

## Blind Reckoning: A Dhulyn and Parno Adventure

**This is a little incident from earlier in their lives. I wrote this long before *The Sleeping God*, and it really helped me with figuring out who Dhulyn and Parno were. I hope you like it.**

"Can you see it yet?" Parno Lionsmane spoke around the tightness in his throat.

"Stop asking." Dhulyn Wolfshead's voice came from further away than he expected.

"How can you not see a ravine," he muttered. "They said nine days, and we've been riding eleven."

"We are slower than usual."

That silenced him. It was like her, he decided, to remind him the delay was his fault. As it was his fault that they were out in this cursed prairie nothingness. Everything, in fact, was his fault. His determination to keep silent lasted perhaps half a span.

"Are we likely to meet any of your kinsmen?"

"No matter. The Horsemen of the Blasonar are not like my kin. They are less likely to kill us."

"Thank you, I feel so much better now."

Parno heard a soft click, almost below the threshold of his hearing, followed by the thinnest, faintest whistling. Cursing roundly he drew his sword from where it was sheathed across his back and struck out, aiming for the air directly in front of his throat. His blade struck metal, and he heard the peculiar thud of a throwing dagger landing point downward in the dirt.

"Demons and perverts! You did that on purpose." Parno jerked his head back and forth and finally re-sheathed his sword with a trembling hand.

Dhulyn laughed. Parno heard the squeak of leather and pictured her leaning over until she was almost upside down to pluck the knife from the earth.

"You could have killed me." *And maybe she meant to*. Parno put his hands up to touch the cloth wrapping that covered the top half of his face.

"What odds will you give me for next time?"

Parno turned toward her, following the sound of her voice much more easily than he had followed the sound of the knife passing through air. He pictured her smiling her wolf's smile, the old scar curling her lip back from her teeth.

"It's too early to stop, my own," she said, no wolf in her voice. "It will be hours yet before the setting of the sun, and the twilight is so long here on the plains. We should go on, if you can."

"I can if I must." Parno tasted the bitterness in his words. "Though what makes one spot different from any other in this vast nothingness . . ."

Dhulyn touched him lightly on the shoulder. Parno barely stopped himself from flinching away.

"Try to relax, my soul. It would be easier if I knocked you out." Her sympathy was a layer of civilization as thin as a harlot's paint.

"No." That would make it easier all right. Easier to be rid of him. He had no faith in the civilized Dhulyn, it was the Outlander he believed in. And to the Outlander a blind man was a mortal liability. The moment he could not keep up -- or the moment she thought so -- she would kill him. And he couldn't even kill her first. Not while they were still on the Plain.

It had all seemed very simple in Savala. He and Dhulyn had been there almost a moon, living high at Chiba's Tavern, and it was there that Parno had learned of this job. A grey-beard, known in Chiba as a Mage, needed a team of Brothers to go east into the Blasonar Plain and bring back a hundred-weight of grua bones.

Parno had left the Mage at another table while he made his report to Dhulyn. She hadn't been much impressed.

"We're Mercenary Brothers, not hunters," she had pointed out in her low, rough voice. Parno had started life in a Noble House, coming to the Brotherhood much later than Dhulyn, and she often felt he lacked the proper dignity.

There was, he had explained, no hunting involved. Huge caches of bones could be found at the bottom of the Terna Cut, a ravine nine days ride east of Pecora, the only city on the western edge of the Blasonar Plain.

"The Terna Cut?" Dhulyn had marked the place in the book she was reading with the thin knife blade she used for such things. "The Cut is bad luck."

Parno had managed not to sigh. They wouldn't be staying at Chiba's much longer if Outlander superstition kept them from earning money. "At least hear him out."

She had shrugged, and Parno had motioned the Mage over.

"The plains horsemen trade at Pecora," Dhulyn said once the man was seated. "Why not let them know your needs?"

The Mage looked up from his folded hands. "They will not go to the site. The horsemen call the place 'Valley of the Stone Gods'. I believe there is some religious taboo." Here Dhulyn had turned her cool gaze to Parno, her blood-red brows half lifted.

"You say you cannot spare the time to go yourself." Parno turned to the subject most likely to distract his Partner from her superstitions. "Can you spare the money?"

"Yes."

Sure enough, that made Dhulyn narrow her eyes. "Why so valuable, these bones?" That was Dhulyn, always curious. She was not called Scholar just because she could read.

"What do you know of the Dedilos sickness?"

Dhulyn and Parno exchanged looks. They knew that the sickness had raged through the Tapizen encampment the previous summer, and there had been no Healer within reach. Much of the host, including seven Mercenary Brothers, had fallen ill. Three had been lucky, and had died. Four were left with wandering minds, unable even to feed themselves.

As the Senior Brother present, Dhulyn had been the one to give them the Final Sword.

The Mage saw their look and read it correctly. "The Book of Anoa speaks of a remedy used by the Caid, but there is one ingredient of the formula no one has been able to identify. I believe it to be powdered grua bone. Fresh does not seem to work, but perhaps the petrified bones found in the Terna Cut . . ."

Dhulyn drummed her long scarred fingers on her book. "Still, why Mercenaries?"

The Mage focused once more on his clasped hands.

"Speak," Dhulyn said. "It is possible that if you tell us, we will not go. But if you do not tell us, it is certain."

The Mage took a deep breath. "I sent a party with my chief apprentice three months ago. They did not return."

Parno watched Dhulyn. He knew what she was thinking. Without the Dedilos sickness, she might never again have to give the Final Sword to a mindless Brother. On the other hand, she had no great love for Mages. Finally she smiled her wolf's smile, and the Mage shifted

uncomfortably in his chair.

"Preliminary expenses, and three times the price you've offered," Dhulyyn had asked. "Half now, and half left at the Mercenary House. And you provide the pack ponies."

The Mage bit his lip until Parno had expected to see blood. Finally he had nodded.

"Then we will go."

"Well."

"What?"

"A ravine."

Parno reined in his horse. "Just found it have you?" he said, tasting acid. "Haven't been looking at it for the last few hours and neglected to tell me? Lucky we didn't ride right into it I suppose . . . Is there a way down?"

"There is." Dhulyyn said nothing further, and Parno threw her his reins.

"The track is narrow." Her voice came from a point below Parno's knee and to his left. He braced himself for a turn.

Parno spread his nostrils wide. "I think I can smell water."

"That seems likely," she agreed. "And if water, then animals. And if animals, then dinner."

Two more hairpin turns and Dhulyyn halted. "You can remove the blindfold."

For a moment Parno did not move. What if the ravine were not deep enough to hide the plain? *No*, he told himself. *She is my Partner. She would not do this.* Or would she count on him to think this way? There was only one way to know. Parno's hands trembled as he unwrapped the soft linen bandages. He squinted in the light. Walls. Blessed, blessed walls, rocky, covered with dried grasses and stiff brush. Parno took a deep breath of scented air. "You sure this is it?"

Dhulyyn raised her blood-coloured brows.

"Sorry." Parno only half meant it. He had spent the better part of eleven days blindfolded because of an unexpected affliction. Part of him knew she did not blame him for any of this. But most of the time that only made things worse.

People did have these uncontrollable fears. Both of them had heard of such things. Fear of dogs, or of high places. Shut in places too, that was common enough. So it was logical, Parno supposed, that a person might have an uncontrollable fear of a place that was not shut in. A place as open as it was possible for a place to be.

The Blasonar Plain, in fact.

Neither of them had ever suspected that Parno had the horizon sickness. He had never been out on the Blasonar before. Rich, lush grasses that went on for miles. As far as a person on horseback could see. And out here, that was as far as the edge of the world.

There were no trade routes through the Blasonar. There were no cities, no towns and so far as anyone knew, no permanent structures on the Plain. Only the grasses for the grua, the inglera, and the horses. Only the tents of the horsemen.

It was a good deal darker by the time they reached the bottom of the cut, and Parno's shoulder muscles had become a good deal more relaxed. He felt as though a fever had finally broken.

"This isn't a ravine," he said, looking around with relief. "It's a canyon."

They looked up, and the sky about them held the gold of day. It was still not late. The twilight they rode in was created by the walls of the Cut, not by the setting of the sun.

That night, after they had eaten, Parno played his pipes for the first time since they had

entered the Plain. Dhulyyn leaned back against her saddle, smiling the smile that in no way resembled that of a wolf.

Parno felt whole and clean as he packed away his pipes. The music had soaked through him, relaxing his muscles even further, easing the tension in his shoulders and lower back. The ride through the plain, the blindfold, the dark thoughts, they could almost have happened to someone else.

"Is the Blasonar very different from your home?" he said, watching as Dhulyyn laid out her bedroll.

"From what I remember, my homeland is colder," Dhulyyn said, "and more enclosed. But my people, the Red Horsemen, are said to have come from the north in the days of the Caids, fleeing some plague, and finding refuge in the forbidding spaces that killed lesser peoples. This plain feels as familiar to me as my saddle. You town men speak of the unchanging grasses, but they change. Different colours with each season, each time of day. And in the way they reflect the sky, you can see the weather, the movement of the sun."

Provided, of course, that you were not blindfolded. Parno rubbed at his face.

"You have the first watch," Dhulyyn said. She settled herself on her bedroll, checked that her sword was within reach, and fell instantly asleep.

He and Dhulyyn Wolfshead had been Partnered just over a year. A son of a High Noble House, and an Outlander ex-slave. She seldom spoke of her past, how she had lost her family, but Parno had seen the marks that slavery left on her back. For that matter, he didn't speak much of his own early life in his father's house. For Mercenaries, life began the day they entered one of the Brotherhood's Schools.

He had four years in the Brotherhood to Dhulyyn's nine. Partnered a year plus a few moons, and never a difference between them. Until now.

Parno looked up to where the edge of the Cut blocked the stars. Even the thought of the Plain sickened him. The need to curl up and draw himself into the smallest possible space. To hide under his horse. Anything for a roof, walls -- it was a feeling akin to madness.

Even blindfolded, Parno had known the emptiness was out there, had felt it in the way his hands had clenched and his shoulders had crawled upwards. He'd had just strength enough not to beg Dhulyyn to turn around. Or perhaps it wasn't strength, but the fear that she would refuse.

Parno had never fully realized how much his understanding of his Partner relied upon his sight. On being able to read on her face and in the attitude of her body the things she never said aloud. Blindfolded he'd found he couldn't tell if she sneered or smiled. Or felt nothing.

Of course he was thankful that Dhulyyn did not suffer the same malady. Of course he was. And he was thankful that, out there, she was able to stand watch almost the whole night. And he was thankful that she didn't blame him, that she never once reminded him that this journey had been his idea.

Now this just made him shrug and frown. On the plain he'd found he hated being thankful.

The moon was on its downward path when his thoughts were broken by a noise like great wings on some hovering hawk, beating once, twice, three times to hold itself in place against some strong wind. But when he looked around, one hand on his sword, the other on his crossbow, he saw nothing. He was about to awaken Dhulyyn when the sounds disappeared. Better wait and tell her in the morning, he decided. She'd been wakeful enough. Let her sleep now.

The next morning they were up just as the sun touched the edges of the Cut. Parno very

slowly took out the rolled linen bandage and left it on the top of his pack. His salvation on the Plains, here it only reminded him. Let it be her decision.

He gritted his teeth when Dhulyyn picked up the cloth and began to wind it, the linen cool on his skin. He told himself she took no pleasure in it, but every turn of the cloth made that harder to believe.

"You are enjoying this," he said finally.

"We are Mercenaries," she said, tying off the bandage. "We must be ready for all things. When you are perfect, I will bind my eyes."

Parno thought about it, and his lips stretched back from his teeth. If it had been anyone else, he would not believe it. But knowing Dhulyyn, it was possible she meant every word.

"Ready?"

Parno braced himself, concentrating, trying to hear only her movements, feel only the air as it touched his skin, smell only the scents as they changed.

"Mount," she said. "We will do the Swallowing Turning."

Parno grimaced and reached out for his horse. Once up, he drew his sword with his left hand. The Swallow Turning, one of the horseback *Shora*. A backhand sweep from shoulder height to behind his left ankle, right hand raised for balance. A move to rid oneself of an enemy on the ground without injuring either self or horse. Naturally she would pick that one. For some reason he just could not do this common *Shora* blindfolded and so Dhulyyn was making him practice it over and over. When he felt her to his left, he struck.

He struck to kill. Of course, one always struck to kill in practice, though one did not always use live blades. That was why so many who came to be Schooled did not live to become Mercenaries.

Fifty repetitions later, "You are still swinging too wide," Dhulyyn said. "But there is improvement."

Once the sun had fully risen, *Shora* was over and the blindfold set aside once more. Parno mounted again, feeling as if he'd been released from a cage.

"I suppose we are going in the right direction?"

Dhulyyn rolled her eyes and did not even bother to answer. Parno started to whistle.

The sun was not yet overhead when Parno held up his left fist with the smallest finger extended. Dhulyyn immediately stopped and dismounted, silently flanking him to his left. In the bushes up ahead, Parno had seen a man squatting, about to part the screen of bushes in front of him. Parno repressed a shudder as a line of sweat trickled down his back. There was no breeze, and even the hair that had escaped from his braid was still.

But not as still as the man they watched. He must have frozen as soon as he heard the sound of their horses, and he'd been unmoving, his hand raised to part the foliage, ever since. The muscles in his arm must be in agony, and yet there was no slightest hint of trembling.

Dhulyyn stood.

She kept carefully on Parno's left, long training ensuring she never put herself between their target and Parno's crossbow. As she passed Parno, she made a face and beckoned him forward. She walked up to the figure and placed her hand on its shoulder.

"He's stone, my heart," she said. "Cold stone." She looked around her, dove into the bush the stone man had been parting for who knew how long. "Another one here," she called out. "Just lying on the ground."

"The Valley of Stone Gods," Parno said, remembering.

Dhulyn scanned the heights of the ravine. "We are being watched. Do you feel it?" Parno sighed. More superstition. "Relics of the Caid's are found everywhere, you know that."

After a moment, Dhulyn nodded.

Parno swept his arm around them. "This may have once been a pleasure garden of some sort."

Dhulyn looked up from where she squatted next to the form on the ground, stone arms raised to protect a stone face. "The Caid's had peculiar tastes I think."

They saw four more stone people by the time they came to what the Mage had called the bone pile. All day the Terna Cut had curved and twisted, widened and narrowed as they had ridden along. At the bone pile the Cut was as deep as where they had entered it, though here the walls were cliff-like and undercut. It was as wide as they had ever seen it, perhaps four spans, and did not curve again for another seven spans.

There were skeletons as far as the eye could see. The two Mercenaries sat their horses and stared long enough for their shadows to lengthen. Here were all the bones they could want, gleaming silver-grey in the sun, ancient beyond telling, halfway between rock formation and sculptures by an artist Parno hoped never to meet.

"I don't suppose a hundred-weight will be missed," Parno said.

Dhulyn shook her head. "Or ten hundred-weight. Or ten thousand."

The bones -- just vertebra as the Mage had requested -- were gathered and distributed in packs the ponies could easily manage. Horses and ponies both were tethered, and supper eaten before Dhulyn asked Parno a question.

"Do you find it odd that we've found no trace of the party the Mage sent out before us?"

"I wouldn't have noticed a herd of grua on the Plain," Parno pointed out. "And as for here in the Cut, the only thing we've found are those statues. To tell truth, I assumed that they took the man's money and disappeared."

"That, if nothing else, proves you grew up in a Noble House. You judge your servants by yourselves."

"Very nice, thank you. How many times have I told you that simply because something is true you need not say it? You Outlanders have no tact. No tact at all."

"True."

"Do you think it was the horsemen?"

Dhulyn shrugged. "Perhaps. If it was time for some youth to pass the warrior's test. Though even so," she shrugged again. "These were Mages, they should have been able to trade for their lives."

Parno nodded. "Took his money and rode off. I'd wager on it."

Dhulyn lay down and wriggled her hips, looking for a more comfortable position on her bedroll. "Wake me. Don't let me sleep all night again."

"Tomorrow we'll be back on the Plain," Parno said from the spot he'd chosen to sit out his watch. *And I'll be blindfolded again*, he did not say. "Get some sleep while you can."

"Wake me," she said.

But later, his watch over, and Dhulyn up and taking her turn, Parno was still laying awake himself, trying not to think of the next day, when his Partner signalled him.

"Is that it," she said. "Is that the sound you heard in the night?"

Parno listening carefully, and finally nodded.

"There's no bird that big. Not even the Rachas of the Cloud People."

"Could it be something from the surface? Grua herds perhaps. Could the walls of the canyon distort the sound somehow?"

Dhulyn slowly shook her head. "I begin to doubt that the Mage's servants simply took his money and moved on."

"I could knock you out," Dhulyn said the next morning. She sat holding the linen wrapping in her hands. Parno had flinched away from her when she started to blindfold him. He had almost struck her. She had done nothing, not even drawn away, but she knew. Parno could see in her eyes that she recognized his hatred and his fear.

"And what? Tie me to my own saddle?"

"If necessary."

He wanted to argue. He wanted to yell and throw something. Anything to shatter that monumental Outlander calm.

Unconscious, he wouldn't know, wouldn't feel the world's edge calling him. But, he also wouldn't know if she rode off and left him. Wouldn't know until he woke up. Alone.

Parno shook himself. That was the voice of the horizon sickness. He would not listen to it. He could not. Dhulyn would bring them both out safely. He believed that. He had to.

"It isn't just the Plain," he said. "When I'm there, strange fears rise up in my mind and overwhelm me. Not just the horizon sickness. I need you to lead me, and yet I hate you for it. I suspect you of wanting to leave me, or wanting to kill me." Parno raised his eyes to hers. "I find myself wanting to kill you."

"Ah, my heart," she said, no laughter in her voice. "On your best day, were *I* the one blinded, you still could not kill me."

"Braggart."

"Just tactless."

This time they delayed the blindfold as long as they possibly could, but all too soon they were on the Plain. A steady wind now blew at their backs, pushing them toward civilization. At first, Parno tried to sing, to keep off the knowledge that, even though he could not see it, the vastness was out there. But the words kept drying in his mouth. His song could not still the inner voice that whispered to him. That told him she had ridden off without him under cover of his song. He held his breath, and relaxed. He could hear the soft thud of her horse's hooves, the animal's breathing, and the noises of the ponies, tethered to her saddle. But a moment later, he was straining again, convinced the sounds had disappeared.

Why would she not speak, he wondered. Prove to him that she was there, that she had not left him to wander alone until the great silent emptiness forced him to take off his blindfold and throw himself, finally, over the edge of the world. Couldn't she tell that her silence was driving him mad?

They had ridden perhaps ten spans further, when the wind turned foul.

"Do you smell that?" Parno lifted his head. His voice felt like a rusty blade.

"I could hardly avoid doing so." Dhulyn rode several paces off and Parno heard her voice coming now from behind him, and to windward. "The odor gusts, though the wind does not."

"Any clouds?"

"Nothing. The sky is clear as far as I can see."

And that would be very far indeed, Parno thought, gripping the pommel of his saddle.

"Parno." Dhulyn's voice was, if anything, farther away. Parno clenched his teeth. Was this how she would slip away? Pretending to investigate a convenient smell?

"Parno, there is a very large bird flying toward us."

"Dinner, do you think?" He tried to speak lightly.

"No. No, I do not think it is a bird after all."

Parno knew that tone. It cut through the clouds in his brain like a dagger through silk. It was the tone of calculation, the tone that assessed strengths, weaknesses and weaponry.

"Describe it."

"It looks . . . it looks like a woman with wings. I am not certain I am seeing it clearly. It seems to have no legs, only claws, talons. I think – "

A ribbon of cold snaked its way into Parno's belly. "Does its hair move of itself? Not with the wind?"

"A trifle hard to be sure at this distance, my soul."

"Can you shoot it?"

"It is out of range, but it closes quickly." Parno heard Dhulyn cranking the bolt on her crossbow.

A Lamista. It had to be. *Demons and perverts*. They were all suppose to be dead. He touched his blindfold. Things were starting to make sense, too much sense. The horrible stench. The fact that the horsemen of the Plain would not come to the Terna Cut. The fact that the Mage's party never returned. The statues.

The statues. Parno opened his mouth to warn her, but the words died unsaid.

His lips spread wide at the delicious irony of it. Let her get her crossbow ready. See what good it would do her. Parno gripped his pommel. She had been the lucky one, all along. No horizon sickness, no blindfold. Laughing at him. Planning how to leave him – a liability – behind. Well, her luck had run out. She'd be turned to stone and become part of this hideous landscape forever, while his blindfold would save *him*. Luck had turned, the blindfold that had been prison and torture to him would be his salvation. That and the *Shora* she had thought of to humiliate him.

The *Shora* that Dhulyn had thought of. Parno's smile left his lips. If he lived through this, it would be Dhulyn's doing. All along she had been trying to save him, to make him stronger. It was the madness trying to kill him, not his Partner. Not Dhulyn. Never Dhulyn.

These thoughts flashed through his mind in the time it took to free his sword from its scabbard.

"Dhulyn! Close you eyes! Draw your sword."

Relief washed through him as he heard the crossbow hit the ground, and the whisper of Dhulyn's sword leaving its sheath.

"I cannot see where it is if I close my eyes." Dhulyn's voice was very dry, showing none of the fear Parno felt. Was she taking him seriously? As an Outlander, she trusted her own instincts first when it came to the rough and the dangerous. Would she trust his now? Or would she think him mad?

"Blood woman! Are your eyes closed?"

"Of course." Parno heard Dhulyn take a few practice swings. His heart was ice. She had never had her chance to practice with the blindfold. She might never have it now. But one thing was clear, she was not riding away. She was not leaving him to die. He had been a fool – worse – to have thought it possible. The blindfold had been the source of the madness, but it might be

the only thing that could save them now.

Parno heard another sound now, a sound of great wings. And then the thing spoke.

The voice was piercing, and cold. There were no words, at least none that he could understand. If they lived through this, he would ask Dhulynd if it was some language she knew.

"Dhulynd!"

"All right. It has not changed direction. It is coming from our – "

Hissing. A smothered cry. A blow. And the sound of metal hitting meat. Dhulynd's horse screamed. His own horse, battle-trained, spun to the left so suddenly that Parno was almost unseated. As he was pulling himself upright he heard a body hit the ground. He told himself he could tell from that sound that it was flesh, not stone.

He turned in that direction and concentrated, trying to empty all thoughts and images from his mind. Refusing especially the image of Dhulynd, stone arms upraised, holding her sword, lying forever on the grass of the Blasonar Plain.

Instead he concentrated on the sounds, the smells, the movement of the air. Dhulynd's horse screamed again and this time Parno smelled blood. The thing did not turn animals to stone then. He urged his own mount toward the smell.

A hissing, and Parno's horse ducked again. He gripped it well with his knees and let the reins go slack. A heavy movement in the air close to him – and he struck. A taste of satisfaction like brandy in his throat as he felt the sword bite. A waft of rank air as the Lamista backed away, wings beating. Parno felt a trickle of optimism. The beast could not be accustomed to fighting prey with swords, since it expected such prey to turn to stone. He pushed even this optimism from his mind.

The air moved again as the Lamista dodged to the left and Parno felt an excruciating stabbing in his calf and a weight trying to drag him from his mount. Smelled that foul combination of blood and dirty feathers. Tried not to think of what poison it might have on its claws. He tossed his sword to his left hand and raised it to shoulder height. He'd never quite achieved the Swallow's Turning to Dhulynd's satisfaction. Here was one last chance.

Time slowed. Air buffeted him as unseen wings beat over his head. *This is Shora, Parno said to himself. I've done this a thousand times. I can keep the swing tight. There is no blindfold. I am Parno Lionsmane. Dhulynd Wolfshead is my Partner. I can keep the swing tight.*

He swung. His sword cut the air like a falling bird. He felt it bite – and the sudden release of pressure on his leg.

Parno dragged in a shuddering breath. He threw back his head and listened. He heard for the first time the squealing of the pack ponies still tethered to Dhulynd's saddle. He dismounted and limped toward them.

"Dhulynd." Not loud enough for anyone to hear. He coughed and cleared his throat.

"Dhulynd!"

There was no answer.

"How many of us do you think you can kill, blind man?"

Parno had been riding with the perpetual wind at his back, putting distance between him and the Lamista's stinking corpse. He was waiting for the change of air and temperature that would tell him the sun had gone down, and that he might, with some hope of not going completely mad, remove the covering from his eyes.

"How many of you are there?"

There was some pleased laughter at this. "What are you called, blind man?"

"I am Parno Lionsmane, called the Chanter. I was Schooled by Nerysa Warhammer of Tourin. I fight with my Brother, Dhulyn Wolfshead, called the Scholar." He shifted Dhulyn's unconscious form, cradled in his arms, her face against his throat. By moving only his right arm, and in the same gesture that would free him to pull out his sword, he could roll her face down across his knees, and be free to fight. He had found her alive, and he meant to keep her that way.

"Mercenaries of the Brotherhood, then?"

"We are."

"We see the woman's badge. What of yours?"

Praying that it was late enough, Parno began unwinding the covering on his eyes. As the last few turns came off, he exposed his Mercenary's badge, the area about his ears and along his temples where the hair had been permanently removed, and replaced with the tattoos of his Schooling, red, gold and green. There were murmurs, and Parno thought he heard at least one sword being returned to its sheath. He kept his eyes shut until he heard the sound of a single rider coming from the east.

Even then, Parno did not turn his head. He took a deep breath and cracked his eyes open, peering out between his lashes. The sun was not quite down, but he was ringed in by riders, and he struggled to pretend, to convince the part of his mind that screamed, that the horses and the men were a wall, that he was not on a grass-covered plate, about to slip off and fall into the sky.

The new arrival's voice was young, and made younger by excitement.

"It is dead. I saw it! I saw the Lamista!"

The riders around Parno looked toward one particular man, and that one nodded, his eyes on Parno.

"You killed it."

It was not a question, but Parno nodded. "I was blindfolded, as you saw. It could not harm me."

The man, obviously the leader of this band of horsemen, if not a chief, shrugged. "We have considered that method. Without success."

"We of the Brotherhood are hard to kill."

"So it seems. Is your Brother . . . ?"

"She sleeps."

Dhulyn squirmed out of Parno's arms and lowered herself to the ground. "She would be sleeping, if not for all this talk." She put her hand on Parno's thigh and squeezed. He touched the back of her hand with two fingers.

The leader of the horsemen reversed his spear and urged his mount closer.

"In exchange for the killing of the Lamista, we will give you rest, and food for so long as you wish it, and whenever you wish it." There were murmurs among the others, but only nods, no heads shaken. Dhulyn's hand tightened again on Parno's thigh. He was being made free of the Blasonar – for all the use he could make of it. Still it was an honour, and he tried to make his smile a genuine one.

"Also, we will tend your wounds, Parno Lionsmane. Not many escape the Lamista, but we know how to care for those who do." The leader looked as if for the first time at the pack ponies with their burden of grua bones. "That is what we give you for your services. Now let us speak of what you would take from the Plain."

"A mere selection of petrified bones, for the edification of Scholars," Parno said. "And surely, as the killer of the Lamista –"

"As such you have done us a service, which we repay you in services also. All that exists

on the Blasonar is ours, however petrified, and however interesting to Scholars. What do you trade for it?"

Parno looked at his Partner. Dhulyyn smiled, and raised her blood-coloured brows. Parno nodded. She turned her wolf's smile on the horsemen.

"What do you know of the Dedilos sickness?"