

The  
Realms  
of  
Beliar

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Book 1

The Sword Myndarit

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*In a world where magic rules, the benevolent Empire of old is challenged by the upstart Alliance run by greedy, bloodthirsty tyrants. Life, pleasant and prosperous under Empire rule, faces a bitter end as the Alliance closes in. But the gods are not above interfering, and four young, inexperienced people may hold the key to the continued future of the Empire – with a little help from a talking sword.*

# *The Realms of Beliar*

*Book 1*

## *The Sword Myndarit*

*Andrew Arrowsmith*

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Publisher Note: Original British spelling and terms used by the author have been preserved in the US edition of this book.



## ~AUTHOR ACKNOWLEDGEMENT / DEDICATION~

My thanks to Dave, Miles, and Simon for many happy hours of disagreement. Also Dana, for patient, passionate midwifery.

Dedicated to LRAG for standing up, which is what this book is all about, but none of my characters does more impressively than LRAG has.



*The  
Realms  
of  
Seliar*

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*Book 1*

*The Sword Myndarit*

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*Andrew Arrowsmith*



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## ~FOREWORD~

### *The Sword Myndarit on the Way of Things*

I'm fairly sure that this is a mistake. After all, do you people really want to be told that you've drawn the cosmic short straw and are eking out your existence at the scrag end of Creation? How do you fancy learning that the bottom-of-the-pile universe you live in is so intrinsically deprived that if a particularly kindly deity hadn't fiddled with some physics for you, the place wouldn't be habitable at all? Or that nobody knows how long His cosmic string-and-sticky-tape fix will hold together?

*No?*

I rest my case.

However, what do I know? Well, nearly everything actually, as you may learn as we go along. But does that mean anybody takes the slightest interest in my opinions? No. Nobody's interested at all – they just want me to trot out the facts, because I've got them all at my fingertips. Well, metaphorically, anyway.

It's one of the real problems with being a sword – people just don't take you seriously as a creative artist. Even when you are the masterwork of a god. The other problem, of course, is that you've got to take over some fool's mind before you can get anything written. It's not really fair – even the stupidest, least creative people have hands. Me? No. I'm dependent on Joe Soap.

Well, you don't want to read me banging on. I've been told to produce an edition for this Plane, so I have, and I hope it makes some kind of sense to you. However, if there's to be any hope of that, there are some things you need to know, and lots more things you might want to. I've put all the things you need to know in a web site called *RealmsOfBeliar.com*. I'm told the previous text changes according to the world this is being read on.

Oh yes. That's something else, isn't it? If you read those documents, you may be upset to discover that a lot of the problems you've had here over the last twenty thousand years or so are actually the result of the Gods of Creation dumping down here assorted vicious and undesirable deities nobody wanted in more salubrious universes – and then sending shades of almost equally undesirable gods to keep them under control. It's not gone well, altogether – but then you know that. What I wanted to say is, don't take it personally. They do realise they've made a mess of things down at your end, and they're migrating people out to the proper universes as fast as they can. There are now only a few tens of thousands of inhabited planets to go. Another few thousand years, and it'll be done.

So here are the things you really need to know. First, your universe isn't the only one. Far from it – there are nine physical universes: we call them the Prime Material Planes. We think of them as being stacked one on top of another – though of course they're not, really. Only

the gods know how the thing actually works, and by no means all of them do. But we look at it that way because from Plane Nine – the ‘top’ one – you can only reach Plane Eight. From there you go ‘down’ to Plane Seven or back ‘up’ to Plane Nine. And so on down to Plane One, from which you can only reach Plane Two, of course. Plane One is you.

Now, if I tell you that everything useful and important happens on Plane Nine, at the top, well, you might start to understand your problem. Most particularly, the universes should work on magic – that’s how they were designed. But the means of releasing and manipulating magic all happen on Plane Nine. So there’s a little less on Eight, slightly less still on Seven... You get the idea. You people are all sucking the hind one. If you want to understand it better, look at those additional documents. You won’t like it, I’m telling you now.

So Brandur – you won’t have heard of Him, He’s only the most important entity in the entirety of Creation – adjusted some physics for you, so that you’d have some way of keeping warm and making things work. But here’s the point: the rest of Creation isn’t like that. Most importantly, everywhere else, when vegetation rots in the soil, it becomes steadily less flammable. So coal, in most Universes, burns about as well as granite. Oil? Well, there are a few fractions that will burn very slowly if given a good hot nudge – but on the whole it can safely be used as flame retardant.

There was something else ... what was it? Oh, yes. You’ve got some simple processes to make things go bang, haven’t you? Salt petre and faeces, or something – Brandur’s little joke. Doesn’t work elsewhere. It’s possible to make stuff that goes bang chemically, with a lot of effort and risk – but why would anybody bother with that when you can buy a fireball spell, or whatever, on a scroll?

So anyway, in these books I have tried to tell the story of the most important events in the history of Creation, including you people living in the basement. I’ve done my best with it because they were so important – and because there were some people involved who deserved to have their stories told, to be honest. And nobody else could do it.

But when you read the story, what you deprived souls have to envisage is a society where, for the last umpteen thousand years, all the bright boys and girls, all the genius researchers, and all the able technicians have gravitated into working with magic. People understand how the universe works as well as you do – better, actually – but they’ve never needed to play parlour tricks with it to keep warm at night or earn a living. Magic does all that for them. It makes for a very different kind of world – it’ll look primitive to you, at first. No electricity, no internal combustion engines, no explosive weapons. Don’t be fooled – they can do more than you can.

The year I start at would work out at about 2260 Anno Domini in your reckoning. Do you still use that? Yes, that’s the future, for you. And your point is? The universes’ timelines don’t exactly correspond. It’s an interesting effect, but not particularly significant.

Well, that’s all I wanted to say. How do you finish these things? I’ve never done one before. Look, there’s a glossary of useful terms following. Have a look at that if you like, or refer to it when you want to know more about something I mention. Otherwise, I suggest you just turn the page and get on with it.



## ~PART 1~

### *Coming Down in the World*

*The world is called Rigantona. It is similar to Earth in many ways, though the physics are a little different here and there – for this is not just a different world, it is a different plane of existence. A link between Earth's Plane and this one has existed off and on for thousands of years, and it has on several occasions joined Earth and Rigantona. It has permitted travel from the lower plane (Earth's) to the higher one with ease, usually by accident – and in the other direction with great difficulty. Thus most life forms found on Earth are found here. But then there are the others...*

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### Chapter 1

The wine really was quite awful. On the other hand, her half-pint goblet was full for four pieces of copper – and while her purse was heavy enough now, Carol had no clear notion where she'd find more when that was gone.

As she sipped, grimaced, and wearily made her way down the short passage from the bar into the inn common room, Carol thought to herself that it might turn out to be quite interesting, balancing spending against income – at least until she got used to it. And good discipline, too. Another sip of wine, a second grimace, and she sat down at a table from which she could look out through the large open doorway and see the sun standing low over the woods beyond.

The common room was large and sparsely furnished, but quite pleasantly laid out – clean, neat and well looked after. There were five or six large wooden tables, around which clustered chairs whose seats and backs boasted recent upholstery. Underfoot, occasional rugs of some quality dotted well-scrubbed, creamy flagstones, while three or four good paintings made a quiet statement on the freshly whitewashed walls. It was not what she was used to, but Carol felt that one could be comfortable in such a place.

The landlord followed her to her table, hands resting on his paunch. "Welcome to the Golden Cock, good lady. How long will you be staying?"

Carol winced, the commonplace courtesy scraping on a fresh wound. "Just the one night. Then I'll be moving on to ... I'll be moving on in the morning."

The innkeeper nodded and moved away, a little concerned. His new guest had arrived on a good horse, with a singularly fat purse, wearing riding gear of the very best – even if it did seem more suited to a warrior than to a lovely young woman of obvious quality. All fair enough. But why was a young lady of quality riding alone so near to the edge of the Great Forest? And

why did she have so little luggage? Above all, why did she write her name so awkwardly in the guest book, as though she'd never written it before?

He'd seen that manner of writing on other occasions, but always by nervous young men accompanying blushing lasses – or groups of very different men coming out of the forest with packs on their horses that the stable lads were careful not to look at too closely. This girl fit neither of those categories at all. So why use a false name? He decided he was more than just a little concerned, and went to discuss the matter with his wife.

As it happened, he was both right and wrong. Carol had indeed given her true name, but she really had never written it before in all her nineteen years. This was perhaps unsurprising since, until a matter of hours before, she had held a different one. However, the landlord wasn't the only person in the inn to have noticed the weight of her purse – or that she was young, remarkably attractive, and alone.

Sipping her wine and gazing out of the doorway at the red sun setting over the forest, Carol was lost in her thoughts when they were suddenly interrupted by a shape blocking her vision. A man sat down at her table, facing her. Another sat at her side.

"Hello, beautiful." The voice was slightly blurred with drink, but the speaker had a steady eye, and the hand that dropped over hers was large and muscular, though grubby.

"We saw you come in. Couldn't leave so lovely a morsel to drink on her own, so we thought we'd come and make friends." His hand tightened on hers, while the other man, half seen beside her, put his arm round her waist, so that his hand rested lightly on her purse. His fingers started to examine the knots attaching her purse strings to her belt.

Carol sat perfectly still. "Please go away. At once, if you would be so kind, or you *will* regret it."

"Well, a real spunky one, Dorrall. Have to teach her some respect." He smiled at her. Well, his mouth did. "Look, sweetie. You're all on your own – no husband or father or big brother to fight for you, which means that if you want people to be nice to you, then you've got to be nice to them. We can be nice, or not nice – it's up to you."

A serving girl had slipped out as soon as she saw the two men approaching Carol's table, and now the landlord returned to the room at something as close to a run as a man of his girth would ever be likely to reach. "Come on Jem, Dorrall, leave the lady alone, now. She didn't mean any harm. Go and sit down and have a drink on the house, eh?"

"Shut up, Armint, or I'll shut you up. Gonna teach this bitch she's threatened the wrong men. It'll cost her a fair weight of gold to square things up." He looked at her appraisingly. "Unless you'd like to make friends another way, little flower? See, we're in the way of being professionals in this neck of the woods. We couldn't let you get away with threatening us even if we wanted to – bad for business."

Carol looked coolly into his eyes. "It was no threat. It was simply a warning, and this is your last chance. Take your stinking hands off me – and my purse – or take the consequences."

Jem scowled, reached over with his free hand – his other was still holding her left hand on the table – and slapped her face, hard. Carol shook her head. Somewhere behind her eyes a fire lit, changing them from soft green to glittering emerald. Her voice, though, was calm and almost apologetic. "Very well. But really, I did warn you."

With her right hand she thrust her wine goblet hard into Jem's face, simultaneously raking her heel down Dorral's shin. Then, with strength that the average fit man would have been pleased with, she upturned the heavy table and darted for her baggage in the passage.

With the two big men in hot pursuit, she didn't stop at her kit but raced past and out through the side door, snatching up a long cloth bag as she did so. By the time she reached the door, she had dropped the empty bag.

Her lead increasing rapidly, she sprinted into the centre of the large inn yard. As she turned to face them, they saw that she had a long-sword in her hand – expensive, elaborately chased along the blade, but looking thoroughly like business for all that. A dagger instantly appeared in the right hand of each of her assailants. Jem held another in his left, and he was smiling – though a trickle of blood ran from a cut where the wine goblet had caught his cheek.

"Well, well. A fierce little pullet. Makes it interesting, don't it, Dorral?" As he spoke the last word, he flicked his right-hand knife at her thigh, accurate and totally without warning. As soon as the blade was airborne, both men raced in, Jem changing off his other blade to the better hand with a practised toss.

Carol snorted in disgust, turning deftly to let the blade fly an inch past her leg. That brought her side-on to Jem, sword arm forward, and in the same flowing motion her blade flicked out, blindingly fast, to rip Jem's throat open precisely as her steel came within reach.

The sword stroke had her turning away from the charging Dorral, so she continued the movement till her back was to him. She bent forward and kicked solidly backwards, catching him full in the groin. He stopped dead with a grunt, slicing her calf with a slash of his blade. Carol was already using the force of the impact to spin on her other foot. Before Dorral could straighten from the agony in his groin, she was facing him again. The long-sword flashed out like the tongue of a silver serpent, to return gleaming red along a quarter of its length. Her single, flowing movement, begun by evading Jem's throw, ended as she came gracefully to an alert, defensive stance. But there was no more to do.

Dorral stood unmoving as Carol turned her back on him, muttering "Professionals? Just how did they ever make a living? No technique and no skill. And so *slow*." She bent to wipe her sword on Jem's clothes and then set off back towards the inn, limping slightly on her wounded leg.

Seeing the innkeeper at the door, she jerked her thumb over her shoulder. "Get someone to clear up that offal." Armint stuttered and grabbed her arm, pointing to Dorral who was still standing motionless in the yard, his knife fallen from dangling fingers. "But what about him? He'll want..."

Carol coldly regarded the hand clutching her arm, and it fell away as the landlord fell silent. She glanced over her shoulder as she went inside. "Him? He's dead." Armint hurried towards Dorral, but the big man crumpled before the landlord could reach him, and lay very still.

Less than three minutes after she had first left it, Carol was back at her place in the common room, supervising two serving girls as they heaved the table back into place. When it was positioned to her satisfaction, she ordered more wine, sat down with a sigh, and started to examine the rather shallow, but nasty, four-inch gash in her leg, hardly noticing as the last few drinkers sipped up and left, with uncomfortable glances at the bloody longsword resting on her

table.

“Here. Let me see that.”

Although she'd heard no sound, the voice was close behind her. Carol jumped up with a little cry of alarm, kicked her chair out of the way, and spun to see a tall, powerfully built, brown-bearded man perhaps three years older than herself, dressed in green and black leather with a large green cloak of the same material over his shoulder.

He smiled quizzically at her, and she noted something strangely familiar about the smile. Where had she...? She stared blankly into penetrating, almost hypnotic dark eyes for a long second before her own eyes went wide and she let out an unexpectedly girlish squeal.

“Geraint? Geraint! Oh, goodness me, it's good to see you! Gracious, you're huge! And the beard really suits you. How long is it? Seven years? You just come here, Cousin!” She soundly embraced and kissed him before she had time to notice another man behind him. Embarrassed, she leapt back, nearly falling over her chair.

Geraint followed her glance. His eyes twinkled as he laughed, an expression his face seemed designed for. “Well, then, that will teach you to be a brazen hussy in public, when—” He swiftly raised an arm to ward off a far-from-playful right hook.

“Hold on there, little one. Let me present my very good friend and near namesake, Geran, heir to the Barony of Branneswald.” This was a tall, almost pretty, very muscular man of Geraint's own age, clad in green tunic and brown leggings. He stepped forward and inclined his head respectfully. “My lady.”

The happiness drained from her, leaving her sombre and very tired. “No more, Goodman Geran. No more ‘my lady’ for me. Now I'm plain Caroline ap Gryffudd.” She glanced almost guiltily at Geraint. “Not that it's not a proud family name to bear, but I grew up as Caroline de Beauclerc, and I've only had a day to get used to ... to the new state of things.” She sat down abruptly, biting her lip and staring into her goblet.

Geraint gazed at her soberly. “You heard your brother and his wife were taken?”

She didn't look up, but words flooded out of her as though a damn had burst. “No, but Edward was expecting the Duke's men any hour when he ordered me away. Why did he send me away, Geraint? I'd done nothing wrong, they couldn't have arrested me! Not that Edward had... Did you hear what they said he did? Edward? Such nonsense! And the Duke took Beauclerc away from us without even a trial! After nineteen generations! But Edward will get it back. The Council are bound to grant his appeal ... won't they?”

Geraint sat opposite her and took her hand, very gently. “Some things you should know, Cousin. Now – you'll need to be strong. First, your brother and his wife were arrested this morning. The arresting officer was a person in the Duke's service named Bernard of Longmeadow – we'll be wanting to remember that name – who brought close on two score light cavalry with him. He has since reported that on the way, they were attacked by an anonymous band of brigands, and in a fierce engagement your brother was killed, and Lady Carla was dragged away by the bandits – her body was found a mile or so into Halvert Woods. All so says his report.”

Carol's eyes grew wide, and she opened her mouth to speak, but he held up a hand. “*However*; that isn't what happened. The Earl had sent my mother a pigeon as soon as you left,

telling us you were coming east. As a result, I was able to contact Mother Tileri at Belmond. She was too far away to be of any use – and for certain reasons may not leave the Grove, at present – but she did *borrow* a hawk, using its eyes to watch over Beauclerc Manor. So we know that Bernard's report is a total fabrication.

"What in fact happened was that after accepting the peaceful surrender of my Lord Edward's sword, this—" his mouth twisted "—*Bernard* ordered his men to stab my Lord the Earl to death. However, while they were trying to do that, he killed one man with his bare hands, took the fellow's sword, and killed five more before they could take him down."

Geraint took a long breath, then an even longer pull at the brandy flask at his belt. Carol stared at him, speechless, eyes wide in horror. As she finally managed to open her mouth to say something, the druid placed a gentle finger on her lips. "No, Cousin. Let me tell it all. You have to know.

"They wouldn't have got him then, had he not taken serious wounds in obtaining the sword. The loss of blood eventually weakened him and – more to the point, probably – slowed him so that they were able to overwhelm him with numbers and bear him to the ground. Some of them held him down while others broke his arms and legs. Then they slowly cut him to pieces at their leisure."

White-faced, Caroline jumped to her feet, but once more he raised a palm. "No. Let me tell it. There'll be time for that when you know it all."

Slowly, she sat again. "Then tell me!"

"Aye. But it gets worse."

"Worse?" She shook her head hard, then wiped her eyes. "How could it be worse?"

"Listen and I'll tell you. They took Lady Carla and ... and indulged in a range of foulnesses with her, which I won't describe. While her husband died a terrible death within inches beside her, they stripped her and..." His jaw clenched and he looked away, breathing deeply. Then he turned back, eyes once more remote.

"I was with my Lord Edward the day he first he met her, you know. She made him laugh and laugh. It's what I remember of her most, the laughter. I'm told the Duke's men laughed a great deal as they played with her. I have asked ... certain acquaintances ... to discover the names of each of those men. Those that survived the day."

He shook his head. "After more than two hours of this, she feigned unconsciousness, grabbed a sword from a careless rapist, and used it to kill him and two of his guttermates. She saw that her husband still retained some trace of life in his ruined body, so before the other duke's men could do anything sensible, she killed him with one clean strike, then herself. Do you know, in all that time they tortured him, he uttered not one plea. Not one. He cursed them, he snarled at them, he gave them his thoughts on their officer and their duke. But not once did he plead.

"One more thing you should know. When Bernard brought his jolly crew home to Belmond, it seems they encountered inclement weather. Mother Tileri tells me that there was a sudden and most vicious thunderstorm, which broke just before they reached the city. No fewer than sixteen of his troopers were struck by lightning, and nine of those died. This means that of those who attacked Beauclerc, just twenty-one survive – together with Bernard, of course. As I

mentioned, I am arranging that we learn their names.

"Finally – the Brothers' Conclave has invited me to undertake certain duties which I can discharge as well with you as anywhere else. Geran had none in the first place, that anybody's ever noticed, and we are both at your service."

Carol was chalk white, eyes glistening. She been quite motionless, staring wide-eyed at her cousin. She remained silent for a further few seconds and then opened her mouth and closed it again, scrubbing fiercely at her face with the palms of her hands. After a few seconds, she looked up once more and, in a perfectly calm though somewhat quavering voice, called to the landlord for two bottles of wine and two more goblets. With tears rolling down her cheeks, she turned back to Geraint. "Why are you calling my brother Lord Edward? You always called him 'Ed' – or more often 'Bonehead Ed' – when we were younger."

If Geraint found the question surprising, he gave no sign of it. He nodded as though he'd expected it, and then sighed. "The Earl won honour for the whole family today, not only by his courage this morning – nobody who knew him would expect less – but also by his foresight in guessing what might happen and acting to ensure the survival of his branch of the family, in the shape of your lovely self."

He laughed, a little sadly. "That was good thinking. Very good – for him. So was his pigeon. That bird saved us a lot of distress, actually, because, although we heard a fairly swift report of what had happened from another source, without the pigeon, Tileri wouldn't have been watching – and we'd have had no indication that anybody had got away."

"So you speak of him respectfully..."

"To do him homage. He always put a lot of store by correctness and formality – and what else can I do for him now?" His eyes hardened. "Except avenge him." Then Geraint met her gaze, his expression now very gentle. "And now, what will you do?"

She gazed back at him for a moment, blinking through the tears that were still coursing down her cheeks. Then she closed her eyes and, voice now shaking so much as to be almost incoherent, spoke so quietly she could not have been heard a foot away. "Now? Now I believe I shall weep for... for a while, if you will excuse me, Cousin." Then, finally abandoning all attempts at self-control, she howled with grief and rage, hurled a goblet with great force across the empty room, and collapsed, sobbing.

Geraint gazed down at her a moment. Then he looked up at his friend, and his face, so soft and gentle a few moments before, was now cold, distant and emotionless – as hard as a knife blade. "I'm going to make a little hobby of seeing that this costs that motherless excrescence Bastin more than he knows how to find. In blood and in goods, both. But that's for the future, unfortunately. We have more important things to do just now. Duty first, pleasure later." He poured himself some wine and walked across to gaze moodily out the window.

There was silence in the room for some ten minutes, apart from the quiet sound of Carol's sobs. Then Geraint turned from the window. "She needed to let that out, but I think she should rest now."

He closed his eyes for a moment, his face calm, his lips moving silently. He pulled an oak leaf and a little mistletoe from somewhere in his cloak and held them for a moment between the palms of his hands, then lifted them above his head, speaking rhythmically and quietly in a

strange, fluid language not otherwise heard anywhere in the lands of men.

As the soft, sonorous syllables rolled out, perhaps a cloud crossed the setting sun, for the inn suddenly grew rather colder, and shadows rustled and murmured at the borders of the room. Out in the woods, a wolf howled a mournful harmony to Geraint's slow, quiet cadences. Quite abruptly, the wolf's lone, eerie voice was joined by a chorus – then equally abruptly, all was silence.

Geraint paused also, then spoke one louder syllable. The shadows around the room seemed to rush into the leaves, and suddenly it was much brighter, and a good deal warmer.

Geraint took the oak leaf and placed it on Carol's head, gently gathering and winding her mass of night-black hair to hold it in place. Then he gently touched her face, crooning a single soft, somehow soothing word. Her sobs subsided, and within seconds she was asleep.

Careful not to let the leaf fall from her head, Geraint lifted her injured leg and examined the wound. Again he closed his eyes, face peaceful and remote, then with brow furrowed in concentration, he brushed the edges of the wound lightly with the mistletoe. After a few seconds, he sighed with satisfaction and used strips of cloth from his pack to bind up her leg, wrapping the mistletoe in against the wound.

"Right, that should do it. She'll be jiggling on that leg in the morning. Now, help me carry her upstairs – without moving this confounded leaf. If it falls off, I'll have to start again. If I were good enough, I wouldn't need a physical focus. But I'm not – and she's going to need me to be."

Geran carefully placed his hands under Carol's shoulders, supporting her head with his body. "You're close, though. I've seen you doing things."

"Aye, close. But that wins no prizes. I'll just have to work at it. If – when – we fail, I will *not* let it be because I let her down."

They carefully lifted her and made their way towards the door. As they returned to their wine a few minutes later, Geran was pensive, looking a touch nervous. "You know your cousin well, then?"

"The three of us grew up together 'til my mother took me to the Green Deep to set my feet on the Path. Carol's father had taken us in when we lost everything at Withy Tor. He raised me like his own son, rather than his brother's, for six happy years. I got to know him very well in that time. He was a strange man: shy, addicted to formality, but extraordinarily kind.

"He was an adherent of one of the less well-known sects of the Church of Varan. Most Varan followers are outgoing and remarkably uninhibited, as I've no doubt you will have noticed." Geran snorted with laughter. "But this sect, called the Inner Brethren, are all somewhat stiff and reserved and very hung up about sex. Not like the usual Varan crowd at all. But he cared for my mother and me with a cheerful, warm-hearted generosity I'll never forget. I had as much reason to grieve as anybody when he died last autumn.

"I was fourteen, Carol just twelve when my mother and I left Beauclerc Manor for the Green Deep. She was already a lovely girl then, and very advanced for her age in many things. Certainly physically. We were just starting to imagine we might be in love."

Geraint sighed and shrugged. "You know how propinquity affects adolescents, appropriate or not. We've written to each other frequently ever since." He smiled, rather ruefully. "She's a fecund correspondent. I think I know just about everything she's done or

thought in the last half decade or so. My letters were ... less comprehensive.”

Geran snorted at that, and changed the subject slightly. “I gather her brother wasn’t the brightest.”

Geraint chuckled, then suddenly sobered. “He was my age. Built like a young oak tree, but without the speed of thought normally associated with oaks. Used his head the one time it mattered though, bless him forever.”

“How far ‘advanced’ was your cousin Carol then? Beautiful already, you said?”

“She had the eyes and that stunning smile already. She had the hair too, while the figure was developing fast – but she was not at all advanced in the way you mean, to my deep regret at the time. She’d taken on board the family’s attitudes, rather than the usual Varan enthusiasm. She’s totally addicted to what she calls ‘virtue’ with a passion that occasionally makes you want to heave – or punch her head. All lingering glances and poetry with her, I’m afraid. Any attempt to turn words to action, and I’d have been singing soprano in no time.”

Geraint swigged and waved a hand moodily. “Oh, and take a word of warning. She’s always been far brighter than her brother – but then he would have been pushed to the limit matching wits with a housebrick. In any normal scale of comparison she’s not of the fastest-witted. She gets there, mind. She’s nobody’s fool, but it may take a little longer.

“Now if you take that and her stiff-necked pride, and put it together with a sense of honour at least as malleable as a three-inch thick steel bar, you have the basis of Carol. Add to that complete – almost grotesque – fearlessness, a total lack of good sense, and a homicidal temper when it comes to cruelty and injustice. Now round off the package with awesome tactlessness – she calls it ‘forthright honesty’ – and it all added up to a rather trying companion.

“It was never boring around her when we were young – dangerous, tiring, very frustrating and bad for the nerves, but never boring. And from her letters, I would say that she’s been getting worse ever since, though, to be fair, she’s clearly been developing a lot of people skills, which she certainly didn’t have then. I think we’re in for interesting times.”

Geran was staring at his friend with his jaw sagging. “By all Gods great and sm... And you sit there telling me all that as though you’re proud of her? Or are you still in love, maybe?”

“Proud? Yes ... in a way. No. That’s me hiding. I *am* proud of her. Unreservedly. She’s gentle and caring with those dependent on her, if clumsy about it – but maturity will fix that. And she never, ever abuses her rights. But she’s sudden and certain death with half a dozen different weapons, and she’ll use them without hesitation – that’s often the problem right there, in fact – to protect anybody who needs help. The odds, of course, have never been an issue she cares tuppence for. It’s not that she doesn’t care about herself; she does. She just cares about other people more. To me, she’s the finest young aristocrat in the Empire.

“But love? Not one little chance, my friend. I’ve learned at least some wisdom in the years since I saw her last – enough to know better than that, anyhow. No, whatever surname she wears now, that lovely lass’s middle name is still what it’s always been – Trouble... And now look what’s going to happen.”

Geraint shook his head and lifted a hand. “Landlord, let’s have another bottle here. In fact make that two. I doubt if I’ll be able to cope with tomorrow without the help of a hangover.”



## Chapter 2

They breakfasted just after dawn, all rather quiet. Carol was still absorbed in her thoughts, her two companions nursing sore heads. However, the bright sun shining in through windows and doors, making dust motes dance and awaking drowsy flies for another day's buzzing, seemed to cheer her up in proportion as it dazzled and dismayed her companions, and by the end of the meal she was chatting almost happily.

After breakfast, Geraint got up to settle with the innkeeper. "I'll pay for us all, Carol. We can sort it out later. How did you register?"

Carol looked up, puzzled. "What do you mean, Geraint?"

Geraint heard his voice assume the patient tone that had been so much part of his later childhood. "Well, that the Duke requires a landlord to record the names of all his guests. Who did you tell the landlord you are? So I can tell him whose bill I'm paying."

"But ... but what ... I mean, I put Caroline ap Gryffudd. What else would I have put?"

Geraint sat down heavily. "You mean you told him who you are? Surely your brother told you to be as anonymous as possible while on the Duke's territory?"

"Yes, but what could I do? I could hardly refuse to give him my name."

"You could have said you were Anne of Bett's Corner or Clothilde of the Marshes or Boo of Pug's Burrows – how would he know the difference?"

"What? You mean lie to him? Don't be absurd, Geraint. Anyway, some of those names are silly."

Geraint sighed resignedly and glanced at Geran. "You see what I mean?"

Carol stood up and started to collect her bags. "Well, I don't, even if he does. Anyway, what does it matter if the Duke finds out we were here? He'll know where I am within a few hours anyhow, won't he?"

"Within... Why?"

"Because we're going to go and kill him of course. So it won't matter two old coppers what he knows, will it?" She tossed her head. "You're supposed to be the clever one of the family ... why didn't you realise that?"

Her cousin breathed slowly. Geran, across the table, was just staring, open-mouthed – an expression he had been adopting a lot lately.

After long enough to count to ten slowly – and then do it again – Geraint gently but firmly took Carol's arm, pressed her into a seat, and began to speak quietly and patiently. "Now, beautiful lady, I want you to listen to me most carefully. If we ride into the Duke's castle, stride into his hall, and draw on him – the sort of thing you had in mind?"

Carol nodded, taken aback despite herself by the firmness of his manner and the startling force of his presence. He had never had this air of absolute authority seven years ago.

"Fine. We do that. What will happen? What, for instance, will his household troops

do?"

"Well, I don't know. I mean, they ought to make efforts to stop us."

"Yes. Seems likely they might, I'd say. He will have ... how many ... perhaps five thousand men in and about the castle, maybe a hundred actually around him? How many men at arms can you fight at once?"

Carol looked contemptuous. "Those people are rarely men of quality. I could take them five at a time."

"I'm sure you could. Perhaps even ten. Anyway, let's say so. Right. Now, I'm merely a novice priest of Brandur and know little of such things, while you've trained in the ways of war since you were five. So I want you to concentrate very hard on this question. While you are killing your ten men at arms, what will the other ninety be doing?"

Carol shook her head impatiently. "You're saying that I'll be killed before I reach him. Very well, perhaps you're correct—"

She was interrupted by a snort from Geran. "Perhaps!"

Carol continued, untroubled. "But honour demands that I make the attempt. And if I die in the contest, no matter. I will have done my duty."

Geraint's eyebrows rose in mock astonishment. "Really? Can it truly be the case that honour and duty call on you to do something that will benefit his slimy Lordship Armand de Beauclerc, his murdering Grace the Duke – and nobody else at all?" He shrugged. "Giving your life in their service seems a strange way of opposing them."

"In their ser– And what do you mean, Armand de Beauclerc? How dare you call him that?"

"Because that's what he'll be – unassailably – from the moment of your death. I had a message from Tileri first thing this morning. She says the Duke has let it be known that since my Lord Edward is no longer able to pursue his appeal to Council – and such appeal may only be presented by the claimant in person – his decree stands by default, and that little bloodsucker Werault will be installed as Armand de Beauclerc come next Yearday. The insolent swine has already moved into Beauclerc Manor, with your brother's corpse still warm.

"So, you listen to me. When your duty to provide a fit and proper earl – or countess – for the people of Beauclerc is discharged, then we can think about who might be the better for a good disembowelling. In the meantime you are duty-bound to stay alive."

She sat still for a moment, staring down. "So what shall I do? I can't let them get away with it! Edward – the filthy things they did to Carla! I won't let them." Tears of frustrated rage stood in her eyes.

Geraint stood again and looked out the window. "Well, it seems to me that the first step is for the injured party to appeal, in person as the law requires, to the Council."

"But Edward is dead..."

"So who is the claimant to the Earldom of Beauclerc?"

"Well ... with no issue of Edward's, I'm the next in line."

"And after you, no clear line at all, since my side of the family are all dedicated to The Path. Which, Turnip Head, is why Edward sent you to safety, and the Duke would love to see you stride, sword drawn, into his hall. You are going to the High Towers, my Lady of Beauclerc

– and you're going now, before the Duke's troops arrive here to find you. And we're going with you to keep you out of trouble."

With that, Geraint strode off in search of the landlord, pausing only to mutter an exasperated "Fat chance!" to Geran as he passed.

\* \* \* \* \*

Half an hour later they were on the road. Carol rode on at a brisk trot, Geran and Geraint side by side behind her. Geran nodded ahead and spoke quietly. "She may not be Lady Caroline de Beauclerc any more – but she certainly assumes a lot. Just rides on ahead and leaves the lackeys to follow behind."

Geraint smiled. "Ah, yes. But the road might be dangerous, so she's riding in front to protect us. And to make sure she gets first go at the hostiles, of course." Seeing his friend's disbelief, he chuckled out loud. "Truly she is – you ask her. You'll get used to it in time." He leaned forward and called out, "Oh, Carol!"

Carol turned her head. "Yes, Cousin?"

"Do try to avoid any duke's men we might see – or at least don't identify yourself. Your brother wisely sent you away because he had expected treachery, and to ensure there's still a rightful heir to Beauclerc alive and safe. But as you can imagine, Duke Bastin is not pleased that you weren't taken. It has been announced that His Grace 'fears for your safety' and has ordered that you be found and escorted to Belmond – from whence you would never go again, for a certainty. If we meet any officials or troops, just leave the talking to me, if you would."

"Very well, Cousin." She smiled slightly. "It really is just like old times."

\* \* \* \* \*

They rode easily eastward through rolling farmland dotted with copses and larger stands of trees. As the morning wore on, these wooded areas became more and more frequent, until by noon they were riding through the edges of the Forest proper, past occasional cottages, a roadside inn or two, and one or two smallholdings.

At one of these, a considerable furore was in progress. A man wearing expensive hunting clothes stood by the door of a cottage, supported by two crossbow men in the livery of the Duchy. Two more Duchy men-at-arms were dragging a lad of perhaps sixteen years from the cottage, while a poorly dressed couple in early middle age – obviously his parents – wailed, pleaded and expostulated.

Carol reined in next to the fracas. "What is the trouble here?"

The well-dressed man looked around irritably. "The Duke's business, my girl. And none of yours. Pass on."

Geraint sighed and whispered to Geran "Wrong answer. 'His girl,' for all Gods' sake! Here we go."

The two elder cottagers had turned at the interruption and now rushed toward the travellers, weeping and shouting unintelligibly.

Carol held up her hand. "Now, good people, nothing terrible will happen for spending a few seconds in reflection." Geraint snorted, and she glared at him. "Tell me slowly, then – what passes here?"

"They're taking our son, Lady. They're putting him in the prison!"

The self-professed duke's man drew himself up. "I am a duke's warrener. This man killed a boar in the Duke's woods. It's entirely possible he'll be hanged. And quite rightly."

Carol turned to the panic-stricken teenager. "Did you indeed commit this crime?"

The lad ducked his head. "It attacked me mum, Lady. It was real mad and just rushed out of the trees at her. I hit it with me club, then it knocked me down. When it went to gore me, I cut its throat with me knife. Look!" He pulled open his jerkin to show fresh wounds on his chest, consistent with the goring he'd described.

"There you are," the warrener announced. "Condemned out of his own mouth. It's the gallows for you, boy." He turned again to the older couple. "Unless, of course you'd change your mind and pay the fine required?"

Carol turned to the warrener. "But the law clearly grants relief to those who act in self-defence. Even if it did not, Duke Sahid never hanged a man in his entire tenure! And what's this nonsense of a fine? A fine would be paid to the Duke's Common Session, not to you."

The official's fury was startling, palpable. He snarled venomously at her, spittle flying, an outraged finger stabbing furiously. "You keep your amateur law-spouting to yourself! Get on about your business! Now – or you'll be in trouble." He turned to his men. "Take him! These people can't pay, and I want my lunch."

Carol swung down off her horse. The zing of her sword leaving its sheath echoed off the cottage walls.

"We will have a little more discussion, I think, Goodman. Firstly, what gives you the authority to disregard the law's provisions? And secondly, why are you arresting this lad yourself and not sending the session bailiff?"

Geraint, also dismounting, put in, "Could it be because then the session bailiff would be collecting this so-called fine and not our honest warrener, here?"

Carol went stiff, and her eyes glittered. "Ah. I see. He'd never meant to report the incident to the session officers at all. It was all a trick to extract money from these poor people. I do see, indeed I do." She advanced on the warrener, sword ready, eyes blazing with fury. "You venal, contemptible, bullying *excuse* for a proper man! That slime like you should live while real men lie in the earth!" She shook her head. "It's not to be borne. Draw your weapon."

He took a step backwards in some alarm and gestured to the two crossbowmen. "Kill her."

They began to raise their weapons, then stopped as a cloth-yard shaft sank deep into the door post a few inches away. "I don't advise it. Really, I don't." Somehow Geran already had another shaft nocked and was sighting down it. The two men froze.

The other two men-at-arms released the lad and drew their swords. The first advanced straight at Carol while the second circled towards her left-hand side. Carol allowed the first man to thrust, then slipped to her right, avoiding his sword easily, her own blade slicing across his extended bicep. He dropped his sword and fell back, nursing his bleeding arm.

The second came a stride forward as Carol continued to circle to her right. As he raised his sword for a crude chopping stroke, she darted back toward him. Her blade lashed out blindingly fast at his sword hand and withdrew again. The man screamed and doubled up, clutching his hand; his sword fell to the ground next to his neatly severed index finger.

The entire combat – if it could justify the name – had not taken long enough for the warrener to draw his sword. Carol advanced on him, green fire in her eyes, sword point weeping little droplets of blood. “You, Sirrah, are nothing but a common brigand; a disgrace to what once was an honourable service. The world will be cleaner without you. Arm yourself.” The man stared wide-eyed at his two disabled underlings and licked his lips. He shook his head and started to back away.

Geraint turned to the teenager. “You’ll have to go away for a while, now. It won’t be safe here. That will cost money.” He smiled and indicated the trembling official. “But fortunately this warrener, appalled at his past misdeeds, is going to start making amends by giving you that fat purse hanging at his waist, and by supplying you his horse.” He studied the lad’s poor jerkin and thin shoes. “Also, I think, his boots and his cloak.”

The official, sweating, divested himself of the required items and ran into the woods. When he got a hundred yards distant, just visible between the trunks of the oaks and beeches, he slowed to a walk, limping slightly. Geran planted an arrow in a tree five feet to his left, and he broke into a sprint again. Neither crossbow man moved.

Geraint turned to the men-at-arms. “Right then. Can we call that the end of it, or are we going to have any more excitement?” The oldest of the men put his crossbow carefully on the ground. “No, my lord. I think we’ll just leave these here and ride off. That way, I think.” He pointed in a direction ninety degrees away from the route of his departing officer.

“Sounds good to me, my friend. I hope your colleagues are soon fit.”

“Thank you my lord. Good day, my lord.” Leaving their swords and crossbows behind, the four soldiers mounted up and rode slowly off.

Carol turned to Geraint. “Why was that odious man willing to give this poor lad all those things?”

“Because he thought you were going to kill him if he didn’t.”

“Kill him? How could I kill him? He wouldn’t draw his sword!”

Geraint smiled. “Just say he works to different rules.”

Geran climbed back into his saddle. “So do I. If he hadn’t done that, I would have killed him – sword drawn or not.”

His friend gave a short laugh. “Yes, I thought you might.” He turned to the lad. “Now take this stuff, get on the horse, and go out of the duchy for at least a couple of years. Understand?”

“Yes, my lord. Thank you, my lord. Thank you.” Carol nodded courteously to the boy’s parents gazing open-mouthed at the bounty lying on the road in front of them. Clicking her tongue to her horse, she led her friends briskly away under the trees.

After a few minutes, Geran leaned over and whispered “I see what you mean. Quite fun, though, isn’t it?”

The big druid snorted, and they rode on in silence.