halberd like a cane and sucked in a few breaths. On the track, three men-at-arms with crossbows looked at him with crinkled faces. Three mules, a muleteer, two bay geldings belonging to men-at-arms....

Where was Torran's stallion?

Where was Torran?

"Son of the house!" a crossbowman shouted. At Woldirek. "Come, sir, quickly!"

Rain dripped into Woldirek's leather armor and undershirt and along his skin. He jumped off the edge of the boulder. Bent knees and mud softened his landing. He ran through the boulder field. The mud tugged at his boots with each step. He had to get to Torran.

On the track, the crossbowman and another man-at-arms crouched near a dark brown shape. The stallion lay on its side. Its hooves pawed at the ground. Its eyes showed whites and blood matted the side of its head. It moaned, and the low keening pierced Woldirek's hearing. He trudged forward on suddenly leaden feet.

Where was Torran?

The crossbowman shifted. Torran lay on his side, pinned under the dying horse. He still wore his boiled leather helmet, yet his mouth hung open and his eyes looked like glass.

Woldirek took stiff, slow steps. Torran's chest did not move. The stink of loosed bowels assaulted Woldirek's nose.

The helmet showed a depression over Torran's left temple.

Woldirek ran the last paces, knelt. Pulled off his brother's helmet. His fingers stroked hair damp with rain and sweat and blood, then traced over a depression matching the one in the helmet. His hand shook. Under Torran's scalp, shards of skull floated in a soft mass of brain and blood.

His brother was dead.