

The Hostages

By Clare Grieve

The inn was just down the road – down the road, round the corner and amongst a small cluster of village huts to be precise. They would not suspect anything. They were new and naïve, foreign to the country and the borough. They did not understand the dangers of Baritan roads.

Around the road the ground rose in gentle ridges that were clothed in thick bristles of gorse and other such prickly and unpleasant plants. The moon scudded between thin wisps of cloud and briefly illuminated the dark shapes crouching among the shadows.

One of the men shifted slightly and a branch cracked. His fellow cursed him under his breath. All wore clothes in greys and greens that would not show up among the shadows. All had long, smoke-blackened knives shoved into their belts. None said a word more.

Why? The smart clip-clop of horses' hooves punctured the silence. The men in the bushes tensed and silently drew weapons from scabbards. They waited.

The horses soon came into view over a slight dip in the road. They were clearly Luskan horses – tall, proud with narrow heads and long, lavish black manes that fell over polished chestnut sides. They would make a good price on the market, the men knew. Their riders rode them with the same grace that they walked.

There were seven of them. Two men came first – one young and in his early twenties, the other older, maybe in his early forties. The young one was slender and clean-shaven but the older was tall and broad-shouldered and wore his hair to his shoulders with a thick red beard. Behind them came two boys. Neither of them looked to be over ten years of age but both were tall and thin with long, dark red hair, wearing the same simple, loose clothes as the older man. They laughed as they rode and tried to shove each other off their horses. The last three victims rode a little behind the boys, two women and a girl. One of the women looked to be about the older man's age, with red-brown hair twisted into a braid and a slender figure wrapped in a warm golden-brown dress. The younger woman was at least twenty years younger and wore her copper-coloured locks loose about her head – the sign of an unmarried woman in Luskan society. The girl was different though – like both of the women, she wore a dress, but the men noticed that it was slit and carefully fitted to allow the maximum amount of movement. Her hair was more like her mother's – a mixture of brown and red. A recurve bow was slung over her back in its protective leather case and a leather quiver of arrows curved over her back.

The question was: could she use it?

The horses were nearly upon them and the men tensed once more, clenching and re-clenching their hands around their knives. Just as the first horse drew level with their hiding places there was a sharp whistle.

The older man's head snapped around in the direction of the sound and his hand went to the hilt of a heavy looking broadsword that hung at his side. With a build like his he could probably use it. Then his head snapped the other way as he heard a cry of surprise from his eldest daughter. Before he could move a figure had leapt from the bank by the roadside and hurled him from his horse. A sword is not made for such close combat. A knife is. His attacker drew a long, one-edged iron knife from its sheath and held it against the man's throat. The message was clear: don't move.

The other men poured forth from the shadows to take on the rest of the party before they could realise what had just happened. The small boys might have put up more of a fight but the sight of their father brought down so quickly dulled their reflexes and they were soon snatched from their feet and also had knives against their necks. The young man held his attacker – a tall burly man – off with a large dagger but dropped it to the ground when one of the men yelled at him that if he didn't surrender the boys would die. The young woman's horse had bolted back down the road but, in youthful foolishness, she turned it around back towards her family and right into the arms of one of the highwaymen. The older woman did not move throughout the attack. Maybe she saw how hopeless it really was. Her younger daughter stood beside her with an arrow knocked to the string. She did not release it though. But she would if she got the chance.

Silence fell around the scene. It was quite a scene really. All four men had knives at their throats. The young woman had been ordered to dismount from her horse and now stood next to it, shaking slightly. The older woman and her daughter remained side by side – the only members of the party still mounted.

A tall figure stepped out of the shadows and turned towards the party. He was almost as tall as the older man but he was nowhere near as broad. He had a strong, bearded face with piercing blue eyes. He wore a simple, grey cloak over a tunic and trousers. At his side hung a long dagger in a dull leather sheath. He looked at each one individually – victims and victors alike. Then he spoke in a calm, even voice that had an underlying note of strength. He spoke to the youngest daughter.

'Put the bow down,' he said. She didn't move. Rather she trained the bow at his chest. He didn't move either. There was a look of desperation about her.

'Put the bow down,' he said again in the same tone. Slowly the deadly instrument was lowered.

'Now put the arrow back in the quiver,' the man instructed. The girl bit her lip and did it.

'Now give one of my men the bow and the quiver – as well as any other weapons you may have.' The girl glared at him as he said it but handed them over all the same.

'Good,' said the man, 'I can't let my trainees out onto a dangerous field.' Then he turned back down the road and called, 'Ron! Ron! Time to do your duty!'

A small shadow darted up the road. As it neared them it became obvious that it was a boy, about twelve years old. He came to a halt beside the tall man, who was obviously the leader.

'What am I to do, sir?' he asked, giving a casual salute.

The leader handed him a rope and said, 'Take this and bind their hands. Not too tightly, mind you. I don't think they pay as much for wounded hostages as whole ones. Not too loose either. They don't pay anything for escaped hostages.'

The boy grinned at his words. There was obviously some sort of inside joke around those words. He took the rope and went up to the nearest of the prisoners, one of the young boys.

'What's your name?' asked Ron. The boy looked surprised, taken off guard by the question.

‘Why do you want to know that?’ asked the boy.

‘Because I’m going to have to share a room with you for the next couple of weeks.’

The boy didn’t laugh. He just said, ‘Alexandar. Not Alex. Alexandar.’ Then he held out his hand.

Ron got the message. This was an intelligent boy who knew that there was no point in struggling but refused to butter up his captors. He bound up Alexandar’s wrists securely but not tightly with a long piece of rope left over for him to be led by.

Ron went on to bind all of the victims’ hands. Some were more willing than others. The older man said nothing. All he did was hold out his hands and glare at the boy. The younger man gave him a sarcastic smile and did the same. The mother, when she was told to dismount, went straight to her daughter and both were bound side by side. The leader did not protest at this arrangement.

The last was the young girl. She slid down from the horse without being told to and held out her wrists.

‘Kiara,’ she said to Ron, ‘and that’s the end of it.’ Like all of them she spoke in a strange Luskan lilt that made it impossible not to guess her origins.

When all were bound, Ron was given seven strips of grey cloth by one of the men. He then went round again and bound all eyes. Then the leader gave the men an order and they helped their captives back onto their horses. Seven men were assigned to guide the horses. Four split off from the group to act as scouts. Up at the front of the cavalcade walked the leader, with Ron beside him.

Once more the road was silent. The only signs that anything had occurred were a few more gouges in the road’s surface and a large white envelope that hung from the branch of a stunted apple tree.

It was about nine o’clock when the first traveller came by the apple tree. He was a farmer in his late forties – just old enough to feel the strain of pushing his cartload of cheeses, milk jars and butter over the rutted road. Always on the alert for robbers, as all farmers should be, he soon noticed the crisp white envelope hanging from the apple tree branches. It was suspended by a short piece of cord and swung and twirled in the wind like a child’s toy.

‘Strange,’ murmured the farmer aloud, ‘that’s no’ sumthin’ you see e’ery day.’

He stared at the envelope for a while and then, having come to the conclusion that it meant him no harm, trundled over to it with his cart. Craning his head back to look at it he saw that something was scrawled onto its smooth surface. He reached up a sunburnt hand and snapped the string easily.

With the envelope now at a more manageable angle he squinted at it again.

‘Well you can’t read Tomas, so why’re you starin’ at it?’ he asked himself. ‘Be’er take it to some-un ‘oo can.’

He shoved the envelope into his breast pocket and set off down the hill at a much more vigorous pace.

When he reached the village he ignored all the petitions for his goods. He told his potential buyers, 'Yous kin buy plen'y when I've done me own bi'ness,' and trundled on through the mud clogged streets towards the inn.

The inn was the centre of social activity in the area and even at this time it buzzed with visitors. The downstairs was full of men and women at tables with plates of scrambled eggs and bacon or rolls of goods laid out before them. Maids ran hither and thither, flirting, serving and tripping over the cats that strolled nonchalantly between the tables with tails held high. The farmer ignored all the activity and headed for the counter where the innkeeper, Doegan, was bound to be.

Doegan was standing behind the counter and shouting orders out to all the maids while taking care of a customer's drinking order and polishing a huge kitchen knife at the same time. He was a multitasker, was Doegan McIndry.

'Hey Doegan,' remarked the farmer when he judged that the time was ripe.

'What d'you want, Tomas?' asked Doegan brusquely.

Not to be put off Tomas said, 'I wan' you to rea' somethin' for mi.'

'You what?' asked Doegan, looking up from his knife polishing.

'Guess wha' I foun' by the roudsi'.'

'A new 'orse.'

'No' as good as tha', said Tomas. 'But I di' find this.' He held up the letter with a triumphant flourish.

'Now that is somethin' special,' said Doegan.

Tomas handed over the letter to him and said, 'Read i' slowly would ya.'

First Doegan read what was scrawled on the outside of the envelope. "'To any traveller who may pass this way,'" it read.

'Should say any traveller 'oo kin read,' muttered Tomas.

Doegan ignored him and slit the paper with practiced fingers. He didn't say the contents aloud this time. His dark eyes slowly widened in shock and then contracted even more slowly.

This is what it said:

4th May 834

A family of 7 were due to return to their lodgings at the Beer Bargain Inn, Totten village tonight. They are all Luskans. The Baragh family to be precise. Their names: Rusk Baragh the head of the family, Helen Baragh his wife, Alexandar Baragh the oldest son, Roland Baragh the youngest son, Catherine Baragh oldest daughter and Kiara Baragh the youngest daughter. Catherine's fiancée was also with them.

Innkeeper Doegan may have noticed that they did not arrive tonight as arranged. That is because they are hostages. We their holders demand 43 silver royals (Doegans'

eyes widened, needless to say) *for them to be returned. If you have not raised this money within a period of 4 days the family will be sold to slave ships bound for ports across the Sea of Caer where slavery is legal. For further information leave a message at Rosehead Hill.*

The clock is ticking,

Archer McFarghil

‘Well? Wha’ does i’ say?’ asked Tomas impatiently.

‘Some of my guests are being held ransom!’ gasped Doegan – so loudly that the inn instantly fell silent and everyone looked at him as if he’d just told them that the king had just died of eating a slice of toast too early in the morning.

‘Your guests?’ asked Tomas.

‘Yes!’ said Doegan and hastily ran through the whole message all over again.

‘How does that concern us?’ shouted one of the visitors.

‘In every way!’ roared Doegan so loudly that one of the more fragile guests fainted. Nobody noticed.

‘We are their neighbours!’ shouted Doegan angrily. ‘It is up to us to make sure they are well.’

‘But they’re foreigners from Luska!’ yelled someone at the back of the room.

‘I don’t care if they’re from the moon!’ retaliated Doegan.

‘They’ve only bin ‘ere a few weeks!’

‘And during that time they have been building their house! Why do you think they’ve been my guests for so long? Because they’re building a bloody house! Why do you think they went away? To check on materials! So shut off the claptrap and listen to me!’

With the room silent as a funeral service Doegan continued in calmer tones. ‘We tell the lord of the borough about this,’ he said, ‘we ask him if he’ll give us some of the money. If he won’t we stride on anyway. We’ll rake up all the money we’ve got and then we’ll pay off what’s needed. We’ll write a letter to this fancy Archer McFairface or whatever he is and we get them back.’

‘And if we get a chance give the blighters a bloody nose for it!’ yelled a voice from the back.

‘That exactly,’ said Doegan grimly.

Kiara felt as though she would burst from anger. They had been captured and now they were hostages to these highwaymen. Her beloved bow had been taken away from her. Her hands were

tied and she could not see where her horse, Andrea, was being led. All around her she could hear rustling as they were lead between bushes. Every now and again the man leading her horse would tell her to duck because of a branch in her way or to prepare for a slope to the left or right. Thankfully she spoke the Common Tongue well and could understand him.

Suddenly the cavalcade drew to a halt. She heard the leader call out something in a soft voice. The man leading Andrea turned to her and said, 'Dismount. I'll help you down.'

Kiara nearly tried to dismount herself but dismissed the idea. She would only break some vital bone and make herself look even more undignified. So she took the hand he offered and slid from Andrea's smooth back and onto the ground.

It was good to feel solid ground beneath her feet but still worry bubbled inside her. Where were they taking her?

She heard the leader give out more orders and the man who had led Andrea took her by the shoulders and began to guide her forward. She refused to move and asked, 'What will happen to the horse?' in a voice that refused to tremble.

'They will be housed in the stables,' said the man, 'now come.'

She was led forward once more. She heard her family being led in a similar fashion. She knew how her father must hate it. He hated to be demeaned even more than she did.

Suddenly she no longer felt the warmth of the sun on her shoulder blades. They had moved into a deep shade and the air was cool against her skin. She reached out a hand to one side and her knuckles brushed against damp earth. They were underground! She searched her mind frantically for any place that they could be. But she did not know the district well and she was at a loss to know.

As she was guided through the passages, she suddenly realised that she could no longer hear the comforting sound of her family moving along beside her. All around her was silent apart from the sound of the man's feet and her own. Panic took control.

Kiara whirled around in an attempt to dislodge herself from the man's grasp. She succeeded and felt empty space where his hands had gripped her shoulders. She did not know where she was or what direction she was facing. So she ran ahead.

Blind and disorientated she could not see what went on around her. She bumped into the earth walls many times. She tripped over small bumps in the floor. But every time she fell she scrambled up and ran on into the darkness.

She bumped against another wall. Her head was aching from all these collisions. She felt along to the right. She felt another wall. She felt to the left. And felt another wall.

A dead end!

'Where am I?' she screamed into the darkness.

'In the Holding,' said the man's voice. She heard a door slam and a lock click behind her.

She whirled around again and ran towards the sound. She smashed into solid wood and fell to the ground in a heap. She struggled onto her knees and felt along the rough wood with trembling hands. There was a keyhole but no handle.

She struck the door with all her strength. Her fist came away bruised and bleeding.

'No!' she screamed and attacked it again. And again. And again.

Finally she collapsed against the nearest wall and sobbed.

The Holding – that's where she was. The Holding.

But where was the Holding?

Kiara did not know how long she lay in the darkness. She did know that, when she finally heard the lock click in the door, she felt as though she would die of thirst and hunger together.

Through her blindfold a light shone. She heard a voice and then the door was once more shut but not locked. There was someone in the room with her. She jumped up, scabbing hands balled into fists.

'I'm not going to hurt you,' said a voice.

'Tell me your name first,' she challenged.

'Ron,' said the voice.

'The one who does all the dirty work in the gang, I see.'

'You've got a blindfold on. You can't see.'

'And whose fault is that?' she snapped.

He was silent for a while and then he said, 'I didn't come here to quarrel.'

'Then what did you come for?'

'I have orders to give you some food and take care of any . . . injuries that you may have procured.'

'I'm not doing anything until you take away the blindfold and the ropes.'

'I have orders to do that as well.'

She heard him place something on the floor and walk towards her. He stopped about half a metre from her and said, 'Hands?'

She complied and held out her bound hands. With deft fingers he undid the knot and took off the rope. She stepped back and wrenched off the bandage. Then she grabbed him by the throat and shoved him against the wall.

He reacted more quickly than she had anticipated. He struck her a blow in the stomach and she crumpled to the ground. Still, she maintained her hold on his neck and dragged him down with her. He punched her in the gut again and she struck him in the shoulder. He grabbed her by the shoulders and hurled her across the room.

Kiara landed on the hard earth floor with an uncomfortable thud. She struggled to her feet and shoved aside the strands of dark red hair that tumbled into her eyes.

'I didn't come here to fight either,' gasped Ron from the middle of the room.

'Let me go,' snarled Kiara.

'I can't do that.'

'Then at least let me see my family.'

'I'll speak to Archer and see if that can be arranged.'

'Who on earth is Archer?' she asked, looking him full in the face for the first time. He looked about her age, she realised. His hair was short and dark blonde. His face was tanned a dark brown and dusted with freckles.

'Archer McFarghil is our leader,' said Ron proudly.

'Delightful,' said Kiara sarcastically.

Ron looked offended. 'He's a good man,' he said.

'If he's a good man then he'll let us out of this place,' grumbled Kiara.

'It's called the Holding.'

'I know but where is the Holding.'

'I'll tell you if you don't beat me up again.'

'I hadn't even started,' said Kiara.

'What about my duty?' suggested Ron.

'What about your duty?'

'It's my duty to feed you.'

'I can feed myself thank you.'

'Well, here's the food, then.'

Ron directed her to a small bed that, in her blindness, she hadn't noticed. It was really an alcove carved into the dirt wall of the small cell. It was made of boards, covered with a thin straw stuffed mattress. Over this a blanket was rolled up. A small sack full of barley served as a pillow. The room, now that Kiara could look about it, was windowless and only about six feet by three. The walls, the

ceiling, the floor – all were made of hard packed earth. The only thing that was not made of earth was the door which was most certainly made of the thickest oak boards that Kiara had ever seen.

By the light of a small lantern that Ron had brought in, Kiara devoured the slice of beef and the seed sprinkled roll that had been brought for her. Then she took the gourd he gave her and drained it of all moisture.

‘Do you have any more?’ she asked presently.

‘Well I don’t have any more food if that’s what you mean but I do have something for your hands,’ said Ron, pointing to the angry red scabs that crusted over her knuckles.

He brought a small flask of some dark alcohol that was probably darcler out of a bag that he had left by the door. He also took bandages and another flask of a thick green salve. Kiara held out her right hand (the most damaged one) to be rinsed first.

The darcler (for that was what it was) stung like a bee when it touched her wounds. Kiara recoiled instantly but Ron held her hand in place and continued to drip it onto the cuts. She felt like slapping him again but then she felt like slapping everything, so that meant nothing. When her right hand was rinsed off – bathed in what felt like liquid fire – Ron moved on to the left. Although there were fewer cuts on this hand, it hurt even more since Kiara already had the pain of her right hand to contend with.

When the process was finally done, Ron saw the way Kiara’s teeth were gritted and said, ‘Maybe I should have waited a while before starting on the second one.’

‘Just get on with it,’ said Kiara through clenched teeth.

He complied and went straight on to applying the sticky green salve. Unlike the darcler, it was surprisingly soothing to the touch and Kiara let out an audible sigh of relief. When the backs of her hands were daubed in a sticky green mess Ron bound them up with a bandage with a satisfied, ‘Ta-da!’

‘Now what about seeing my family,’ said Kiara.

‘I’ll see what Archer says,’ Ron said as he packed away his things.

Doegan McIndry was a stickler for details, as well as a multitasker. Although the village clamoured that they could all just go to Rosehead Hill and demand to see Archie McFairface (as the gang leader had come to be known), McIndry wouldn’t have it. The letter said they must leave a message at Rosehead Hill and leave a message they would. In neat handwriting, if you please.

One of the more persuasive villagers – Clady McFeran by name – had gone straight to Lord Ormond’s castle (about four leagues away on muddy treacherous roads) to explain the situation while the villagers had set about trawling through their earnings to gather up the necessary money. McIndry himself had set aside a grand sum of ten silver royals for the bargaining process. Now that he could not be accused of hypocrisy, he set about going from house to house in order to make sure

that every villager gave as much money as they could afford to go towards the 'Great Matter' as the villagers called the incident. Some willingly handed over as much as they could. Others had to be practically held at knifepoint before they would part with their money.

By the time the day was out and all of the fifteen houses in Totten had been 'ransacked' exactly twenty-nine silver royals, seven shillings and eight pence worth of money had been collected into one big canvas sack that clinked and jingled as the pennies, shillings and all the other coins rubbed against each other inside it. Now came the clincher. Where would the sack go for the night? Everyone knew that Clady would not be back until sunrise the next day at the earliest. Until then they could not pay.

In the end, after much arguing it was decided that the sack should go to Hile Garishe's house. Being the only person in Totten who did not have a 'Mc' in front of his name set apart from everyone else in Doegan's estimation. Not only that – he was the most reliable character Doegan knew. The only person who could equal him was Clady McFernan herself – but she had a 'Mc' in her name. While he was obviously unwilling and slightly jittery about having to sleep over a bag full of more money than he had ever owned at one time in his life, Hile accepted – but only after checking the lock on his door, barricading the windows, finding a suitable hiding place and assigning himself, his wife Emma and his oldest son Fargen watches to make sure that the bag was kept safe.

Now everyone was gathered into the inn to enjoy a good supper and an even better chinwag. (Literally everyone was there – cats, dogs, children – everyone.) Doegan went around giving out dinner to his guests and exchanging views with them on the ransom situation.

Finally, just when everyone was quietening down a little but not quite ready to leave, Doegan moved back to the counter and bellowed out, 'Be quiet!' as loudly as he could.

'Now what's the trouble?' yelled a voice.

'Shut up Garfay!' said Doegan, 'Just because you have to give a few shillings for the benefit of humankind doesn't mean you have to sulk like a rotten thundercloud.'

'Hear, hear!' yelled Garfay's son, Hitch.

'I'd sleep outside tonight if I were you, boy!' called out his aunt, Lorma.

'Quiet!' yelled Doegan again.

Silence fell on the inn. 'All right, you lot,' he continued, 'we need to let the hostage holders know that we've got our act together and are preparin' the money. That way hopefully little Clady'll have a better chance of gettin' home in time.'

'She ain't liddle!' yelled Clady's brother, Mockle.

'Oh that she is, lad, that she is!' called a voice. 'Right li'l saucer that one.'

'Shut it!' yelled Doegan.

'We can go up to the 'ill tomorrer an' tell 'em then,' said Tomas, taking another swig of his beer.

'No we can't,' said Doegan.

'And why not?' asked Garfay sourly.

'Because the letter makes it bloomin' clear that we've gotta leave a message.'

'Only in a loose sense,' said a voice.

'That's codswallop!' yelled Garfay, 'Stop trying to be posh on us, Gimle.'

'Glad to see you agree with me, Garfay,' said Doegan. Then before Garfay could protest called, 'Then it's settled. Gimle (praise his neat handwriting) will write us out a short *simple* letter to say that we are on the way to getting the money and will be up there as soon as we can.'

'D'you get tha' Gimle or was it too simple for ya?" called out Lorma.

'Shut up woman!' yelled Gimle.

'Same to you,' said Lorma.

'Now before you lot start a fight how about we get Gimle some sort o' pen and some sort o' ink and get a move on!" yelled Doegan.

'On it!' said a dozen young voices and about half of the gathering disintegrated to go off and find the necessary supplies.

'I remember when I used to be tha' young,' sighed Tomas.

Finally pen and ink were found and a sheet of paper was supplied by McIndry. Gimle sat by his small table and wrote the words that flowed from Doegan's uncensored lips. The innkeeper kept being interrupted and every time he did the poor little man would write it down. Doegan had clearly said that he wanted it written down word for word and Gimle was not about to quibble with him. He was a stickler for details was Doegan McIndry and he had clearly said that he wanted it written down word for word. Then when he looked at the final product he gave poor Gimle a verbal lashing for putting down all the 'unnecessary clutter'. Lorma of all people came to Gimle's rescue and a shouting match ensued between the stout-bodied innkeeper and the stout-hearted housewife until, in the end, they came to a compromise. A compromise that looked a little like this:

To Archer McFarhill ~~no damn you. All right~~/ Archie McFairface ~~Goodness young ones nowadays~~

We the villagers of Totten ~~no it is spelt like that~~ would like to tell you that we are in the ~~process no you idiot~~ process of collecting money to pay for the relece of the Baragh familee. ~~No I will not list their names. Oh all right.~~ Rusk Barach, Helen Baragh, Alexandar Baragh ~~let me check the letter again,~~ Kiara Baragh, ~~Andrea = wait that was the horse,~~ Roland ~~yes I'm getting there~~ Baragh and ~~Katherine it's a 'e' you idiot~~ Catherine Baragh. ~~Finally I thought this would go on forever.~~

Doegan McIndry
Gimle McEskín

We will be depositing the munny on Rosehead Hill as soon as possible.

~~Hey wait I haven't finished!~~

~~PS if you cheat us we will hound you to the depths of bloomin' hell. I don't care about the language.~~

'Now tha' was much friendlier wasn't it?' said Lorma.

'Question is 'oo's gonna d'liver it,' said Tomas.

'I will,' called out a dozen voices.

'Catch,' said McIndry and threw the scrap of paper into the air.

The children made a run for it and one lucky boy snatched it from the air. Then he raced for the door followed by a crowd of his fellow children.

'At least he'll have a bodyguard,' laughed McIndry.

'I wish I was that young,' said Lorma wistfully, rubbing her aching back.

'Kiara! Kiara!' yelled Ron down the corridor. Kiara looked up from where she was scratching a crude drawing of Archer McFarhill or whatever he was called being stuck full of arrows. The walls of her cell were covered with such drawings.

The door burst open and Ron's slight figure staggered to a halt. 'Guess what, Kiara?' he said, eyes shining.

'You finally learned how to tie a decent knot,' said Kiara.

'No,' said Ron, not seeming to notice the gibe, 'The Totten villagers are gathering the money to pay for your release! In a matter of days you'll be out of here!'

'And you'll have more money than you know what to do with.'

'That's not all,' said Ron.

'So tell me the rest then.'

'Archer says that you can go and see your family.'

'About time too. Is this because of the money being prepared?'

Ron shrugged. 'I don't know but the point is that it has been arranged.'

'Do I have to wear any fancy headgear?'

'No. That was just for the journey here. Do you want to go see them now?'

'What do you think?'

'Well come on then!'

Ron led her through the maze of passages. They were all underground and constantly turned right and left at unexpected places. Ron seemed to know his way easily and didn't even pause at the intersections.

'How do you know this place so well?' asked Kiara.

'There's a simple sequence that you have to know,' said Ron. 'It will get you anywhere from anywhere.'

'What is it?'

'I can't tell you that.'

Kiara was silent after that. Not because she was offended but rather because she was trying to figure out this sequence of his. She did not have time to piece it together however before he announced, 'We're here!' and gestured towards a large door that was guarded by a man that was almost as large as it was.

The guard opened the door and Kiara walked in – only to be swamped by her brothers and sister.

'Easy, easy,' said Kiara, slipping back into Luskan, 'I don't want to be smothered.'

'It's been so boring without you, Kiara. Alexandar and I were separated.'

'I really missed you, little sister. I was all on my own for ages. Damion wasn't allowed to come with me.'

'You act as if you were already married, Cate.'

'Leave the girl alone. I want to look at her,' said Father.

The seemingly endless sea of siblings parted, leaving a clear path to where Father sat the same sort of low bed as was in Kiara's room with one arm around mother and the other held out to her. Kiara got the message and came to sit down next to him.

'Hey! How come she gets the other side of the bed?' yelled Roland in indignation.

'Because your head's too big for you to fit in it!' said Alexandar triumphantly.

'It's her turn to tell everything that happened to her now shut up listen,' said Father. 'Tell us, Kiara,' he said, hugging her.

So Kiara told them everything – well almost everything. She left out the bit where Ron told her about the sequence that could take you anywhere in the Holding.

When her story was finally done Roland asked, 'Can I sit there now?'

'You can sit with me, Roland,' said Damion peaceably. Kiara saw the look of gratitude that passed from Mother's eyes to the young man's.

While Damion distracted the younger ones Catherine walked over and sat down beside Mother.

'We'll have to repay the villagers after this,' said Father.

'We've only just moved here, Rusk,' said Mother, 'They understand that.'

'We'll have to repay them,' said Father again.

'What about the house?' asked Mother.

'We'll stay at the inn. That way we can repay the innkeeper.'

'But the materials will arrive at Totten any day now.'

'We will hire the builders after we've repaid the debt.'

'We'll work, Mother,' said Cate, 'and just because we've moved here doesn't mean that Father's business has suddenly ground to a halt. Trading goes on no matter what happens.'

'I know,' said Mother, 'I never thought that I would be the one traded.'

They spent the rest of the day together in the small room. Finally they were told by the guard that they must all go off to their separate rooms. So that event was over. Mother and Father hugged each of them and then they were heading back to their rooms.

When Ron dropped Kiara back in her room she didn't go to bed. Rather she turned towards the wall and wrote on it with her finger. Then she looked at what she had written for a long time, her lips moving as she worded out all the events of the day. Then she rubbed out what she had written and climbed into bed. The only thing that she left on the wall was a small 3.

The sun had set but the afterglow was still strong, washing the sky a pale gold. The figure was a slight one and slender too. The face was clean-shaven and surprisingly dirt free for someone emerging from the middle of the bushes at dusk. His shirt was made of pale blue linen, good quality despite the fraying along the edges. The trousers were similar with a patch or two here and there. The boots on the other hand were brand new. They were polished to a shine and squeaked every now and again like mice under torture.

The man watched as a stream of children ran up the track from the village. One up front, a small boy of about nine years old streaked ahead of the others. In his one hand he clutched what looked like a roll of paper which he would raise above his head in a gesture of triumph this seemed to drive his pursuers on and for every time that he raised the paper they would gain a metre on him.

Finally, when another boy caught up with the first one, the onetime leader handed the paper over to him and fell behind. This happened several times as the children progressed up the hill, presumably, the man thought, to be sure that the paper arrived at its destination in the shortest time possible.

Just when the children were about to pass him by the man stood up and called out, 'Hey little ones! Where are you going at this time?'

The children slowed their pace slightly but did not stop. One of the young boys yelled, 'We're deliverin' a message!'

'To who?'

'Doesn't ma'er,' yelled one of the older boys, 'point is that soon Clady'll be 'ome from Lord Ormond an' we'll be able to 'ave 'em released.'

With that the group quickened the pace once more and were off into the woods once more. The man stood watching where they had gone for a while and then turned back towards the village.

McIndry's guests were just beginning to trickle away when the stranger entered. He wasn't posh looking but he didn't have the look of a villager either. His dark hair was cut short and he was beardless. His clothes were well made if a little on the battered side. His boots were a sight though. They reflected everything they passed by and squeaked like those horrible clockwork toys that you sometimes saw children playing with in the streets.

The stranger walked straight up to the innkeepers counter. 'You are Doegan McIndry I presume,' he said politely.

'That I am and nobody else. What do you want?' asked Doegan, not to be flattered.

The stranger adjusted his stance slightly. 'I've got a message from Lord Ormond,' he said.

The villagers, who had until now only given the man a stray glance, suddenly looked on with grave attention. It payed to know what the lord of the borough's latest thoughts on your taxes was – especially when you gave away half your money to save a bunch of foreigners.

'And what does his high and mighty lordship have to say about us humble peasants in Totten?' asked McIndry.

'He's planning on having a new road built near here,' said the stranger.

'He's what?' asked half of the village.

'He's planning on having a new road built near here,' repeated the stranger.

The villagers didn't know whether to laugh or cry and McIndry showed no sign of doing either. Having a road near you was a two edged sword. It would bring more people near you so trade had the potential of flourishing – especially McIndry's. It could also be built over your fields and you would have to somehow find another, probably more far-flung place plant your seed or feed your livestock.

'Now that is interesting,' said McIndry in a tone that suggested that it was the most uninteresting thing that he had heard in the last decade.

'What road did you come by?' asked Mockle.

The stranger stood up straighter, as if he somehow needed to be at attention when talking to someone half his age. 'Why do you ask?'

'My sister Clady's coming by the east road,' said Mockle. 'I wondered if you'd seen her.'

'Yes I came by the east road. It's the easiest way to get from Lord Ormond's castle to here. Tell me what does your sister look like?'

'She's very small,' said Garfay before anybody else could speak.

'She is not!' said Mockle, gravely offended.

'Get on with it!' yelled Doegan.

'She's got long blonde hair and brown eyes. She was wearin' a brown dress and a green and red pa'erned shawl when she left. She always carries a walking staff with her. Calls it Flitchy,' said Mockle.

'I must have missed her,' said the stranger, 'If I see her do you want me to pass on a message?'

No one payed any attention to the last thing he said. No one said anything about the Baragh's. Instead Doegan said, 'Do you want a room whatever your name is?'

'Garin,' said the stranger automatically, as if he was accustomed to giving his name at regular intervals, 'and yes I do want a room please.'

'Supper?' asked Doegan.

'No thank you,' said the stranger, 'I'll just have ale if you please. I fancy hanging around with these chaps for a while.'

'Along you go then. Your ale follows after,' said Doegan.

As Garin retired to bed he ran over all the information that he had gained through his conversation with the village men. It would seem that Clady was well liked in the village for the most part. The boys admired her looks and her spirit. The girls seemed to think of her as a friend worth having. All the men and women liked to think of her as their future daughter in law. They also seemed to think that Clady was perfectly able to handle herself out on a dark road – they had confidence in her.

Misplaced confidence?

It was drawing on to dusk the next day, when along the road came Clady adjusting the strap of the bag slung at her side as she went. With any luck she would make it back to Totten just after dark – in time for a quick chatter with the villagers that would no doubt be grouped about the inn exchanging wild stories and to elect one of them to change her simple journey into a wonderful adventure. Clady smiled at the thought. The people of Totten were the best that she had ever met. They were very 'Northern' according to the other villagers. They argued over everything and managed to find

ludicrous ways of misinterpreting the most obvious facts. Once an old man had even managed to twist things to make it sound like the sun really could rise in the west!

The thought of her friends made Clady pick up the pace a little so that she was now moving at a fast walk. As she did so she ran through her head all the happenings of the past few days. The only trouble that had presented itself during her journeys was when a feral dog attacked her. And he had been easily beaten off with the help of her stick which she had fondly named Flitchy. When she had arrived at Lord Ormond's castle she had found the lord sick with a fever. His oldest son had been in charge and Lord Ormond junior had gladly handed over twenty silver royals in aid of the venture. It was more than enough as Clady pointed out but Lord Ormond junior told her that she could distribute any leftovers to the villagers. Clady had readily agreed to this and had set out for home with a full bag and a light heart.

She caught sight of the tall oak tree and quickened her pace even further. The oak was known as the Old Man by the village children because of what looked like an old face in its bark. Some villagers said that it was the Yarina, people of the ancient times, who had made it like that with magic. The children laughed at them in public but in private discussed the matter avidly. Clady smiled as she passed under the boughs.

She didn't smile for very long. She felt a small pinprick in the back of her neck. At first she thought she was imagining it and then she felt a small drop of blood roll down her neck. She grabbed behind her hair and searched with trembling fingers.

She felt it. A small feathered shaft projecting from her skin. *Don't panic, Clady – it's only a small dart.*

But we all know what a small harmless dart means.

Refusing to let the panic take over Clady carefully pulled on the shaft. The dart came away in a single piece. Not about to let a little blood put her off Clady looked at it carefully.

The shaft was made of cheap wood with a few small feathers at the base of it. The tip was made of copper and not particularly sharp. But smeared on it was a thin white substance. Clady knew what it was before her brain could run through the list of possibilities. She felt the unusual weariness in her limbs and a feeling of sleepiness that was so potent it was unnatural.

Clady dropped the dart and, with all the energy she could muster, screamed as loudly as she could. Then she collapsed down on the ground in a heap. Through sleep fogged eyes she saw a slight figure step out from behind the Old Man. She did not see his face. But she saw his boots. They reflected her face in them.

Clady took a while to wake up properly. Her body felt like it weighed a ton but her thoughts darted like energetic and panicked swallows. She did not have her shawl. That was a problem. Her mother had bought that shawl for her from a Hiarish trader and had practically paid its weight in gold. That shawl was the most wonderful and expensive piece of clothing she had ever owned. It was warm and fine and had a fringe of tassels along the side. She also did not have her bag. That was an even bigger problem. That bag contained the money to set the Luskan hostages free. If she didn't have it

then there would never be enough money to pay the price. Worst of all she couldn't see Flitchy anywhere. And without Flitchy she felt defenceless and alone. No one knew who else might come along a dark road that night. Some might have worse designs on her than the short man with the shiny boots who had taken all these precious things.

Finally, when she could stand lying still no longer, Clady forced her hands to move and began to drag her forward. The first few yards were a battle. Her body was still half asleep with the effects of whatever that dart had been coated with. She had no means of moving herself off the ground as she was sure her legs would not support her so the road was a bumpy and a bruising one. After a while her body began to liven up and her arms gained strength. By the time the village came in sight she had just managed to stand up. She took a deep breath of night air and yelled out, 'Clady's home!' as loudly as she could. It was a rather ridiculous thing to say but she would never have any of the village boys boast that she had called out 'Help!' to him. Never.

She didn't wait for the villagers to hear her. Instead she continued down the hill at as brisk a pace as her jelly-like legs would allow her. She was about halfway down the hill when the villagers of Totten came charging up to greet her. The first to reach her was her brother, Mockle, with his long brown hair hanging in sweaty strands over his face.

'Clady what's happened?' he asked, offering his shoulder for her to lean on, 'Where's Flitchy?'

'I don't know,' said Clady, ignoring his offer of support, 'I've been robbed. By a man with shiny boots.'

'You've what?' asked Garfay, incredulously.

'Looks like we won't be gettin' our road near Totten then,' said McIndry drily.

'Take me home an' I'll tell you!' said Clady. 'No! Take me to the Beer Bargain rather. That way everyone fits in.'

'Well McIndry's going to be gettin' a few shillin's for t'night!' called someone at the back of the crowd.

He wasn't far wrong. For about the fifth time in the past few days the whole village turned out to meet up in the Beer Bargain Inn. Usually McIndry would have been delighted at the prospect but now his face was solemn as he served out drinks over the counter. It looked like dark days might be coming to the new arrivals of Totten.

The villagers listened to Clady's story with baited breath and when she was finally finished there was silence for a while. Then finally Gimle voiced all their thoughts.

'What are we going to do?' he asked nobody in particular.

'I haven't a clue,' said Garfay and was promptly slapped by Lorma.

The silence thickened like a skin over cold custard and finally Tomas said, 'Well, I s'pose all we kin do is wing i'.'

'What d'you mean by that?' asked Doegan.

'Simple,' said Tomas, 'We tell Archie McFairface that he's go' 'is deal an' that we'll be along straigh' 'way to give o'er the money.'

'But we don't 'ave the money,' pointed out Hitch.

'I know tha',' said Tomas. 'But we pretend to. Then when they're countin' the money we beat 'em up and free the 'ostages an' tha' takes care o' tha'.'

'What if something goes wrong?' asked Gimle, nervously twisting his hands.

'Then we wing i',' said Tomas.

'An' how do we wing it this time?' asked McIndry.

'I don't know,' shrugged Tomas, 'I don't know what'll go wrong.'

'Well that's that then,' said McIndry. 'Gimle, you'll be doing some more writing. Don't take down the swearwords this time unless I tell you to.'

And that was how a small square of off white paper ended up in the hands of Archer McFarghil or Archie McFairface, as he was now dubbed by the general public.

This time it said:

Dear Archie McFairface,

We are bloomín' ritíng to tell you that we have collectd all the munny that is needid to pay for the releece of the hostajes. We will meet you at bloomín' Rosehead Hill to give over the munny. Let us know your tírms and condishons by putting a letter by that bloomín' apple tree to tell us that you're bloomín' ready.

PS no delays, no excuses, no bloomín' mercy.

Doegan McIndry
Gimle McEskín

'Kiara! Kiara!' yelled Ron from down the hallway. Kiara sighed and got up from drawing Andrea to wait for him to arrive.

Over the last day or so she had been going to see her family members regularly. She had even gone to see the horses. She had the sequence under control but she was racked with guilt for using Ron as a tool. He really wanted to be her friend. And she really wanted to be his friend. The trouble was that they were on opposite sides of the fence.

Ron barged in and said, 'Kiara the villagers are coming today! They're going to pay off all the money. You'll be free to go home!'

And pay off the debt.

'That's wonderful,' said Kiara, 'Will we be there for the handover?'

'No,' said Ron. 'The deal is that first they make sure that the amount of money is right and then you're sent out. Your family will all be kept in the same room but Archer said you and I could stay together. Do you want to watch?' he added.

'Watch what?'

'Everything. I can take you out into the air and we'll see everything from on high. Interested?'

'Very,' said Kiara, 'I'll come.'

Ron grinned and held the door open wide. 'After you,' he said politely.

Ron was as good as his word. He took her through the winding passages until he reached a small hatch. He grabbed hold of an iron rung in the centre of the door and pulled. The hatch swung open and sunlight poured in. Kiara held her eyes closed and then opened them to let them adjust to the light. When she was ready Kiara stepped out and onto open ground for the first time in days.

The hill was grassy and smoothed by age. It was almost perfectly round and was as tall as it was wide – suspiciously so. Other than the grass patches of gorse and other hardy plants made their living. In the bright morning light Kiara could see all around her. She saw the village of Totten, her new home that did not feel like one, far down the track. Around it the woods stood – thick packed trees that would in the autumn provide the villagers with a bounty crop of nuts and berries. Far off to the west she could make out the mountains looming against the sky.

More important than all this she could make out a group of village men standing at the top of a neighbouring hill. It was Rosehead Hill! Kiara struggled to believe it. All this time she had been so close to a place that would have been one of the most obvious landmarks in the surrounding countryside. Even as she looked a group of her captors, led by Archer McFarhill or whatever his name was, making their way up Rosehead to where the villagers were.

Kiara watched their progress in breathless silence until Archer and his band reached the top. She saw that they were armed with swords and bows as well as their usual knives. She could only hope that the villagers wouldn't try anything or things might turn ugly.

One of the villagers – a tall stout man with a large apron and a thick beard, who Kiara recognised to be Doegan McIndry the innkeeper – stepped forward and spoke to Archer and his band in a loud booming voice that Kiara heard easily. Before Doegan had finished his sentence she had collapsed on the grass laughing. Archie McFairface! Leave it to the villagers of Totten to come up with something like that!

Fortunately Archer did not seem to be in the least bit offended and went straight into the money counting. The villagers stood by and waited.

Waited for what? Kiara narrowed her gold flecked brown eyes and looked more closely at the villagers. They seemed tense and uneasy. Especially a young man at the edge of the crowd with long

brown hair. He kept shifting from foot to foot and glancing uncertainly at his elders who looked every bit as tense as he did (but weren't shifting from foot to foot obviously). What if . . .

'There's not enough money!' yelled one of the men at the top of his voice.

Kiara didn't even think. She jumped straight at Ron and grabbed him by the throat, just as she had when they first met. This time he didn't react quickly enough. Kiara banged his head against the ground three times – hard. Then she tore a strip off his shirt and used it to tie his feet together. Then she ran.

Kiara knew exactly where to go when she dodged through the hatch. Even though Ron had not noticed it, she had paid close attention to every turn they had made. The sequence was perfect. The pieces all fitted together like one of those complicated wooden puzzles that Father could have done in seconds.

The hill was man-made. The Yarina probably made it back in the days when Barita was theirs to do with as they pleased. They had built this hill as a temple – or maybe a fortress. They had made a maze out of it. A sacred maze. According to the Yarina religion there are three sides or three faces to each of their nine gods – and to just about everything else for that matter. Three is a lucky number. Nine is a magical number. Twenty-seven isn't to be sniffed at either. So they had built sequences of three into their maze. To get anywhere in the hill, you had to turn right three times, left three times and go straight three times: but not necessarily in that order. This Kiara had remarked from her experiences with Ron in the hill.

The first place she headed was the armoury. Of course it hadn't been the armoury when the Yarina built the hill but it was now thanks to (smirk!) Archie McFairface and his band. It was a large room that was guarded day and night by a burly guard with a spear well worth avoiding. That didn't put Kiara off in the least. She stopped just around the corner from where he stood.

Kiara crouched against the wall like a sprinter taking her marks. She dug some loose soil from the floor and shaped it into a ball about the size of her fist. She threw it round the corner so that it burst several metres away against the opposite wall.

For about two vital seconds the guard was distracted. In those two seconds Kiara had sprinted along the wall and leapt at him. She used his shoulders as a push off and somersaulted over his head and into the storeroom beyond.

Kiara landed on her feet and fell into a crouch to absorb the shock. Then she leapt up and grabbed the nearest thing to her (a nasty looking dagger with a jagged edge).

The guard had turned around now and faced her with his spear at the ready. Giving him no time to think out his attack Kiara threw the dagger at his head.

The light of a nearby lantern flashed on the blade as it headed straight for the man's forehead. He deflected it with his spear but the knife cut a huge notch in it and the experience left him shaken.

Kiara grabbed the next available weapon (a shield this time) from against the wall and threw that at him too. This time the object was so heavy that Kiara missed his feet by about half a metre or so. The guard, shaken by his recent encounter with the dagger, stepped back automatically.

While he was slightly off balance Kiara grabbed another weapon from the wall and jumped him once again. They both came down onto the floor with a crash. Kiara held the blade of her new weapon (a short sword) against his throat and said in the Common Tongue, 'If you move I cut your throat.'

The man got the message and said nothing as she bound his hand and foot with a coil of rope and took her pick of weapons from the armoury walls. She took a curved hunter's knife (obviously Hiarish) and her bow and arrows. Then she also took the short sword as it was the only long weapon that she could hold without toppling over. Thus sufficiently armed she set out on her quest to get her family back (preferably without losing a limb).

Kiara decided that her family would probably be kept inside the same room that they had met in last time. So she sprinted off, being careful to remember every right, left and 180° turn she had to make.

A few turns from the armoury she ran straight into another guard. Before he could say anything Kiara dodged past him and down the tunnel and let his yell of surprise follow her.

The door was guarded, just as she had expected. There was only one man but Kiara doubted that it would stay like that for long. Already she fancied she could hear the sound of running feet.

The guard was much like the armoury guard save that he had a shield as well as a spear and that a sword much longer than Kiara's hung at his side. A longer sword meant more damage to her.

Kiara could not shoot around corners and the particular corner that she was standing behind was less than a metre from where the guard stood. She stood quietly for a while, judging the speed of his spear versus her arrow. She notched an arrow to her string, took a deep breath and stepped out to shoot it.

He had known she was there. He had to have. He could never have reacted so quickly otherwise. The moment she turned the corner the spear was thrust into her face – literally.

The side of the spear sliced her cheek open just as the arrow sailed from its anchorage. Both Kiara and the guard fell to the ground at the same time. The only difference was that Kiara would be getting up again and the guard would not.

Kiara felt blood trickling down her cheek and struggled back onto her feet. She had not imagined the sound of running.

She felt around the guard's pockets and found a ring of keys. With trembling fingers she tried the first in the lock. No, not that one.

The next one. Not this one either.

The third one wasn't even worth trying to fit.

The fourth jammed inside and refused to move.

Kiara tugged frantically on it but it refused to budge. She wrenched harder and still it wouldn't move. The sound of running feet grew louder by the minute. Shadows danced on the walls.

In a desperate effort Kiara twisted the key in the lock and the door sprang open.

Her family didn't need any explaining to be done. They poured out of the room, heard the shouts and ran in the opposite direction.

Arrows buried themselves in the walls just behind them. A stone sailed over Father's head and struck Roland in the shoulder. Kiara grabbed her brother and swung him up onto her shoulders as if she was giving him a piggyback and kept on running.

They didn't reach a dead end. Instead they ran into another group of McFairface's soldiers around the bend. There were no joining passages to flee down. There were no looks of mercy on the faces of their captors.

What if the villagers had killed Archer? They looked mad enough for that to be true.

Kiara let Roland slide from her shoulders. She drew her short sword and waited. She never got her moment of glory.

'All right you lot – enough o' the partying!' yelled Doegan McIndry at the top of his best innkeeper's voice.

Everyone stared at the innkeeper – captive, captor – everyone. He and his group of villagers seemed to have appeared from thin air. Actually they had opened one of the many trapdoors that dotted the Holding and were staring down at the ground dwellers from above.

'Honestly,' said he stout man, 'do you people never look up in your lives?'

'Excuse me but we've got something to finish here!' snapped Kiara.

'Well that's gra'itude for ya,' said a woman, 'We save your bloomin' lives and all you can do is tell us how importan' it is to get killed!'

'I didn't mean –,' began Kiara.

'Will fightin' do you any good?' asked Doegan.

'No!' said Roland from his position on the floor of the tunnel.

'No it won't,' said Doegan, 'so my suggestion is that you Luskan lot get up out of that hole and come back to Totten and you what-ever-you-ares come out and go in the opposite direction after handin' over those weapons of yours. And try not to go near any wardens that'll be patrollin' the area because I will gladly give a full description of every last one of you. I have the memory of a badger so don't be taking chances. Now up you lot come.'

It took a good half hour before McIndry's conditions were met. When he was finally satisfied that it was safe to release the hostage holders, he ordered them to be followed for the first hundred yards

or so into the woodland. Then the villagers had to find the horses (with Kiara's help of course) and move them out of their underground stables and into the light.

While they were thus engaged Kiara headed up the side of the Holding to look for Ron. She found him standing in the same place that she had left him to save her family. He stared out towards the mountains in silence. Kiara stood beside him for a while and waited for him to speak. Finally he did.

'They killed Archer,' he said.

'I know,' said Kiara.

'He was a great man,' said Ron.

'I know that too.'

Neither said anything for a while and then Kiara broke the silence. 'I'm sorry about bashing you up,' she said.

Ron smiled ruefully. 'I know,' he said, 'I would have done the same thing in your shoes.'

'What'll you do now?' asked Kiara.

'Maybe I'll go with the others.'

'You don't belong with a band of criminals, you know, Ron.'

'What else can I do?'

'You could work at Doegan McInly's inn,' said Kiara, after some thought.

'You mean the fat man who shouts a lot?' asked Ron.

'Exactly,' said Kiara.

'I don't think I could,' said Ron. 'Don't take this the wrong way. I'd love to. But the villagers would never accept me.'

'They don't have to know.'

'Do you really think that I can pull the wool over that McInly fellow's eyes?'

'He'd have to know, of course, but nobody else does. Tell you what: you stay in the woods for a week or two. Let everything cool down. I'll get you food. Then, when the time is ripe, you appear with your pack on your back, looking for a job.'

'But what story do I tell?'

'I'll leave that up to you to decide.'

'After you've just given me a conk on the head?'

'Three conks on the head.'

‘I suppose that makes it a whole lot better,’ said Ron as Kiara ran back down the hill.

The tired residents of Totten slowly made their way back down the muddy track from Rosehead Hill. Roland and Kiara were given a bandage and a salve for their wounds (Lorma had come prepared). The villagers chatted and laughed as they climbed down the last hill towards home. Even Clady was able to get over the loss of her Hiarish shawl and her faithful Flitchy to joke and smile with Catherine.

Everyone seemed content. It was funny, but true, that now, finally, the villagers began offering to help with the building of the Baragh’s house. Even Garfay refused to be outdone and offered to give a couple of shillings to help on the project. Father would normally have rejected all such offers of help but he saw that this was the sort of friendship that they would need if they were to last in their new home – so he gladly accepted, to Mother’s delight.

‘How about this?’ asked Doegan as they neared the village. ‘You all come to my place tonight and we have a fine old feast now all this hostage business is over.’

‘Is Garfay a skinflint!’ yelled Clady. ‘Of course we’re all coming!’

‘And maybe we’ll even manage to attract Mr Shiny-Shoes himself to come along and get cut down to size!’ laughed Hitch.

‘I’ll bring some cake!’ called his Aunt Lorma.

‘I’ll make some tart,’ shouted another woman.

‘I’ll help in the kitchen!’ yelled Kiara.

‘Not with that sword, you aren’t!’ said Doegan.

‘Who’s to stop me?’ asked Kiara.

The sun was setting behind the mountains and bathed the world in glowing light. The dogs ran from the village to join their masters. Women and children poured from the small houses to greet husbands and fathers. Luskan voices and Baritan ones mingled in the golden air. So they ran laughing back to Totten – their home that was beginning to feel more like home with every moment – and their supper – which was becoming a more attractive prospect with every step.

The Bloomin’ End