

The Girl

The girl crept closer to the dead man. He had a gaping wound in his side and several deep cuts to his arms and one across his face. Blood had flowed down his cheek, and flies had started to buzz around him. One landed on his nose.

She pulled at the pack slung over his shoulder, but it didn't come loose. Still, she opened the flap and rummaged around in it and came up with a hunk of cheese. She sniffed it, tasted it and stowed in her own pack. She rummaged some more, but didn't come across anything else of interest.

The girl looked around but no one was in sight. The two boys she had been with for a while had disappeared long ago. The dead man lay looking at the sky, his sword stuck in the ground just behind him, and his body and the crushed vegetation were the only evidence of the brief conflict in this clearing. Then she spotted the second dead man, partly hidden as he was by a leafy bush.

She crept up to him. He had a deep head wound, and blood had flowed down his face and across his mouth and nose but she couldn't see any other injuries. She pulled on his shoulder pack and he flopped over onto his back. After a brief pause she undid the flap on his pack and started to investigate the contents.

The dead man sat up and grabbed her wrist.

"What do you think you are doing?" he asked.

Then he groaned and held his head.

There was a knock at the door and Hedwig hurried to answer it. He checked that the safety chain was connected and opened the door as far as the chain would allow. He peered through the slit.

"Yes?" he asked.

He could see a jerkin. He looked higher and saw a face. The face had a smile spread across it.

"Are you Hedwig? I have an order here, which says that I am to be billeted with you. I'm Eddy, Edgar."

The giant outside held up a piece of paper. Hedwig considered his options. He didn't have any.

"One minute."

He closed the door and released the safety chain. Then he opened it again and the giant man entered, carrying his backpack. Hedwig closed, locked, and chained the door.

"Welcome," he said, though his tone said otherwise.

"Thanks, boss. Where can I put my kit?"

Hedwig showed Eddy the spare room. It was partly filled with bolts of cloth and boxes of spools of thread that Hedwig used in his trade, but Eddy didn't seem to mind.

"Do I have to feed you, Eddy?" worried Hedwig.

"Nah. I have a bunch of vouchers. I'll bring food in, Don't worry."

And he did. Hedwig didn't have to buy food. Eddy would go out in the morning to 'check in', and, on most days, he returned home in the early afternoon, usually with a small sack with food in it. He had set about cleaning the place up, and Hedwig admitted to himself that it had got into a 'bit of a state'. Eddy still had time to sit with Hedwig and chat while Hedwig practised his tailoring.

Eddy couldn't tell Hedwig much about the war, of course, because it all had to be kept secret, but anyway, Eddy didn't know what was going on. None of the troops did. There were always rumours, though. One minute everyone thought that the troops would be deployed the next day, but the next day it was rumoured that the troops would be staying put until the year's end.

Hedwig found that he was enjoying having Eddy around. He had been living alone since his wife died, and they had never had any children. Hedwig was a quiet man, so he hadn't realized that he

was a little lonely. He and Eddy visited the inn now and then, as did many of Hedwig's friends and neighbours. Most of them had troops with them, the boys and men who had been billeted on them. The troops and the locals got on well, in general, but the expectation was that the troops would eventually be deployed away from the town. That wasn't what happened.

The girl watched the 'dead man' for a while but she didn't touch his pack again. She fished around in her own pack and pulled out a large apple. It was rotten on one side, but she took a bite out of the other side, then tossed it away. She delved again, this time finding a hunk of stale bread and chewed it slowly. It was rock hard.

The 'dead man' opened his eyes, and she retreated a little.

"Are you dying?" she asked.

"No. I don't think so."

"Oh. Got any food?"

"No! Er, what happened?"

"Dunno. You were knocked out and now you're not."

"Ah. The battle. I remember."

"Where's your sword?"

"I had a pike."

He looked around. It was nowhere to be seen. Suddenly he remembered something and checked his pack. He looked relieved.

"You sure you've got no food?"

"No!"

Then he reconsidered. If he fed her she might go away, he thought, which showed that his mind was still a little muddled. He delved in the pack and pulled out a package wrapped in paper, then felt for his knife which was in a scabbard on his hip. Yes! It was still there! He unwrapped his portion of salted pork and cut a chunk off and handed it to her. She bit into it and chewed the succulent meat.

"Don't you say thanks?"

She looked at him for a few seconds.

"Thanks. Yeah, thanks. Sorry."

She returned her attention to the meat. He cut a bit off for himself and wrapped the rest up and stowed it back in the pack.

"How old are you, anyway? You look about five or six. Ten years or so younger than me. What are you doing out here, robbing dead men?"

She just shrugged.

"You've got blood all over your face," she said.

"What?"

He felt his head.

"Ow!"

He pulled a piece of polished metal, a piece of tin, from his pack and looked into it. It wasn't much of a mirror but he could see that blood had flowed freely for a while.

"Is there a stream near here?"

She pointed. He walked unsteadily to the stream and she followed him. He flopped down on the bank, and rinsed off the worst of the blood and the chill of the water made him feel a little better.

"You've still got some blood, there," she offered, touching him gently.

"Thanks," he said, wiping it off. At least the wound had stopped bleeding.

“Did you see which way the troops went?” he asked her.

She shook her head. He thought.

“We had the sun behind us, a bit to the side. Maybe that way?”

“Maybe the other way?”

If his side had been pushed back, she would be right. He made a decision and headed off unsteadily in the direction he thought that his company had been heading. A building was burning a long way off to one side in that direction, but he wanted to avoid it. Buildings meant people, and he wanted to keep away from people as much as possible for a while. He noticed that she was following him.

“Get lost, kid. I don’t want you around.”

He was worried that she might get hurt or get in the way if he had to fight, and then he realized that he had no weapon. He’d have to surrender if he came up against anyone who was armed.

Anyway, she just ignored him.

They crossed two fields and came across a body. The girl ran up to it, and looked carefully at it.

“Leave it alone, girl. What do you want with a dead body anyway?”

“Food,” she said. “In his pack. But this one hasn’t got a pack. Somebody prob’ly got here before us.”

“Ah.” It made sense.

“Where’s your family, girl? How come you are running around by yourself?”

“I was with two boys. They went away a long time ago, before I tried to take your pack.”

That didn’t really answer his question, he thought. He helped the girl over a gate and hopped over himself. He wondered if he could get someone else to take her on, but the local authorities would be unlikely to be helpful, and that was assuming that he could find them.

A big black dog came running down the lane, barking. It ignored the girl, who cowered behind the boy, and threatened him, barking and jumping. He was terrified, and backed away.

“Jake, leave him,” said a firm voice.

The dog backed away and its owner approached. He was holding an axe over his shoulder.

“What can I do for you?” asked the dog owner. “You’re not with those soldiers who came through here earlier, are you? They made a right mess of my barley!”

“We’re not exactly with them,” said boy. It was true, up to a point. “I was a pikeman. Got knocked out. I met the girl when I came round.”

He realized that he didn’t know her name.

“Well, be off with you. Use the lane, not the fields.” The farmer turned away, but then he had another thought. “No, hang on, kids. Could you do with a meal? Follow me.”

Eddy crashed through the door. He had his helmet on his head, but it was dented on one side, the nose piece was bent sideways. He removed the helmet and tossed it away. His leather jerkin was covered in blood, though it didn’t appear to be Eddy’s.

“Surprise attack, Hedwig. Let’s get out of here!”

“What?”

Eddy grabbed the pack from behind the door. He’d nagged Hedwig until Hedwig had collected an ‘Emergency Kit’ and stashed it in the pack behind the front door. Eddy pushed Hedwig out of the back door and they ran down the alley. There was a ‘whump’ as the house next door to Hedwig’s exploded. Glass and wood rained down on them.

“The little gods, that was close!” said Eddy. “Come on, Hedwig!”

Hedwig tried to go back, but Eddy pulled him away. The windows of Hedwig's house blew out and flames roared from them.

"No!" he screamed. "No!"

Eddy dragged Hedwig off in spite of the little man's struggles. There was no wall around Hedwig's town so they made it out of the town and up the road. At a convenient point they stopped and looked back, as other refugees streamed past them. The whole centre of the town was ablaze, and small fires dotted the rest. Hedwig dropped to the ground and cried, while Eddy patted his back.

"Which side are you on, boy?" asked the farmer, across the table.

The boy considered. He put down his cup of cocoa.

"I don't know, sir. The troops came through and conscripted everyone who was of fighting age. I'm for the King, though! We were headed north, I think, if that's any help."

He looked into his cocoa cup.

"You're being very kind to us, sir," he said.

The farmer waved that away.

"The other lot are from somewhere up there. Or they may be from the west. I'm not sure," he said. "We're on the fringes here. Not much damage done by either side, apart from my barley! One lot, I think it was a bunch of your people, got into the heifers' field. Of course, the heifers wanted to see what these people were doing in their field so they trotted over towards them. It was so funny! The troopers were jumping over the fence like the devils were after them. One, two, three, four, five... Like jack in the boxes. Except one boy who was obviously a country lad. He just waited for the heifers and stroked their noses!"

The farmer looked the girl.

"What about you, lass?"

"Huh?"

"I've just met her," said the boy. "She was searching the dead for food. I don't know anything about her, sir."

"Lass? Do you not have a mother?"

"Nah. I don't know, I can't remember."

She paused for thought.

"I went to school once. That was a long time ago. I think my Mumma was killed. My Dadda wasn't there."

She drank her cocoa and wouldn't answer any more questions.

Hedwig and Eddy walked down the road in silence, with Hedwig just stumbling along, not really seeing anything. They weren't alone. The refugees from the ravaged town streamed along the road, heading away from the conflagration. There were many wearing the uniform of the defending troops among them, a testimony to the depth of the defeat experienced by the defenders.

"We'll head for the next town," said Eddy. "There's a big barracks there. They'll tell us what to do."

Hedwig stopped. "My house! My shop! My business."

He tottered to the side of the road and curled up in the grass. Eddy stopped and scratched his head. He sat down beside Hedwig and just talked to him, mostly about the things that had happened to him.

"... then me and Sunny split up. To be honest, I knew it was for the best. Things weren't going well for us, and we both realized it. I signed up with a roving smithy, and we went all over the

place. I went back once and Sunny was married to a nice bloke, with a lovely daughter. She was so cute! Did you and your wife have any kids, Hedwig?"

Eddy knew that they hadn't of course. Hedwig had told him. Hedwig stirred a little, so Eddy kept talking.

"... then we went out west. There were rumours of wars out that way, but it amounted to nothing, eventually. But we made good money. Well, at the time it amounted to nothing, but it's a different story now, of course."

Eventually Hedwig sat up. "Sorry, Eddy. I didn't mean to collapse like that."

"It's OK, pal. I understand. But we couldn't stay there."

"I know," said Hedwig, looking back. A towering pall of smoke was being shredded by high winds. "Oh my. I've lived there all my life. Never left, except for a trip down the coast for my honeymoon."

Eddy nodded and they stood looking back for a while.

"Let's go, Hedwig. Let's go."

"OK, Eddy. Thanks. You know, my wife's ashes were buried in my little yard. But it doesn't matter."

"Well, you never know. We might be able to go back when the fighting dies down."

They headed off up the road.

The farmer's wife bandaged the boy's head wound and she fed him and the girl. The boy, whose name was Finn, was pleased to see that the girl used her cutlery, and didn't just use her hands. He wasn't sure if she knew how.

She wouldn't give her name, though. When they had eaten the farmer's wife took her off to the bathroom, and when they came back the girl looked a lot cleaner. She was wearing some fresh clothes too.

"Your turn, lad," said the farmer's wife, and for an instant Finn thought that she was offering to give him a bath!

"Thanks," he said, and the farmer's wife showed him to the bathroom.

"There's some old clothes of my son in there if you want," she said.

"Thanks. Thank you very much."

He returned to the kitchen, and the farmer's wife was brushing the girl's hair.

"I'd better be moving on," he said. "Thank you very much for the meal."

He picked up his pack, and the girl jumped up and picked up hers too.

"Oh, I suppose you can stick with me for a while," he said. "Until we find somewhere safe for you."

"You could leave her here," said the farmer. "We'll make sure she's safe."

"No! I want to go with him! Don't leave me here, Finn!"

The farmer and his wife looked at each other.

"We'd look after you, girl," he said. "But we aren't going to force you."

The girl hugged the farmer's wife.

"No, I have to go. I have to! Sorry!"

"Sorry," said Finn. Then his eyes narrowed. "Wait a minute! That pack looks a lot heavier. What have you got in it?"

He grabbed the girl's pack and opened it. He pulled out a towel, some soap, and a comb. Then there was most of a loaf, a chunk of meat, and a couple of apples.

"Oh, girl! What have you done!"

The farmer and his wife looked at the items and then at each other.

“You shouldn’t steal, girl. That could get you into trouble. Don’t worry, Finn, It doesn’t matter. Girl, you can have those things. But you could have asked.”

“But you might have said no!”

“That’s the point,” the farmer’s wife sighed. “Finn, you’ll have to have a talk with her. Good luck. I think that you will need it.”

At the top of the next rise in the road, people were milling about, not going anywhere. Hedwig and Eddy made their way to the crest and, with the others, gazed down at the town below. Thick smoke billowed up in several places, and Eddy swore under his breath.

“It looks like the other side got here first. I think that they’ve got us beaten, Hedwig.”

It was Hedwig’s turn to support his companion.

“What does this mean, Eddy? We’re not going down there, are we? So, we have to go somewhere else, don’t we?”

Eddy shook himself, and since he was a big man, it was impressive.

“You’re right, Hedwig. We’ll head along the ridge. There’s no point in going down to that town. Left or right?”

“Left,” suggested Hedwig. The track to the left was in the open, but the track to the right dived into some woods. Hedwig was worried about ambushes.

Eddy laughed. “Yeah, the open route. Besides, that will take us down to the coast. Maybe we can find out what is happening if we go down there. Let’s go, pal.”

Finn had a long discussion with the girl about how stealing was wrong and the trouble that it could get you into. It seemed that she understood, and he thought that he was getting somewhere until she asked him about the dead men. She asked him if it was OK to take their food, and his optimism faded away.

He sighed. “Well, I guess it was wrong, but they didn’t need it, and it would have gone to waste.”

He was relieved that the girl didn’t ask any more questions.

“So, how did you come to be following the army, girl?”

“My Dadda wasn’t there,” she said.

“Was he conscripted?”

She looked at him with a frown. “Dunno.”

He guessed she didn’t know what he meant. “Um, did they make him join the troops?”

The girl shook her head. “Nah. He wasn’t there. He went away a long time ago.”

He mused a bit. She was maybe five or six maybe. It sounded like her father had abandoned her mother well before the war started. Oh well.

“What happened to your mother, kid?”

She looked down. “She was dead, I think. She didn’t move. She was cold.”

She shivered and wouldn’t say any more.

Finn and the girl headed north-east, more or less, and he didn’t see any signs that troops had passed through the area. He was beginning to think that he’d picked the wrong direction. Then they started to come across people headed in the opposite direction.

“Hey, what’s going on?” he asked an old man and his wife.

“The war,” said the old man with a tear in his eye. “The troops came at night and took over the town. They set light to the barracks and the fire spread to the rest of the town. Our house burnt down, but we managed to get out. Mabel and I are headed to our daughter’s house.”

Mabel and the old man started to move on.

“Hey, lad,” said the old man, over his shoulder. “You’re in a uniform. Do you know what is happening? The invaders were in blue uniforms. That’s not your lot is it?”

Finn’s uniform was fawn. He didn’t know which side wore blue, and his unit had only come across and fought with soldiers with green uniforms.

Finn and the girl reached the crest of the hill. Down below a pall of smoke rose from the centre of the town and flames could be seen rising from the wooden buildings. The road up the hill was black with people.

“Let’s go, girl,” said Finn, and they headed off along the ridge.

Hedwig and Eddy walked along the ridge track. They weren’t alone. Some of those heading along the track had some belongings with them, but most had little more than the clothes on their backs. There were more than a few kids in families, and some with only one adult. There were old people, trudging slowly along using sticks or being pushed in chairs. One family had a donkey, and Hedwig wondered how they had got the animal out of the beleaguered town. All the refugees seemed tired and dispirited, as was Hedwig himself.

Eddy for his part was used to walking long distances. He didn’t notice the civilians much, but noted all those in uniform. Some of them had swords strapped to their waists, and one or two carried crossbows. One man had had a large pike, but he had found a man with an axe who shortened the shaft for him, so that he had a short stabbing weapon.

The uniforms of the soldiers were varied, and Eddy spotted blue uniforms, green uniforms, black uniforms, and more. He saw a few with the same uniform as himself. All the soldiers were keeping to themselves, even those who wore the same uniforms.

The ridge track started to wind as the hills became lower, and as they emerged from a small wood, they could see the coast. The sea sparkled in front of them.

“Up the coast that way is where we started from,” said Hedwig. “I remember. I’ve never been this far, except on my honeymoon, but some of my wife’s family lived down here, somewhere. She used to visit her relatives sometimes.”

He sighed, and Eddy touched his shoulder.

“Come on, pal,” he said. “Let’s see if we can find somewhere to sleep tonight. Hey! What’s this?”

A line of men with crossbows were confiscating weapons and directing the refugees into a field. The men were wearing dark red berets and camouflage uniforms, and many of them had darker skins than was usual in this region. They would not talk to any of the refugees, and just urged them into the field.

“Confederation of Nations. CONS. Peacekeepers. It figures.”

The Peacekeeping troops directed Finn and the girl into the field and they joined a long line waiting to enter a tent. When they entered the tent the dark skinned trooper at the desk said “Names?”

Finn gave his name and as the girl kept quiet he said “She’s Jane Smith. She’s shocked and can’t talk. Sorry?”

Except for the name, it was close to the truth. The officer didn’t seem interested. “Relationship?”

“Er, niece.”

This passed without comment.

“Where are you and your niece from?”

Finn lied. He told the officer that they were from the town that they had seen in flames, and again the officer just accepted the answer and wrote it on her pad.

“Were you in any force or militia?”

“No.” The officer glanced at his uniform, but didn’t comment.

“OK. Take this token. It entitles you to food and a tent, if we get any. Don’t lose it or give it to anyone, or you will have problems. Go out of the back entrance to this tent and find the area assigned to you. It’s on the token.”

“Thank you, officer,” Finn said.

The officer finally looked at him and smiled. “Thank you, sir,” she said.

Eddy and Hedwig located the area to which they were assigned. There were posts delimiting the area, and there were a few people wandering around, staying within the limits of the posts. Eddy staked a claim to a few square metres and sat down.

“Sit down, Hedwig. We’re not going anywhere for a while. Relax.”

“It’s easy for you to say, Eddy, but I’m not used to roaming the countryside.”

Eddy laughed. “True, Hedwig. I’ve been around a bit. But not with the army.”

“Oh, yes, you told me. You worked for a travelling smith, didn’t you?”

“Yeah, I didn’t mean to get caught up in this. That’s why I told the officer that I wasn’t part of any militia, but she didn’t seem worried.”

A young lad and an even younger girl sat down near them.

“Hi, pal,” said Eddy. “Have you come far?”

The lad looked at Eddy’s uniform with some suspicion.

“From down south,” he said. “Are you a trooper?”

“Nah, lad. Conscripted, but I think that the fighting is over by now. I’m Eddy. This is Hedwig. Who are you?”

The lad sighed. “I’m Finn. I was conscripted too. Is it really over, do you think?”

“Yeah, Finn. The CONS will be snuffing it out, I reckon. Who’s the girl?”

Finn looked at her, and she gave him a worried look. “She’s Jane. I met her on the road. I think she has been orphaned by the war.”

“My name’s not Jane,” said the girl, but she wouldn’t say any more.

A few tents were delivered and Eddy grabbed one.

“Want to join us, Finn?” Eddy asked.

“Thanks, if you’ve got room,” Finn replied.

“Yeah, they’re four man tents, I think. You won’t get a tent to yourselves!”

Eddy upended the bag and the tent and some poles and pegs tumbled out. They started to erect the tent.

“Mmm, this tent has seen better days,” commented Hedwig.

The main ridge-pole had a crack in it, which someone had roughly splinted with some smaller poles. Hedwig untied the makeshift repair and retied it more securely using his tailoring skills.

“Yeah, that should hold. Mmm. It’s a bit like working with threads. But bigger!”

“Good work, pal. Let’s get this up.”

With a bit of work, a few running repairs from Hedwig, and some tent pegs cut from the hedge, their tent was up. Around the area people were erecting their own tents with varying degrees of success.

“Let’s see if we can help,” said Hedwig, and Eddy nodded.

“Finn, can you look after our tent while we see if anyone needs help?” Eddy asked.

“Sure, Eddy.”

While Hedwig and Eddy were away on their errand of mercy, one of the Peacekeeping soldiers came past with leaflets.

“Can you read, girl?” Finn asked.

“Some stuff,” said the girl. She looked at the leaflet over his shoulder. “Nah, too hard for me.”

“It’s all stuff about the war and things. Oh they’re asking us to stay in the camp until they confirm that hostilities are definitely over, and then they will send us home.”

He had to explain what ‘hostilities’ were.

“Here’s a voucher for some food. We can get some later apparently. That’s good. And they are setting up washing and other facilities at the bottom of the field.”

He looked at the girl. He knew that she had had a bath at the farmer’s house but somehow she had become a little grubby since then. He sighed.

Hedwig and Eddy came back.

“You’ve got your vouchers? Good! A CONS officer handed ours to us while we were helping someone out. He reckoned we’ll be here for a week or two. Oh, well.”

Life in the camp settled down, and Eddy, Hedwig, Finn, and the girl made themselves comfortable in their tent. They were given some supplies by the Peacekeepers, and Finn and Eddy still had their backpacks with their bedrolls. Hedwig had a bedroll too, as Eddy had made sure that he had an emergency kit ready, and they had grabbed it as they left. Finn collected some blankets and a bedroll for the girl from the Peacekeepers, so they all had something to sleep on.

The girl rarely left Finn’s side, but she became friendly with Eddy and Hedwig. Hedwig wondered what it would have been like if he and his wife had had kids, but then he frowned. If he’d had kids they could have ended up like the girl, he thought. But then again, many kids are born and have a happy life, and only a few don’t. A very few. Ah well. The least that he could do would be to see that the girl was as happy as possible while he was around her.

Hedwig noticed that one of the seams of the girl’s jacket was coming apart. He could fix that!

“Give me your jacket, girl,” he said. “I’ll fix it for you.”

The girl was unwilling to take it off at first, but Finn encouraged her. Hedwig drew out his sewing kit and started to mend the heavy garment. The girl was amazed.

“This jacket is good quality! I’ll teach you to sew if you like, girl,”

“Yes, please, Hedwig. Can you?”

So Hedwig gave the girl lessons in sewing for the two weeks that they were at the camp. He also did some sewing for their fellow refugees, and sometimes they gave him things in return, like new shoes for the girl. Eddy and Finn also helped their fellow refugees where they could, tapping in to a barter network that sprang up across the camp.

Eddy and the others found out that they were not confined to the camp, and they could leave at any time. They discussed it and decided to stay, as did most people. Here they were fed and sheltered and protected by the CONS forces, and if they took to the road, they would have to fend for themselves. As would be expected, a few people did decide to strike out on their own.

Eddy was playing a game with the girl which involved moving pebbles on a board scratched out on the ground. Finn was sitting nearby gazing at the distant sea, half dozing, while Hedwig was plying his trade, sewing a garment for someone.

“Your move, Eddy,” said the girl.

Eddy looked at the board. “Really?”

She nodded. Eddy noted that she had no moves that would increase her chances of winning. Neither did he. He was fairly sure that she hadn’t made a move, but he moved some of his counters anyway. She immediately captured several of Eddy’s pebbles.

“Hmm. Are you sure that you didn’t miss a turn?”

She just grinned at him.

Finn sat up. “What can we do for you officer?”

The CONS officer who had just arrived consulted the clipboard that he had in his hand.

“Erm, Eddy, Hedwig, Finn, and, erm, Jane? There’s a question mark against the girl’s name. Erm.”

“Yes, officer, that’s us. What can we do for you?”

“I see. Well, erm, we are informing everyone that we are closing this camp down. Hostilities have ceased, and, erm, you are free to go home again. We would like you to leave the camp by noon the day after tomorrow, erm, if you wouldn’t mind, but if this causes you any difficulties, please inform someone in the CONS tent. Erm.”

“OK, officer, we’ll leave. Thank you.”

“Oh, one more thing, sir. Erm, can you please let me know where you will be headed?”

Finn looked at his companions. He told the officer that they would be going to Hedwig’s home town, and the officer wrote this information down.

“Erm, that’s just so that we can manage the traffic, by the way. You are, erm, free to go anywhere you like, of course. Please leave the tent and any CONS equipment behind. Erm. Thank you folks.”

The officer strolled over to the next tent.

“Is that OK with you, Hedwig? Can we come along with you and Eddy?”

Hedwig looked depressed. “Yes, of course. But I don’t know if it is worth going back. My house and shop are gone. I’ve got nothing left, back there.”

The girl let go of Finn’s arm and put her hand on Hedwig’s shoulder, and he smiled at her.

Eddy said “That may be, Hedwig, but we have to go and have a look. Which way is back from here? Do we have to go back up the hill? None of us are from around here!”

Hedwig thought. “Yes, I am, but I haven’t travelled much. Let’s go down to the coast and up to my home town that way. I think that the roads will be clearer that way.”

“That sounds good to me,” said Eddy and got nods from Finn and the girl.

The next day they headed down the hill towards the coast. They passed through the seaside town and headed up the coast road, and it appeared that this was a popular choice.

“Hey, Hedwig, aren’t those your neighbours?” said Eddy.

“Yeah, Blaise and Molly.”

Blaise and Molly were pleased to see Hedwig.

“We thought that you had been killed, Hedwig. Your house blew up! Are you going back, then?”

“Yes, I need to see it. I don’t know whether I will stay or not. Eddy and I have talked about going to the Capital.”

“Our house was on the edge of the fighting. We hope it is OK. We’ll see when we get back, but anyway, we can go to my son’s place. He wants to look after us, so maybe now is the time. We’re not getting any younger!”

“Nice to see you, anyway! Have you seen any of our other neighbours?”

Blaise and Molly indicated that they hadn’t.

Hedwig and his friends didn’t hurry. They stopped off at a couple of beaches and the girl splashed about in the sea. Finn showed her the creatures trapped in the rock pools, and they all marvelled at them.

“I’d no idea how interesting travelling could be,” said Hedwig. “I’m beginning to understand why you went on the road, Eddy.”

“Yeah, it’s good in weather like this, pal, but when it’s raining or snowing, well, it can be depressing.”

“Still ...”

The town was revealed bit by bit as they approached it along the coast road.

“It doesn’t look that different,” said Hedwig, with a hint of hope in his voice.

“Steady, pal,” said Eddy. “We saw your house blow up, remember.”

He rested his huge hand on his friend’s shoulder, and Hedwig nodded.

The girl was riding on Eddy’s shoulders and she gently tickled Hedwig with a frond of grass she had found.

“Hey!” he said, laughing.

“It’s only a house, Hedwig! You’ve got us!”

“You’re right, lass! Oh, well, let’s go and see what the damage is!”

They strolled into town, and Hedwig kept meeting friends and neighbours. They came to the place where Hedwig’s house used to be, and silently perused the gaping hole and the piles of rubble. On one side there was complete destruction, and on the other, the next house was leaning towards the gap that used to be Hedwig’s house. Several stout beams supported the house belonging to Hedwig’s neighbour.

“Hullo, Hedwig,” said his neighbour. “You survived then. I’m glad. My wife and I thought that you had been killed.”

“No, no, Sammet. Eddy and I got away just in time. How about you? Did you run for it?”

“No, we were lucky. We were out, but our house wasn’t directly hit. Oh, the Baron is looking for you and our other neighbours. He wants to rebuild. He wants to do the whole row.”

“I’ll go and see him tomorrow.” He sighed. “We’ll camp out in the barn. That wasn’t touched, luckily.”

Hedwig was exaggerating slightly when he said that the barn was untouched. The front was listing slightly, but three of the four walls were mostly intact, and they built a barrier of hay bales in case it came down.

“What do you think, pal?” asked Eddy. “Are you going to stay for the rebuild?”

“I don’t know, Eddy. This doesn’t feel like my town, now. Let the Baron rebuild. I think that I want to travel. At my age, I’ve got itchy feet!”

He laughed.

“What about your wife’s ashes?”

“Oh, well. That’s not her. If they disturb her ashes when they rebuild, I don’t think that she would mind. She wasn’t that sentimental, anyway.”

But she was, a thought insisted. She kept mementos of their life together, but she wasn’t afraid to throw them out if they got in the way. And she would tell him not to worry.

“I’m headed for the Capital,” said Finn. “I guess the girl will come with me.”

He looked at her and she nodded.

Eddy considered. “I’ve often meant to head that way,” he said. “Hedwig, what do you think?”

“Yeah! It sounds good to me. I just need to sort things out here, and we can all head north!”

That night they visited the tavern, and Hedwig caught up with old friends. Some had been unaffected by the recent hostilities, others had had their homes or businesses destroyed, like Hedwig. Overall, though, most people seemed optimistic, now that the fighting was over. There were even a few kids, drinking soft drinks with their parents or carers, which was a little unusual. Eventually the girl dropped off to sleep on Finn’s lap, and they all went back to Hedwig’s barn.

“My Dadda went to see the King. So did my brothers,” the girl said suddenly. “It was a long time ago, before my birthday.”

Hedwig and Eddie had gone off to see the Baron, so Finn and the girl were wandering around the town. Finn had just bought them each a bun with a meat patty in it and they were sitting on a bench in the park.

“Oh, I see. Did your Mumma get any letters from him?” Finn had thought that her father had abandoned the girl and her mother.

“Heaps,” said the girl. “Dadda always sent his love in his letters. Mumma showed me.”

Finn kept quiet, and wondered if she would say more.

“These buns are good!” he said.

“Yeah! Mumma was getting worried about the fighting, but it wasn’t down our way. Most people went away, to relatives and stuff. Then the soldiers came and everyone else ran away. Mumma was surprised that the soldiers came. Old Pedro, the butler, he didn’t run away. He got his old sword but one of the soldiers stuck his sword in Pedro and he died.”

‘Old Pedro, the butler!’ thought Finn.

“Mumma and me ran away. Mumma made me hide in the big wardrobe, in the hidden bit. I covered myself in blankets, and there was a lot of noise. Mumma was shouting, crying. Then it all went quiet. I waited ages for Mumma to come and she didn’t.”

The girl sat in the wardrobe, covered in blankets. It was quiet, but earlier, there had been a lot of shouting and crashing and banging. The girl heard Mumma’s voice, but she couldn’t hear what she said. Mumma was shouting at someone and that person was shouting back. Suddenly Mumma screamed and the girl started to climb out of the blankets, but she remembered that Mumma had said that she wasn’t to come out whatever happened. She waited and waited, but Mumma didn’t come. Finally she fell asleep.

When she woke she considered. Mumma said to stay there, but Mumma hadn’t come. Finally she decided to crawl out of the wardrobe. She could always get back in.

When she crawled out she could see that the room had been wrecked, and about the only piece of furniture that was still standing and undamaged was large wardrobe. Then she saw Mumma! Mumma was lying on her back, in the middle of the carpet, staring at the ceiling, and the girl rushed over to her.

“Mumma! Mumma! Oh!”

There was blood all around Mumma, and she looked white. There was a short sword in her hand. The girl accidentally put her hand in the blood and it was sticky.

“Mumma!” she shrieked. “Mumma!”

She threw herself on Mumma, but Mumma didn’t move. She was cold, but the girl still hugged Mumma’s body for a long time. She only moved when she heard loud voices, coming from outside. She went to the window and carefully looked out. It was Uncle Fabian! He was shouting at some of the soldiers.

“Where is the girl! You incompetents!”

“Dunno, Boss. Didn’t see any girl.”

“Idiots! She wouldn’t have been far from her mother. We’ll have to search.”

Uncle Fabian and the soldiers disappeared into the house.

The girl had lived in the house for all of her short life, and knew all the short cuts and hidden ways. She sprinted down the stairs. Mumma would have told her not to run but Mumma... She stopped that thought in its tracks. She easily avoided the soldiers and Uncle Fabian, and skirted the barn and the wood shed and disappeared into the woods.

The girl suddenly turned her attention to the bun and wouldn’t say anything else. Finn put his arm around her. He didn’t have a sister, and he wondered what it would be like to have one.

He wondered about her story. It sounded as if her family were important or rich. Or maybe her Mumma worked for some rich people. Finn had been intending to go to the Capital anyway, but maybe they could find the girl’s family up there.

“Er, is it OK for me to tell Hedwig and Eddy this?” he asked with caution.

The girl concentrated on her bun. “Yeah. They’re nice. Yeah. OK.”

Hedwig and Eddy were discussing the meeting with the Baron.

“There were quite a few people there, Finn. Most of them from the centre of the city. When the Baron had dealt with them he talked to us. He wants to rebuild the whole row of houses and repair the damaged ones on the other side. There’s going to be a levy for the rebuild, but most of that will come from the merchants. Some the Baron will put in and some will come from tradesmen like Hedwig. Hedwig’s OK because he had some money saved up, but some people will find it hard. The Baron’s got a plan for that, but he didn’t say what it was. The Mayor was there too, but he didn’t say much. Just some stuff about the sewers and roads. He seems to agree with the Baron’s plans.”

“But Eddy and I are going up to the Capital while the rebuild is going on. We told the Baron,” added Hedwig. “Do you two still want to come along?”

Finn told them that they would. When the girl had gone to sleep he told them her story.

“So, her mother is dead, but her father and brothers might be up in the Capital. Let’s see if we can track them down,” summarized Eddy.

“Yeah. There’s something funny about the story though. She won’t say where she came from, but she was headed north when I met her. The fighting was only around here, though, and not down that way. And why would her father and brothers leave the girl and her mother down south, unprotected, if they thought that there was any danger?”

“Yes, it does seem odd, doesn’t it?” replied Eddy. “I think that we had better keep her hidden as much as we can. She ran away from her uncle, and maybe she had a good reason for that.”

“What about you, Eddy? What’re your longer term plans. You don’t come from round here do you?”

“No, I don’t but I don’t have any roots anywhere. My parents have passed away and I have no brothers or sisters. I’m going to share with Hedwig when we come back from the Capital, at least for a while. There’s a smithy a couple of streets over and I’m sure I could get work there.”

Finn talked to the girl alone, about the future. “I like having you around, girl, but I don’t know how long you can stay with me. What do you think?”

She gave it some thought, then shrugged. “I want to stay with you, Finn. You’re my friend.”

Finn was silent. So far as he could tell, she wasn’t upset. He didn’t want to hurt the girl’s feelings.

“But you’re going to grow up sometime. You’re going to want to meet kids of your own age. You’re going to have to go to school.”

The girl thought about this seriously for a bit longer. “But until then?”

“Yes, of course! But, erm, what about your family?”

“I don’t have a family. Dadda wasn’t there, and Mumma was dead.” Her eyes filled with tears.

Finn hugged her. “Your Dadda will be looking for you, I expect. I hope so.”

Her smile lit up the barn. “And my brothers?”

“Maybe. But, girl, don’t get too excited. We might not be able to find them.” He didn’t want to say that they might be dead too.

“We’ll look everywhere,” she said, her determination showing in her voice.

“Yeah. We will. If we can find them, we will,” Finn said.

They were both quiet for a while.

“Girl, do you have any other relatives?”

“Nah. Oh, there’s my Uncle Fabian. But Mumma said ‘Don’t trust Uncle Fabian.’ That was just before she put me in the big wardrobe.”

The girl was in shock when she left her home, and her mind wasn’t working properly. If anyone had asked her what had happened to her, she would not have been able to answer. It was like a blank place in her memories. She did remember that her brother had pointed out the road to the north.

“The Capital is up that way,” he had said. “That’s where the King lives.”

She didn’t want to go home, and she didn’t want to meet Uncle Fabian, so she waited until dark, and more or less by default started up the road to the north. She slept under a hedge. The next day, too many people looked at her as they passed her so she turned off onto a side road, and at one point she fell into a ditch.

She met up with two boys who were a bit older than her, and at first they threatened her, but they found that she didn’t have any money or food and lost interest. But they let her follow them.

The boys were adept at surviving on their own. They stole any food that they could find, and slipped into carts if they could, and she copied them. Though the girl didn’t know it, they made steady progress north, sleeping in barns and under hedges.

Once they passed some soldiers.

“Is that her?” asked one of them. “Nah. That dirty urchin? No way!”

They came across a big squad of soldiers, who were heading north.

“Let’s follow them,” said the older boy, sensing possibilities.

The squad met an opposing squad and a brief skirmish followed. One soldier was killed and the fighting moved away.

“Come on,” said the boy, and the trio cautiously approached the man. He was definitely dead, and the girl briefly thought of Mumma.

The older boy searched the man's pack for food and other stuff. He put the coins in his pocket and took the food. He gave some to the other boy, and hesitated, but gave some to the girl. When they left the body, the girl took the pack with her.

The kids followed the troops for a while, robbing the dead bodies, but while they were investigating one dead man's pack someone shouted "Hey!".

They scattered and she never saw the boys again. She had no luck that day and the next, but finally found another dead man. She stole some food from his pack, and then she met Finn.

Eddy and Frank, the carter, were sitting up at the front of the cart while Hedwig, Finn and the girl were sitting the back, making themselves as comfortable as they could. It had been raining on and off but the big canvas arch that protected Frank's cargo also kept most of the rain off them.

"Hunker down, guys. There's a couple of soldiers coming," said Eddy,

The three in the back tried to merge with the cargo. Frank drew the cart to a stop.

"Afternoon, officers. What can I do for you?" asked Frank.

The soldiers reigned in their horses.

"Afternoon, sirs. Have you seen anyone on the road? Anyone suspicious?"

"Well, the roads are busy, officer. We've seen plenty of people. It's the war you know."

One of the soldiers was trying to peer into the cart but he wasn't putting in much effort. He was wet and looked a little irritated.

"It's just you two, is it, sirs?"

"Yes, officer."

"You haven't got any kids with you, have you?"

"Kids?" Frank and Eddy looked at each other in surprise.

"Why would we bring kids along on a day like this, officer?"

One soldier looked at the other. "We're supposed to search every cart."

The other sniffed. "You can, if you want to," he said, and walked his horse off down the road.

"Thank you, sirs," said the first soldier, and followed his partner.

After the soldiers went away, Frank said "Why are they looking for you? Do you know?"

"No, Frank. No idea. But there were a couple of guys distributing broadsheets in that last town."

"Yeah," said Frank. "Looking for a girl. Hmph! My granddaughter is about her age. Hmm. You OK, girl?"

"Yeah, Mister Frank. Thanks."

"Mm. Look, I'll let you guys down a bit short of the Capital. They check all the wagons. Just say you have business in the Capital. They won't mind. Good luck! Oh, if you need accommodation, go to the Green Dragon, and mention my name. They know me there."

As Frank predicted they had no trouble getting into the Capital. The soldiers who let them through were relaxed.

"Visitors? Do you have anywhere to stay?" one asked.

Eddy scratched his head. "Not really. Where do you suggest?"

"Well, there's the Red Lion. That's cheap. Or the King's Head, if you have a little money."

"Thanks officer. The Red Lion is cheap?"

"Yeah. Clean too."

As the travellers passed into the city, the guards watched them go. "It was a girl they were looking for, wasn't it?"

"Yeah. She's the right age too. They didn't mention any others?"

“Nah. We’ll suggest that they check the Red Lion and the King’s Head. We might get a reward.”

They hadn’t been ordered to look out for a girl by their superiors, and they couldn’t leave their post. They’d just been asked by someone who called himself a ‘friend’ to look out for the girl. Neither of them much liked the guy who had asked them to look out for her.

Hedwig scratched his nose thoughtfully. They were sitting in the lounge of ‘Mrs Hobson’s Lodging House’, which advertised rooms to let, with bath and laundry available on request. Mrs Hobson was a motherly woman who had taken the girl off to give her a bath. The others would take their turns later.

“Erm, I got the impression that you had business in the Capital, Finn,” said Hedwig.

“Yes, Hedwig. I’ll go up to the Palace tomorrow. I’ll take the girl with me. We’ll see you in the evening?”

“Yes, Eddy and I are going sightseeing. The Citadel will probably be out of bounds because of the hostilities, but we should be able to tour the Botanical Gardens, and the waterfront is supposed to be good, with all the restaurants and coffee shops.”

“Is the Zoo open yet? I’d like to take the girl there, if possible.”

“Have you decided what you are going to do with her?” asked Eddy. “She’s very attached to you.”

Finn sighed. “I’ll take her back home with me. My mother will know what to do.”

It wasn’t as simple as just walking into the Palace. They had to find the entrance for people who had business at the Palace, as opposed to those who were simply sightseeing. Then Finn had to persuade the guard at the gate that he really did have business at the Palace. Finally he had to persuade the guard to let the girl through with him. They were shown to a waiting room, where dozens of people were waiting for an audience with the King.

They found seats and Finn settled down for what might be a long wait, but suddenly the girl shrieked!

“Jamie! Jamie!”

She rushed over to a young boy, and Finn hurried to follow her.

“Hullo, squirt,” said the boy, hugging and kissing her. The boy was a year or two younger than Finn. “Where did you spring from? How did you get here? We’ve been looking for you!”

“Where’s Dadda? Where’s Rowie?”

“They’re with the King. But I decided to wait outside. Who’s this, Bee?”

“This is Finn. He’s my friend.”

“Hi,” said Finn. “We didn’t know that you were looking for the girl.”

“We’d better let them know that you’ve been found, Bee. Come on.”

Jamie led them to an usher, and spoke with him quietly. The usher nodded and went through some doors.

“How do you know the girl? Bee?” asked Finn.

“Beatrice. She’s my sister. We thought that she’d been killed. She’s been with you all this time?”

“Yeah, most of the time. We met on the battlefield...”

“She knows ... about her mother? Dad and Rowan and I went back briefly when we found out that the house had been raided. We buried Mum, while we were there, but no one knew what had happened to Bee.”

“Yes, she knows about her mother. Your mother.”

At that moment the usher came back and directed the girl and Jamie through the door. He was going to bar Finn, but the girl insisted that he came too.

They passed through a small throne room into a side room, which was more like a large office. The King was seated behind a large wooden table, and on the other side sat an older man and a boy about Finn's age. The King's secretary sat to one side.

"Bee!" said the older man.

The girl ran up and hugged him. "Dadda, Dadda!" She cried. He picked her up and sat her on his lap.

"Oh, my beautiful girl!" he said.

The older boy said "Who is this?"

"Oh, he's my friend, Rowie! Rowie, this is Finn."

"Rowan," said the boy. "Nice to meet you, Finn."

The King stirred. "Nice to see you too. But how does this affect what we were discussing? Fabian, or rather his wife's claim to the Duchy?"

"Sire, we thought that my wife and my daughter were killed in the fighting, but may I introduce my daughter, who is now Duchess of Midwich, as the title uniquely passes down through the female line, as you know. It means that Fabian's wife has no claim on the title."

"Uncle Fabian's soldiers were at the house," said the girl.

"What? Fabian's soldiers? When your Mumma was...?"

"Yeah. They killed Pedro and Mumma and I ran away. Mumma made me hide. Then later I ran away, and I met Finn."

The King and the girl's father looked at each other.

"I'll handle it," said the King.

He seemed pleased. "Is there anything else?"

Finn cleared his throat. "Um, yes, sire. I have a letter from my father, who is a Baronet down south. He pledges allegiance, but unfortunately I was conscripted by force before I could get here, and was delayed. I'm sorry."

"No worries, lad. Give your letter to my secretary. And thank you, and thank your father. You are not the only courier who was delayed by the hostilities. Thank goodness the CONS got involved because the other side were beating us, beating us badly. Now we have a real chance for peace."

"So you're a Duchess, girl? Fancy that!" said Hedwig.

"Yes, she is," said Jamie. "We're going home tomorrow. Now that the fighting has finished Rowan, that's her big brother, and I are going to go home and sort things out down there. Dad's sending some of his men with us, but he's staying up in the Capital for now. He and a few others were called to be part of the King's War Cabinet well before the fighting started, and the King needs them now, for the peace talks. Rowan and I went with Dad, in case we were needed, but we thought that Mum and Bee would be safe down there!"

"Yes, it's ironic, isn't it?" said Eddy. "What's going to happen now?"

Jamie glanced at his sister. "The King had a plan, but he didn't say what it was."

The girl said "You're talking about Uncle Fabian, aren't you? I hope that they catch him and, ..."

She burst into tears.

"I'd better take her back," said Jamie. "See you tomorrow, Finn."

Jamie and the girl started to leave but at the last minute, she made him put her down. She hugged Hedwig and Eddy and cried again.

“Take care of yourself girl. It’s been nice having you around,” said Hedwig.

“Bye Hedwig. Bye Eddy. You’ve been nice! Thank you.”

When Jamie and the girl had gone, Eddy sighed.

“Breaks your heart, doesn’t it?” he said. “It will be some time before she recovers from all this. I hope that something very nasty happens to her uncle!”

“It probably will,” said Finn. “The King and the girl’s Dad were very angry.”

“Anyway, Finn, you’re leaving us tomorrow, it seems?”

“Yes, guys. I’m headed back south with the girl and her brothers, and I’ll head home from there. I’m going to miss you guys! Thanks for letting us tag along.”

“It was great,” said Hedwig. “You two and Eddy helped me with the shock of seeing my house blow up. Left to myself, I would probably still be lying in a ditch somewhere, sobbing.”

“Let’s see if we can pick up a big case, tomorrow, Hedwig.”

“What for, Eddy?”

“Well, you still want to go on the road? We can pick up some threads and needles. Maybe some material. Whatever you need for your trade. If we stop somewhere I could help out at the local forge and you could practise your trade too.”

“That’s a good idea, Eddy! I lost all my special tools when my house was blown up. Oh, I can make do, but it’s so much easier with the right equipment.”

“Yeah, pal. The same for me. I left all my personal tools behind when I was conscripted. But if we swing by the place where I left them, I’ll pick some of them up.”

“So the girl was a Duchess,” Hedwig mused. “I’d never have guessed it. And she managed to get away from her Uncle and his troops and to look after herself until she met up with Finn. She’s a tough little thing!”

“Yeah, isn’t she! I’ll miss her.”

“Me too. You know, Eddy, my wife and I wanted kids, but she was already sick when we got married. Oh, It was just an inconvenience at first, and we had a pretty good marriage for many years. At least when she did start to go downhill, it didn’t last very long. Oh, I hated it at the time, but looking back, it was for the best.”

“Hmm,” said Eddy. “Have you thought about fostering? When you get home?”

Hedwig stared at him. “I’m not too old? They’d let me look after kids, do you think?”

“It’s not for me to say, pal. But I reckon you’d be good at it. There’s going to be orphans from the fighting. Of course, I’m going to be staying with you for a while at least, when you go back home. We could look into it together if you like. I’ll help you out.”

“You might want to head off on the road, Eddy. I know that you like it!”

Eddy waved that objection away.

“You can handle it, pal. We’ll let them know what the situation is. Anyway, a lot of water has to pass under the bridge first. Let’s take it one step at a time.”

So they did.
