

6

MOUNTAIN HALLS



*Glisten of the argent river where the frozen rushes shiver,
 Glitter of the moon in Winter, shining like an icy splinter,
 Lambent leaves of birch and willow; gleam of foam on stormy billow;
 Starlight from the heavens spilling; polish on a mint-new shilling;
 Crucible of precious sterling, glassy fish in cistern swirling,
 Hoarfrost glinting on the clover, tinsel filigree all over.
 Dewy web like pearly cable, lustrous ware upon the table;
 Chalice, tankard, spoon and platter. Candle-flames like diamonds shatter.
 Thread and needle for the tailor; guiding beacons for the sailor.
 Shadow in a burnished mirror, sharp as crystal, brighter, clearer.
 Elemental, clever metal, snowy as an almond petal.
 Shimmer on nocturnal water, heart-enslaver, shining; silver.*

THE LOVE OF SILVER:

TRANSLATED FROM THE LANGUAGE OF THE TROWS.

ACROSS the entire sky constellations, heart-piercingly pure, glittered against a ceiling of hyacinthine mystery, as if caught in some intricate mesh. The stars silently radiating their splendour sparkled as brilliantly at the zenith as at the outer fences of the world. Presently a glow opened on the horizon behind the ranges, like the radiance from a city lit with white-flamed torches. Soon it brightened, impossibly, as if an argentine bonfire of gigantic dimensions had been kindled. A tiny arc of silver ascended, growing

to become a semicircular disc. The moon had risen. Outlined against its pure luminosity, frozen mountain peaks raked the night sky, jagged as smashed crystal.

The journey across many leagues seemed hardly to take any time at all. Asrāthiel was aware only of a billion sidereal lamps wheeling above her head, while all else moved slowly, as if the world fell gently through a syrup of dark wine spiced with scintillants. She slept or dozed, at whiles, fastened by gramarye upon the back of the daemon horse, lapped by the cool aquamarine lambency of its mane, rocked like a child in a cradle. She had never imagined such refined movement; fluid, elegant and mellifluous, gentle as a breeze caressing blossom, but nimble as light. All the momentous events that had recently occurred and that currently unfolded seemed distant in time and place. As before, a type of detachment overwhelmed her. Temporarily, at least, inquisitiveness seemed to have drained from her conscious mind. The effects of the past anxiety-fraught weeks - the nights of scant sleep, the conflicts, the responsibilities, the urgency - had caught up with her. Now it was all over. Behind her lay places to which she no longer belonged, and people she had lost; before her lay places and beings unknown, but she was numb to all that. Her exhaustion of spirit was such that she must succumb to the opium of drowsiness. Lulled by the rhythmic gait of her steed, she accepted the ride amongst the eldritch chivalry, without any urge to ask where they were going or what would happen when they arrived. Let the future wait - it was out of her hands, in any event.

They had reached the Northern Ramparts. Supernaturally sure-footed, the trollhästen galloped thousands of feet up the steep and pathless mountain slopes as if they negotiated a level plain, finding purchase where no purchase could possibly be, climbing slopes at impossible angles; surely their hooves must be as adhesive as their hides. Slender and fine were they in build, but their eldritch energy seemed inexhaustible.

Amidst soaring crags the goblin knights rode in procession across a level terrace that gave onto an extraordinary bridge. Slender and transparent, it seemed fashioned of glass. Asrāthiel wondered how such a fine, attenuated structure, whose stanchions resembled icicles

dripping from a twig, could hold the weight of such a considerable cavalcade. Beneath the bridge a crevasse plunged to unthinkable depths: there cloud-spectres twined with entombed shadows in valleys never touched by sunlight. A ravening gale blasted out of that chasm, so powerful and swift that any mortal horse would have been blown aside like thistle-down.

She looked up.

High amongst the gables of icy Storth Cynros - the tallest and most central of all the mountains - a fabulous semi-subterranean city concealed its marvels from the world. Built in ages past, this citadel of the Silver Goblins was all spires and starlight, eyries and lofty halls, glittering with ancient jewels delved from beneath the mountains. Its turrets were wrapped in mists, its roofs spangled with snow; its gorgeous walls hewn from sparkling basalt. Its galleries broke through the heights where the views were most breathtaking. To this remote and secluded fastness the goblin horde and their haughty chieftain were bringing their three human tributes.

Ahead of them loomed a pointed archway as high as a fully-grown poplar tree; a grand entrance into the hillside.

‘What is this place?’ asked Asrāthiel.

‘Sølvetårn,’ said a voice nearby, although she could not tell to whom it belonged. ‘Though mankind’s legends name it Minith Arianath, the Silver Mountain.’

Halfway across the bridge, the knight Zauberin, who was riding beside the kobold that bore Uabhar on its back, tore something from the dethroned king’s belt and tossed it into the abyss. Asrāthiel watched a leather purse go hurtling down, to be quickly swallowed in the steaming cauldron.

‘That was the Sylvan Comb!’ she murmured, half aware.

Zaravaz rode a short distance ahead of her. ‘I daresay ’twill lie in some forgotten niche until the end of time,’ he said over his shoulder, ‘or else some human fool will find it, and cause more mischief. Either way, I care little.’

It seemed an ignominious fate for such an improbable thing.

Their road passed beneath the archway and on into the mountain's interior. As they travelled deeper into the citadel, Asrāthiel, roused by wonder, stared about. The ingenious engineering, the delicacy of architecture, the spectacular ornamentation, the grace and vastness and cold splendour of Sølvetårn astounded her. Never had she imagined such a sight. Stairs of hailstone spiralled to lofty pinnacles. Glittering cobwebs draped pointed archways, apses and traceried windows. Fire and water adorned the caverns: columns of flaming gases flaring up to ceilings too high to be descried; cascades of chthonian water streaming down to the many levelled floors, their tumult echoing from wall to wall. Deep dived the caverns of Sølvetårn, yet they were airy and elegant, upheld by fluted columns, traversed by airy, suspended ways and seemingly fragile spans and stairs. Cleverly positioned mirrors conveyed reflections of moonlight therein, and torches flamed like luteous flowers. It was an architecture of translucent glass and ice, pale limestone and stalactites, flashing diamonds and crystal, laced through with waterfalls, lakes and underground rivers.

Presently the weathermage's attention was drawn to the two other human captives, who were being carried away down a glistening vaulted corridor in another direction, their wails ignored.

'Where are they going?' she asked Zaravaz.

'To a place of sighs.'

Envisioning her fellow hostages suffering some appalling torment she said, 'I ask you, sir, to grant them clemency.'

'Daughter of Rowan Green,' said her host, concentrating his violet gaze upon her, 'it is twice that I have shown extraordinary mercy, of recent times; thrice if you count my asking ransom for your kingdoms. Once when the man William Wyverstone, perhaps blinded by an excess of philanthropy, attempted to negotiate terms against my express wishes. Again when the man Conall Gearnach, perhaps blinded by a misguided sense of honour, assailed my *graihyn* as we departed. It has not been easy for me to show such unwonted tolerance. Do not ask it of me a third time.' He smiled dazzlingly at her. 'Besides, how can you know what fate I have in store for you? Would you not rather make a hoard of your clemency pleas? You yourself

might soon need to beg for my leniency.’

Staggered by his inferences, Asrāthiel struggled to speak but failed. She felt as if she had been winded.

‘Yet fear not, I will not deal hard with you. We shall hold a banquet in your honour,’ announced the goblin king.

Before the damsel could say anything further, a brushing sound, like the swishing of leaves, or ragged hems sweeping the floor, heralded the arrival of trow-folk in great numbers. From the shadowy radiance of inner halls they emerged; small, grey-clad figures gliding toward the incoming cavalcade, uttering soft hoots and cries of gladness.

Asrāthiel recovered her composure and put on a brave face. ‘So this is where the trows were bound!’ she exclaimed.

First Lieutenant Zauberin’s sprightly trollhäst trotted up, its rider shrugging back his fur-lined demi-cloak. He said, ‘They clamour to be our servants.’

‘Of course,’ said Asrāthiel. ‘How could they not? The trows would be attracted to your kindred.’

‘They are attracted by silver,’ said Zauberin. He glanced sideways at the weathermage, allowing one eyelid to droop - a trick that exaggerated his habitual air of dissolution. As he rode away, the hooves of his trollhäst clattered on the flagstones.

‘Go with the Grey Neighbours,’ bade the goblin king and, since her steed followed the trows, the damsel must go too.

After dismounting from the daemon horse that had brought her to Sølvetårn, Asrāthiel found herself hustled away by a gaggle of trow-wives; wights who looked like little women, half her height, in grey headscarves and tattered frocks, bedizened with silver bangles. These dames took her to a suite of exquisite rooms hollowed out of stone, where she bathed in a solid silver tub beneath a cascade of hot, scented water pouring from a wall spout, arcing through the air like a swag of pearl necklaces. The overflow splashed into a pool hewn in the rocky floor, from whence it gradually drained away through some unseen conduit.

Invigorated by the water, Asrāthiel woke fully from her somnolence and took stock of her situation. Here she was, alone amongst

enemies; no ordinary enemies, but the sworn foes of humanity. What was it that the lieutenant Zauberin had said? *'Your race is held to be accursed by all the Glashtinsluight, and we cannot endure your presence in the world. We count it our duty to dip our swords in human blood.'* These wights were utterly antipathetic to the human race. Being anathema to her people, they were anathema to her also. She hated them with outraged passion, for all their arbitrary bloodshed and decimation. Yet she would receive as much profit by demanding that they treat her according to her rank, or haranguing them, or summoning storms against them, or refusing to cooperate, as a wave receives when dashing itself against a cliff of adamant. They held all advantage. Come what may her fate was in their hands, and if she were to exist in relative comfort it was in her best interests, at least for now, to appear compliant.

Eerie music was chiming faintly through the apartments. Asrãthiel looked about. The sounds appeared to be generated by airs wafting through shrewdly positioned interstices in the architecture. The ceilings, with their pointed-arch vaulting, were supported on slim pillars whose ornate plinths and capitals were carved with intricate, flowing designs, such as intertwining stems or roots, each stalk terminating in long, tapered leaves or fantastic tendrils. Silver shone everywhere, lustrous and pure as milk; untarnished silver, wrought in ways that enhanced its loveliness; cast, chased, filigree and repoussé, etched, engraved, carved, stamped and embossed. A separate chamber housed a splendid couch suspended on argent chains from the ceiling. By its fragrance, the mattress was stuffed with dry sprigs of lavender, poppies, hemlock and chamomile.

As Asrãthiel took in her surroundings the trow-wives dressed her in an ankle-length shift – which they called a sark - of white cambric bordered with lace, and proceeded to coif her hair.

While this was going on, the damsel plagued the wights with questions.

'What will happen to the two other prisoners? What will happen to me?'

All the little goodies said by way of reply was, 'We dinnae ken!

Nae bothy kens!’

‘Am I permitted to send a letter to my family? Where are the women of goblinkind? Will you please refrain from pulling my hair?’ When she made this protest they shrieked and gibbered, instantly becoming much gentler with their handling. They peered at her earnestly from mournful eyes, over their long, drooping noses, giving the impression of being as dim-witted as they were quaint. Asrāthiel, however, had learned never to underestimate eldritch wights.

Numerous tall, star-filled windows pierced the walls, overlooking sharp valleys, and glittering precipices, and cupped mountain tarns.

‘It is night once again,’ the damsel said to herself in perplexity. ‘How long did it take to reach here from the Wuthering Moors? Only a few hours? Or was it a whole day, and now night has fallen once more? Yet I do not recall the sun being in the sky during our journey. Perhaps the goblins enveloped us in their mist and blocked it out.’ Her eldritch handmaidens could offer no solution to the mystery, though they were able to explain other matters.

‘What happens during the day, when the sun shines fiercely?’ she asked of them. ‘Do its golden rays not shine through the glass? Does it not scald your masters?’

‘An the briggit days, dem draps is closet,’ the trow-wives said, ‘aber sin oor maisters wisht dem draps kit open o’er the day, dem draw mist.’

Which Asrāthiel took to mean that on sunny days the window curtains – of finest silver mesh, with black lining - were drawn across the panes, but if the goblins wanted the curtains open in daytime, they would conjure mists to dilute the sun’s radiance.

‘Are they weathermasters, then, your masters?’ she demanded inquisitively.

‘Nay, ainly dem can draw mist.’

Which she understood to indicate that the goblins possessed the power to summon water vapours such as clouds, mists, fog, brume and haze, to diffuse the light of the sun, but they did not wield the brí.

‘Does the touch of sunlight destroy them?’

‘Nay. Dem can dure’t, aber dem liken it not.’

‘They can tolerate it, but they do not love it?’

‘Aye, Guidlady.’

Some of the wights fluttered nimbly around their charge, weaving tiny gems through her hair; moonstones of shimmering iridescence, amethysts, and rock crystals. Others lurked in the shadows of these singular apartments, snooping, poking their long noses around corners, or nursing trow-babies wrapped in fringed shawls. They gave her nothing to eat, perhaps anticipating the promised banquet; but she felt no hunger and was content to drink water from the spout in the wall.

At length they brought a sumptuous gown of foam and cerulean moonlight to sheath the damsel in, but she had grown impatient with their skulking and fussing, and bade them go away and leave her in peace.

‘Mun make thysel’ fit for t’feast, Guidlady,’ they twittered anxiously as she saw them off.

Ignoring their instructions she put aside the dress. She wondered how she could bring herself to dress up in finery and go to a party after the horrors she had witnessed so lately, the slaying of Conall Gearnach, good men falling beneath goblin swords while trying to save her. Again she puzzled, how was she to traffic with this enemy? And how would they traffic with her?

The cambric shift was flimsy, yet she did not feel at all cold in these airy chambers. As usual, her mother’s gift of invulnerability kept her warm. Alone with her thoughts she took time to ponder whether Zaravaz had been giving veiled threats when he told her to hoard her pleas, but at length she concluded it was more of his banter and dismissed the notion. He had said, ‘*Fear not, I will not deal hard with you,*’ but then again, goblin conceptions of gentle treatment might be quite at variance with human ideas. Yet, if they were going to do mischief to her, they would hardly be sending handmaidens to look after her, would they? Unless, of course, she were in some way being ‘primed for the kill’ like hand-fed livestock. Her opinions veered back and forth. If she were to be insulted, then surely it was unlikely the trows would be concerned about pulling her hair. It seemed certain they had been ordered to treat her well. Indeed she seemed to have

some sort of dominion over them, for they acquiesced to her requests. Should that be so, maybe she could ask her captors, when she next saw them, if they would let her send a note to Avalloc informing him that she was well. It gave her much distress, knowing how he and the rest of her household must be suffering since she had been taken by the goblins.

Having thrown off her fears and feeling much refreshed after her ablutions, she was afflicted with a desire to discover more about this fascinating citadel; to explore it on her own, without being accompanied and directed by scores of shuffling trow-wives. If ever she found herself directly threatened, it would be useful to know something of the layout. The intentions of the goblin king were unclear. That he was perilous was a certainty; perhaps she would locate some hidden escape route to save her in extremity, should William's worst fears be realised.

Additionally, she felt reluctant to attend this goblin feast. If it were such a banquet as promised they would all be in attendance, the unseelie knights, while she, their plunder, would be alone and friendless in the crowd. More than that, she wished to put off meeting with a certain member of that eldritch chivalry, one so unsettling she refused even to think of his name. The mental turmoil that his presence engendered in her was so overwhelming that she did not know how to deal with it, and she wished to postpone such an encounter until she could make better sense of its inevitable effects. To her chagrin, all ideology became suspended whenever she set eyes on him. Always haunting her thoughts, jostling against concern and longing for the loved ones she had left behind, was an image of that compelling face with the black-lashed, violet eyes. To convince herself she was not longing to behold him again as soon as possible, she decided to deliberately make herself inaccessible, and late for the goblin banquet.

Another, more wayward element also motivated her behaviour. It vexed her that the goblin king disturbed her so absolutely, by his mere existence. To vex him in return was a form of revenge; furthermore, although she was loathe to admit it, some inexplicable inner perversity made her wish to discover what might occur if she provoked him, even if it were to wrath.