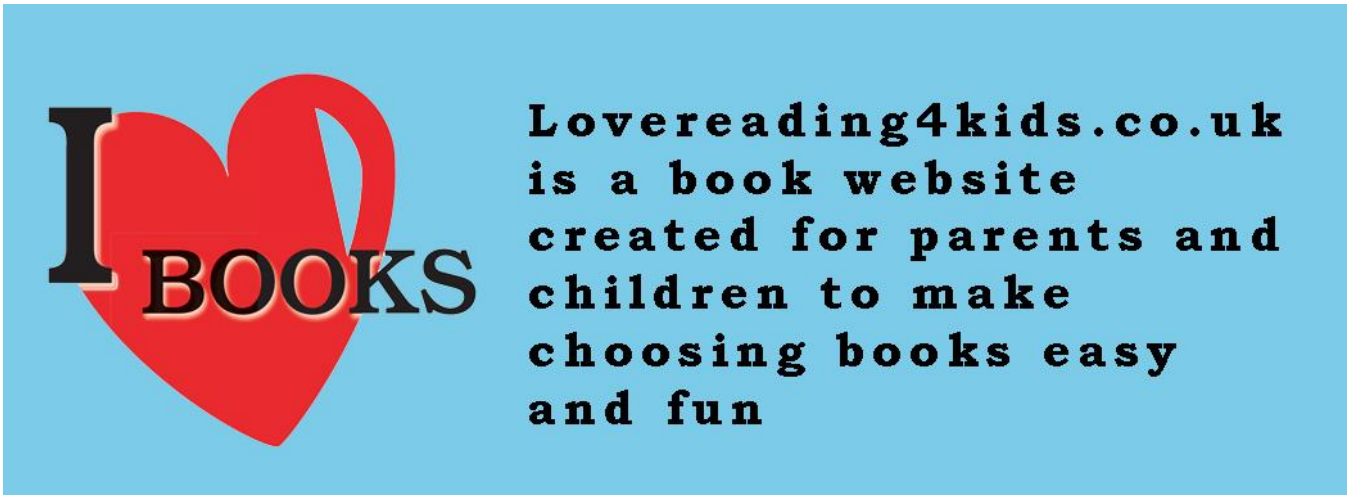


Opening extract from

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Philip Womack

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Contents

PART ONE: THE SILVER KINGDOM

Chapter One: Maddened Magehawks 3
Chapter Two: Concerning Cygnet 21
Chapter Three: The Bound Mare 31
Chapter Four: The Lady of the Pass 42
Chapter Five: The Lonely Beast 54
Chapter Six: The Temple of the Threefold Goddess 66
Chapter Seven: The Last Priest 76
Chapter Eight: The Black Altar 91
Chapter Nine: Blood Sacrifice 99

PART TWO: THE CENTRE OF THE WORLDS

Chapter Ten: Interzone 115
Chapter Eleven: The Shifting World 123

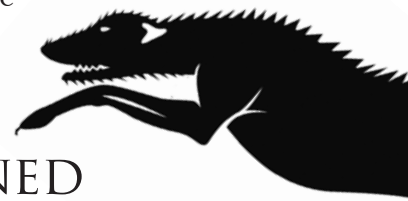
Chapter Twelve: Insects and Acid 130
Chapter Thirteen: The Burning Pit 139
Chapter Fourteen: The Trapped Eagle 159
Chapter Fifteen: Legionaries 172
Chapter Sixteen: The Duel 184
Chapter Seventeen: Battle Begins 205
Chapter Eighteen: Battle Rages 221
Chapter Nineteen: The Centre of the Universe 233
Chapter Twenty: The Threefold Goddess 245
Chapter Twenty-One: Monkeys 258
Chapter Twenty-Two: The Final Fight 267
Chapter Twenty-Three: The Hind 273

Epilogue 288

PART ONE

THE SILVER KINGDOM

Chapter One



Maddened Magehawks

FANGS BARED, the royal hound sprang at Simon, its black fur bristling.

Simon ducked sideways and the hound, veiny eyes glaring and nearly as big as he was, flew past him, almost ripping his arm with its long canines. He gagged as he caught its sulphurous stench in his nostrils, but ignored the sensation, and quickly readied himself to lay a blow on the hound's back with his short sword.

But the hound was too fast. It jackknifed, snarling, and pounced with its full might.

The beast crashed into Simon, making him drop

his weapon, which clattered on to the hard floor, and the hound took the opportunity to clamp on to Simon's leg with its jaws. He struggled to push it off, grabbing fistfuls of fur and skin. A jolt of pain rushed through him, and the room started to go dim and faraway, his thoughts slipping from the present moment as he began to lose consciousness.

He'd made a long journey to get to this point, here in the Silver Kingdom, and it all came back to him, parading before his mind's eye in a series of clear images.

Though he could feel the hound worrying at his leg, his eyes began to close, the pain almost overwhelming.

It seemed so long ago now, when his little sister, Anna, had been annoying him back at home in Limerton, on Earth, and he'd said the spell that had called Selenus, the King of the Silver Kingdom, to take her away.

He'd gone on a long quest to rescue her. But when he'd done so, the dying king had sprung a trap, blocking the Way between the worlds, forcing them to remain where they were in the Silver Kingdom.

He'd got this far, though. He wouldn't let a dog, however huge and terrifying, beat him when he'd

faced snakes made out of shadows, deadly, shape-shifting knights, and worse.

With a large effort, Simon gathered all his remaining strength and heaved at the hound, pushing it off and kicking it hard in the stomach.

Yelping in surprise, the hound turned tail and skittered away.

But not for long.

Almost immediately it swirled round and readied itself for the final attack.

Simon tensed. The hound bounced upwards, and caught Simon's leg between its teeth, knocking him to the floor. He scrabbled to fight it off once more.

It was no use. The hound was too big. He was done for.

'Leave him!' A cool voice cut through the air, commanding the hound.

Reluctantly, the hound released Simon's leg, leaving a small, bloodied tear in his trousers. Whimpering with disappointment, it padded over to the side of the room to slump down by its mistress.

There Selena, recently crowned Queen of the Silver Kingdom in place of her father, was watching. With her newly grown horns, which marked her as the queen, curving out of the side of her head, she

made a striking figure. Her hair was tied neatly in a plait; a dark, loose gown fell around her, its hem reaching to the wooden floor.

She patted the hound, and it rested its head between its huge front paws, slobbering slightly, and letting out a huge sigh and a big, pink lolling tongue.

'Not your best, Simon,' said Selena sharply. 'We don't know what we're going to be facing. Men, beasts and stranger things. You need to be faster, stronger.'

Simon, panting, nodded. 'I'll get better.'

Flora, who'd been watching anxiously from the other side of the room, came running over to him. 'I thought you did all right,' she said and offered her hand, but he ignored it and got up himself, wincing slightly.

Selena swept to the doors of the training room and unbarred them, calling for attendants, who quickly came bearing bowls of hot, scented water, and a balm that smelled of flowers, and bathed and dressed the bite. Simon thanked them.

'We'll finish for now. We meet in the Central Chamber at the high point of the sun.' Selena strode away, gown billowing, the hound and a clatter of attendants following.

Simon, leaning back on his elbow, looked out at the high window above, at the strange, silver sun that shone during the day in the Silver Kingdom. It had risen and set four times since the green rider Andaria had killed Selenus.

Four days since the king's trap had sprung. Four long days of combat training, of tumbles, scratches, bruises, of sword fighting and hand fighting, training their minds and their muscles for what was to come, all overseen by Selena.

'I don't know what she's expecting, but let's hope we don't have to become martial arts experts to survive,' said Flora sympathetically. 'I mean, I can hardly even climb up a rope.'

'Me neither,' laughed Simon, then laughed even more when Flora performed a spectacularly bad impression of a judo chop.

They walked together through the black glass corridors of the palace of the Queen of the Silver Kingdom. People were rushing everywhere, in groups, or one by one: black clad attendants, squires in bright colours, and many others from the town and from the country wide about. Many had been coming to the city since news of the king's death, seeking aid and bringing tidings

from all corners of the country.

Flora and Simon nodded to Lavinia, the Lady of the Stag, who strode past them in the hall in her full armour, antlers rising into the air from her helmet. Since she'd helped lead the rebellion against the King Selenus, she had been advising Selena and was often somewhere close by.

When Simon opened the main door to the comfortable and large set of chambers he was sharing with the others, Anna came bounding across to him and grabbed him by the waist. She'd hardly been able to leave his side since they'd been reunited, and it was only with great reluctance that she let Simon train without her.

Johnny, Flora's older brother, who'd also been taken by the king, was sitting by the window, looking out over the square, holding his arms tightly around his chest. He turned, his face hollow and thin, and smiled weakly.

'What's up, Johnny?' said Flora in the American accent she sometimes used with him.

'Nuttin,' Johnny replied in the same tone, and Flora went over to join him, scrambling up and pointing out of the window down below at a group of squires playing a ball game. Johnny put his

forehead against the window, and Flora placed an arm around his shoulders.

Simon tried to disentangle Anna from his waist. 'Can't I train with you?' she asked.

'No! How many times do I have to say it? No, you can't. It's far too dangerous, and you're –'

'Too young. Humph,' she said, and released Simon, folded her arms, and went back to her bed where she picked up a rag doll and started to play with its hair. 'Wasn't too young to get stolen away,' she said to the doll in an undertone just loud enough for Simon to hear.

Ignoring her, Simon went behind a wooden screen and undressed, washing himself in warm water scented with sweet herbs, then put on the clothes that Selena had given him.

Anna laughed when he came out. 'You look like a girl!'

'I do not,' he said hotly, and looked down at the long, gently shimmering gold and green robe. It billowed as he walked, and he hated it. But his own clothes – the jeans, the jumper, the T-shirt – had been taken away to be cleaned, and had not yet reappeared. His hair was getting longer too, something which he quite liked. He blew it away

from his forehead, and he threw himself on to the soft bed.

None of them could really settle, and they played a game of catch with a rubber ball until the silver sun reached the high-point of the sky, and Johnny noted it was time to go.

They left Anna sulking by herself. 'Too young,' she muttered, and whispered to her doll. The doll, minding its own business, remained blank-faced, and Anna threw it to the other side of the room.

The Central Chamber was busy when the three friends arrived. Lavinia was deep in conversation with the young Knight of the Hawk. The whole company of the leading knights was there, some in armour, some in long robes like Simon's. The townspeople's representatives also thronged the room, dressed more soberly in blacks and greys.

A large, dark -skinned lady, wearing the rich silk robes of a knight, made way for Simon, Flora and Johnny as they entered. 'Thank you,' she said, her whole face beaming. 'You freed us from tyranny!' She took their hands and kissed them.

Each of the friends felt a blush rising. 'It was Andaria, really,' said Simon.

'But it was because of you!' answered the lady,

pressing his arm. He released himself with difficulty, and they hurried to their seats as the lady blew kisses after them. Another tried to stop them as they made for the table, but they squeezed past when Selena noticed them and motioned them through.

The Central Chamber was a large room with tall glass windows that looked out over the square below. Selena was sitting at the middle of the table, in a large wooden chair, and Simon squashed in at one end on a bench, in between Johnny and Flora.

Mithras, the demi-god of the Golden Realm, sat opposite Selena, arms folded calmly, and his supporters Cautes and Cautopates were on either side of him, their blond hair tinged by the sun pouring through the clear windows. Tall golden jugs filled with fragrant cordials, finely worked glasses, and plates of delicious-looking confections were laid along the table.

'Cautes.' Simon nodded to the man on Mithras's right. Cautes shook his head from side to side in response, flopping his hair over his forehead, and made a face at Simon that nobody else could see, sticking the tip of his tongue out and stretching his eyes, then popping a whole sweet in his mouth and gulping. Simon couldn't help but stifle a giggle. He

was glad Cautes was going to come with them on their mission to the Centre of the Worlds.

They knew that Selenus had harmed the Threefold Goddess with his trap and set the worlds out of joint in doing so; they had to find out what he'd done, and stop it, or they would be trapped in the Silver Kingdom for the rest of their lives.

Their companion Pike, newly given his father's title of the Knight of the Shark, was standing behind the Lady of the Stag, and Simon caught his eye. He couldn't help winking, and Pike blushed. Pike's mother, the Lady of the Snake, was not there, but many others thronged around.

'Let us begin.' Selena banged the table and everyone fell silent. 'The messages, do you please.'

Lavinia rose. She was holding a bag of little packets, and unfolded each one carefully. 'Magehawks are coming in from all over the kingdom,' she said. 'They're bringing strange news. Forests withering, although it is summer; unknown beasts prowling; prodigies in the sky that no one can interpret; shadows forming in the far reaches of the kingdom . . .'

Concerned voices began to murmur.

'What about the other worlds? Did anyone try

to get through to the other worlds using their animals?' asked someone.

'The Knight of the Hawk – he has the talent. What do you say?' called Selena.

The Knight of the Hawk stood up. He was young, and his handsome face reddened. 'My queen . . . I tried . . . I could not contact my hawks. Something I cannot reach through blocks me. It pushes me back. It hurts, though I would try again if you wish.'

'I thank you, Knight of the Hawk,' said Selena. 'Do you please try again when you are rested.'

He nodded briefly, and ran his fingers through his thick brown hair before sitting down quickly.

The councillors were now all talking at once, each trying to get heard. All the voices were blurring into one. Everyone was getting up and sitting down, and sending messages by magehawks, and Queen Selena was watching and listening, her hand under her chin, paying careful attention and looking, despite her youthful age, regal.

Simon was feeling more and more annoyed. Nobody was doing anything useful. He wanted to get on and go to the Centre of the Worlds, and all they were doing was chattering. He coughed, but nobody listened; they all jabbered over him. He felt

so helpless and ignored that, without thinking about what he was doing, he banged hard on the table and stood up, his chair legs scraping on the floor.

Everyone went silent. Flora tugged at his elbow, but he didn't sit down. 'Look,' said Simon. 'Flora and I have been stuck here four whole days now, ever since the king died, and what have you all been doing? *Talking*.' He hit his palm down on the table again, causing a glass to jump and clatter.

'Simon, do you please seat yourself,' said Queen Selena gently.

'You said we would go to the Centre of the Worlds,' said Simon, sitting down reluctantly. Flora grabbed his arm, as if to stop him in case he thought about getting up like that again. 'To find out why the Way is closed, what Selenus has done to damage it.'

'And you will,' Mithras interrupted. 'There is more than one difficulty, however. We have been trying to reach the priests at the Temple of the Threefold Goddess – the order went out for all priests to return to their temples after Selenus died. They will best advise us. Our magehawks do not return with any word from them. We sent the Lady of the Snake, but it is four days' ride, and it will be another four at least before she returns with any news.'

'Why do we need these priests?' asked Flora.

'Because they hold the key to the Centre,' replied Mithras quietly. 'And if they are not answering by magehawk, then there is only one thing to do. We shall have to go ourselves to see them.'

'Then let's go now,' said Simon. 'We'll catch up with the Lady of the Snake, or meet her coming back. I can't stand all this waiting about. I need to know – I *want* to know what's happening . . .' He tailed off, unable to complete the sentence that had formed in his mind.

'What's happening there?' came Johnny's sleepy, quiet voice. He'd picked up on Simon's tone. 'Back home, I mean. On planet Earth, the solar system, the Milky Way, etc. etc. We all want to know what's happening at home.'

'No one can see,' said Mithras. 'As the Knight of the Hawk says, there is something in the way, some veil, or wall even.'

'And what about the place where you put my parents?' asked Simon, suddenly anxious. The Golden Messengers had secreted them in a holding place between worlds, safe and out of the way, and he wondered if that had been affected.

'We cannot communicate with the Golden

Realm, so I cannot tell you if it still holds,' Mithras answered.

'Are they in danger?' asked Simon.

Mithras paused, and when he spoke there was a tightness in his voice. 'We are all in danger.'

'So let's go now!' said Simon. 'We're ready, we can deal with it.'

The councillors were murmuring among themselves, some impressed at his bravery, others thinking him rash.

'We need to discuss many things,' Lavinia cut in. 'Your training is hardly sufficient . . .'

Selena looked up. 'That is true.'

'We can fight!' said Simon. 'We got here on our own, and we've been learning from you . . .'

Frowning, Selena thought. 'It is a difficult journey. For now . . .' She paused, looking carefully at Simon and Flora, then placed her hands face down on the table. '. . . I forbid it.'

'That's it?' exploded Simon. 'We just have to wait here?'

'We must wait, at least until the time has passed for the Lady of the Snake to return. And till we leave, you and Flora and Johnny will continue to train.'

'But –' said Simon, deflated.

'The decision of the queen is final,' said Selena. 'We will wait until we hear from the Lady of the Snake.'

Simon kicked the back of the table leg in frustration as the discussion moved to the knights still loyal to the old king, Selenus, who were causing trouble in the city, led by Sir Ursus, Knight of the Black Lion.

The meeting went on, and Simon let his mind drift away from what they were saying. He sipped a cool, fresh cordial, and his eyelids began to droop.

It was Flora who noticed. She, too, had not been paying attention to the conversation, and had been looking out of the window.

'What's that?' She pointed out across the square.

Selena's voice faltered as the light in the room began to darken and shadows lengthened. Simon stood up, and saw in the distant sky a huge black mass covering the sun.

It was moving, and it was coming straight for the palace.

Simon ran to the window, and he was swiftly followed by everybody else, all calling and shouting.

'What is that?' said Flora, aghast.

They could answer the question soon enough.

'Magehawks,' said Pike, as the cloud got closer. 'Hundreds of them. Why aren't they travelling by the shadows?'

The enormous flock reached the square. But instead of settling, they continued to beat their wings.

And then they started to fling themselves at the glass of the windows of the Central Chamber.

One or two, stunned by the blow, fell to the square below, but where they fell, the others continued. A crack appeared in the glass. 'They're trying to get in!' shouted someone.

Simon, face right up to the window, met the staring white eyes of hundreds of magehawks. 'They've gone crazy,' he exclaimed.

'Out! Everybody out!' ordered Selena. There was a rush for the door. Flora leaped over a fallen chair, and Johnny slid round it, but Simon stumbled, and caught his foot. Birds' beaks tapped on the window.

'Come on, Simon!' yelled Flora.

Simon extricated himself and ran for the door, through which everyone else was already streaming.

As he reached it he couldn't help but look back towards the window.

The crack was getting wider and wider, smaller fissures spilling from it, like ripples in a lake. The mass of birds was breaking through.

Johnny grabbed Simon by the shoulders, but he resisted, wanting to see.

And as Johnny managed to pull him through the door, the glass gave way, shattering in a huge rush of air that blew through the room. Glass splintered everywhere, and the maddened, shrieking birds stormed in.

Johnny slammed the door shut on a magehawk's beak, and they stood with their backs to it, listening to the thumps of the birds hurling themselves against it.

'The door will hold,' said someone.

'There's a squire from the square . . . He's coming up . . .' said another.

Simon led the way into the main hall of the palace to meet the squire, who was loping in through the great doors, bedraggled and shocked.

'They're from the Borean priests,' he cried out, holding handfuls of paper. 'Raining down from the magehawks. It's mostly nonsense – just scribbles and symbols! But there are some phrases that keep repeating . . .'

'What are they? What do they say?' demanded Selena.

Outside, Simon could see many birds dropping to the ground, falling in piles, though with exhaustion or death he could not tell.

The squire paled as he read out the message, his voice trembling. '*Help! Bring help now!*' He paused, and glanced at Selena nervously.

'Go on! Read it!' Selena commanded.

The squire continued. '*Or everything will die.*'

Chapter Two



Concerning Cygnet

'Simon? Simon? Can I go with you to the temple? Please?' Anna was dancing around Simon's legs and generally getting in the way as he hefted his belongings on to the horned horse he'd been assigned for the journey to the Temple of the Threefold Goddess: a mid-sized roan with short, pearly horns and a gentle gleam in his eyes.

The arrival of the magehawks and their message had changed Selena's mind, and she'd decided to go to the Temple of the Threefold Goddess herself to find out what was amiss there. *Everything will die.* It was too urgent to ignore. They were all getting ready,

but Anna was to be left behind for her own safety.

Simon started putting things into saddlebags, occasionally stopping to pat or stroke the horse, and all the time trying to ignore Anna. He'd found his old clothes, fresh and clean, and had put them back on, stowing some spares of the Silver Kingdom in his bag.

The band of travellers was in the square outside the palace gates, loading up the horned horses with enough provisions to last the journey to the Temple of the Threefold Goddess – and back again, just in case. Each of them had been given a sword, a dagger, a bow and quiver of arrows, and a small shield that could be strapped on their backs.

It was the midpoint of the morning, the day after the magehawks had come, and the whole city was washed in silver light, glittering and fresh. The black glass towers, piercing the sky, shone. Bells tolled into the air, sweet and clear. All the pictures of Selenus had been torn down, and now that his presence was fully removed, the city felt as if it had struggled out from under a yoke.

Many palace servants were clearing away the dead magehawks and tending to those that were still alive.

Flora, who was wearing her old dress and filling up some saddlebags on her own horse with dried fruits, whistled, and Johnny caught the tune as he helped pack. It was something from their early childhood, a cartoon they'd always watched about Robin Hood, and before they finished it, they fell on each other, laughing.

Simon turned to his little sister who was now pulling at his sleeve. She was so small, so fragile, and his heart filled with love for her. 'There's nothing I can do,' he said as she asked him once more. 'You have to stay here. Don't worry, I'll be back soon, I promise.'

Anna left him, and appealed to Selena. The queen was checking over her huge, sable, horned horse, and shook her head as she bent to look at its hooves. She was not yet used to the horns that had grown when she became queen, and could feel them weighing down on her. Standing up once more, she pulled up her specially made travelling hood, hiding them.

'Can I go?' asked Anna.

Selena shook her head firmly. 'We don't know what is happening up there. The magehawks were behaving so bizarrely . . . I've never seen anything like it. The Temple of the Threefold Goddess has

always been a place of peace. It's hard to believe anything *so* wrong is happening.'

Anna twisted the folds of her dress in her hands, and looked up at Simon expectantly.

Simon guessed that she didn't want to be left with nobody she knew, among these strange black towers and the pale, armoured knights.

'You're too small for a horse, anyway,' said Selena, hoping that would clinch the matter.

'I can ride ponies! I won a competition.' Anna stopped, remembering the blue rosette that was pinned to the corkboard in her bedroom, at home in Limerton by the sea.

Selena smiled at Anna. 'You are brave, Anna. But you cannot come.'

They continued preparing the horses, and Simon forgot about Anna for a while as Lavinia took him, Flora and Johnny aside and put them through their sword paces. They practised for a while, parrying, thrusting, jumping, until Selena gave the sign for them all to get ready to mount.

Simon pulled at the hunting horn, which hung constantly at his side. Since the king had died it had been quiet, as if it were sleeping, though Simon knew how deadly its note could be. He saw

Flora's sunsword was in its sheath, hanging from her belt.

At last they were ready. Selena had given her final orders to the Knight of the Hawk and the Lady of the Stag, who were to rule the Council of the Silver Kingdom until Selena returned, communicating with her by magehawk. Mithras had vanished; they assumed that he would come and meet them by the city gates. Simon said goodbye to Anna, and left her in the care of the Lady of the Stag. He turned to wave, and saw that she had already begun chattering to her protector. Feeling that there was no need to worry about her, he joined Flora.

They crossed through the city streets quietly; there seemed to be no one about. Pike, in light armour, was on the lead horse; behind him came Cautes, who rode bareback on a grey with confidence and poise. Flora and Simon went abreast – Flora with ease, Simon a little less so, but enjoying the rhythm of the ride. Johnny and Selena took up the rear of the procession.

As they passed through the huge city gates set into the turreted walls that surrounded the capital, the royal guards raised their trumpets and blew

a salute. The chief guard cried out, 'We wish you well. You have delivered us once; may you deliver us again.'

And then the whole wall came alive, the battlements thronged with people, all waving and cheering. Simon spotted Cautopates, who threw flowers down to them. Simon caught one, and handed it to Flora. It was blue, unlike any he'd seen before, with huge petals and a heady, delicious scent. Flora put it behind her ear.

'I *am* named after the goddess of flowers, after all,' she said.

They turned, waved and held their weapons in the air; then, borne on the tide of excitement, took the road in the direction of Boreas, the north wind, and the Temple of the Threefold Goddess.

As they were leaving the city, Simon was surprised to hear a voice he knew well.

'Wait! Wait!'

Hardly believing it, he looked over his shoulder to see Mithras approaching on a horse. He was about to relax, when he heard the voice again, crying for them to wait, and a head peeped out from behind Mithras.

Anna was sitting behind him, carrying a little

bag. Out of the top of the bag peered the head of her rag doll. Behind them came Selena's attendant, Clara, leading a small but sturdy pony.

The travellers drew to a halt. 'What's this?' said Selena lightly. 'Insurrection?'

Mithras, looking grave but with a glint in his eye, said, 'I guarantee the safety of this young lady.'

'It was my order that she does not come,' said Selena.

'Upon my honour,' said Mithras, 'she will be safe.'

He put Anna down gently on to the ground, and drew his horse towards Selena, where he whispered something in her ear. Meanwhile Anna let out a cry of excitement and began to jump up and down.

When Mithras had finished, Selena looked thoughtful. 'Anna,' said Selena quietly, calling Simon's sister to her. Anna, awed by Selena's bearing and her horns, came gently. Selena was holding something, which she revealed to Anna.

'This is a short dagger,' she said. 'I had it when I was your age.' Her voice wavered, and she paused a second before recovering. 'My father gave it to me. Look – see how its hilt is set with emeralds, and see the symbol of the moon on the dagger? It is a royal dagger, and its aim is true.' She slipped a little belt

around Anna's waist, and placed the dagger in its sheath on the belt.

'Have you got one for my doll?' said Anna, and Selena laughed. 'She needs to be able to defend herself too!'

Selena's attendant, Clara, ran forwards. 'Will you give this fine young lady a weapon for her doll?' asked Selena.

Clara pulled a long pin from her hair, and gave it to Selena, who presented it courteously to Anna. Anna bobbed a little curtsey.

'Where did she learn how to do that?' whispered Flora to Simon, who shrugged in reply.

'The demi-god Mithras will protect Anna,' said Selena. 'Do you, Simon, object?'

Mithras had saved them before; Simon knew his power. If he was going to look after her, then it would be all right. Even before he could say anything, Anna mounted her little pony, reverently attached the hair-pin to the doll's skirts, and rode up to join Simon. 'See?' she said. 'I am coming after all.' And on she trotted, gabbling happily away to Selena.

One person in the city was not watching on the walls, and he was certainly not rejoicing. As the

populace slowly returned to their homes and tasks, a slim, pale fifteen-year-old boy came quietly out of the side gates, cloaked up and muffled. He was riding a horned horse that looked well-fed and rested, carrying four large wicker panniers.

The boy was clutching a white swan's feather, and he brought it to his lips, and kissed it.

One of the panniers moved, and the lid poked up; inside was a hideous, little monkey-like face, looking out at him and grinning. Cygnet, only son of the Knight of the Swan, placed the swan's feather in a pouch around his neck, then threw the little creature a nut. Another pannier immediately opened up, revealing the creature's companion; it reached out and grabbed the nut from the other, and the two set up a furious chattering.

'Silence, beasts,' said Cygnet, and threw the second creature a nut as well. 'You will get a better reward soon enough.'

He set his horse in the direction of Boreas, chewed on a nut himself and spat out the husk, whilst the two little monkey creatures muttered and giggled. *I'll keep an hour behind the queen*, he thought. *They will not imagine they can be followed. They do not even know that I am alive.*