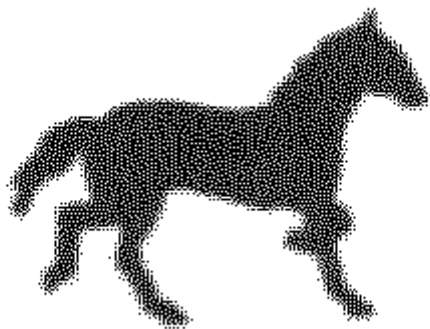


# Green Rider

Kristen Britain



## GRAY ONE

The granite was cold and rough against the gray-cloaked man's palms. It was good, solid granite, from the bones of the earth itself. He traced barely perceptible seams between the huge blocks of the wall. It was the seams, he believed, that held the key. The key to the wall's destruction.

The wall towered above him to some unknown height. It was many feet thick, and it followed Sacordia's southern border for hundreds of miles, from the East Sea to Ullem Bay in the west. It protected Sacordia and the rest of the lands from *Kanmorhan Vane*, which in the common means Blackveil Forest.

The wall had endured for a thousand years. It had been built after the Long War at the turn of the First Age. For a thousand years, the denizens of the dark forest had grown restless, had festered, trapped behind the wall.

Now the Gray One must call on them and end their exile. He would bring these nightmares back into the daylight world. He would bring them slowly. Slowly at first.

The wall was bound with such deep magic that it prickled his hands. The magic was ancient and powerful, even for the works of those long-ago humans. Today humans understood none of it. They knew little of what their ancestors had been capable of. Nor did they know what they, the citizens of present-day Sacordia, were still capable of.

A good thing.

He brushed the layers of magic with his mind. Magic had been melded into each block of granite from the moment it was quarried, through its cutting, finishing, and placement. The mortar had been inlaid with strengthening spells not only to ensure that the wall stood for all time, but to prevent magic from breaking it.

Oh, the spell songs the stonecutters must have sung as they hammered drills into the rock and refined the mortar mixture. The wall was magnificent, really. A great accomplishment that had taken generations of humans to complete. A pity it must be destroyed.

The Gray One smiled beneath the shadows of his hood. He would return the world to a state it hadn't known since before the Long War, far beyond the First Age, a time lost to memory; a time when humans lived in primitive bands that stalked herd beasts and game. There had been no kings back then, no countries, no organized religions. Just superstition and darkness. During the Black Ages, as that long-ago time was now called, they had had a better understanding of magic than they did today. The Gray One looked up. The pink clouds of dawn were fading, and birds squabbled in the trees. His collaborators would be growing impatient for his return. He supposed they had every right to be impatient: they were mortal.

He closed his eyes and shielded himself. He began to follow songs of quarrymen and stonecutters wrought in a tongue modern Sacordians would not recognize. The music sprang from the earth's bones; it wove strands of resistance, barriers, and containment.

The echoes of hammers wielded by stonecutters centuries ago clamored in the Gray One's head. The blows jarred him, rang deep in his mind. He gritted his teeth against the pain and probed deeper.

Men and women sang in unison. Their song intensified as his thoughts rippled along the seams. He caught the harmony of their ancient voices, allowed the cadence of the hammers to invade his mind, and he sang with them.

His body swayed to the rhythm, and dripped with perspiration. But his body was a distant thing now, an afterthought, for his mind was deep within the granite. He flowed within the pink feldspar and crystalline quartz, within the pepper flecks of hornblende. He felt powerful enough to withstand the Ages, untouched by the weathering forces of nature. He could endure anything. But he must surpass this power. He must become stronger than even the granite to break the wall.

His voice found its own harmony running counter to the rhythm within the wall. *All great things must fall*, he sang. *Sing with me, follow me.*

Far away, his forefinger tapped the new rhythm on the wall. It wasn't enough yet to disturb the hundreds of hammers, but it helped create discord. But did he detect uncertainty in the song? Did some of the hammers lose the rhythm?

A splintering akin to the spring cracking of lake ice scattered his thoughts. He lost his bearing. The song and rhythm faded, his solidarity with the wall wavered.

His body absorbed his mind like a sponge. The force sent him flailing backward, stunned and unwieldy in his corporeal form. When he remembered how to use his legs and arms, he inspected his handiwork.

Yes, yes, yes! A hairline fracture in the mortar. The wound would grow, and he could come back and break the D'Yer Wall!

Now he must return to the camp where the humans awaited him. Cracking the wall had sapped a great deal of his energy— there was barely enough left to transport him. He would be in bad shape for the rest of the day, but the soldiers would be impatient to hunt down the Green Rider.

Soon he would be done with this intrigue the humans so valued, but for now, it served his purpose.

As he slung the longbow and quiver of black arrows over his shoulder, he felt someone's gaze upon him. He looked wildly about but saw only an owl roosting on a branch above. It blinked, extinguishing its moon eyes, and twisted its head away, as owls do.

The Gray One had nothing to fear from an owl preoccupied with its early morning hunt. He spread his arms wide to begin the summoning. They trembled from the effort of having cracked the wall. "Come to me, O mortal spirits. You are mine to hold, bound to me in this world. Walk with me now and take me where I must go."

He willed them to him, and they couldn't resist his call. A host of spirits, like a watery blur, gathered around him. Some sat mounted on horses, others stood afoot. Among them were soldiers, old men, women, and children. Ordinary citizens stood beside knights. Beggars huddled next to nobility. All were impaled with two black arrows each.

"By the arrows of *Kanmorhan* Vane, I command you to walk with me now. We will walk on the quick time roads of the dead."

## DEAD RIDER

[Image]

Karigan G'ladheon awakened to the chitter of waxwings and chickadees. Mourning doves cooed and jays defended their territories with raucous song and fluttering wings. Above her, the sky opened up like an expansive dusky canopy that winked with stars. The moon hung low in the west.

Karigan groaned. She lay at the edge of a fallow farmer's field, behind a hedgerow, and her back wasn't taking it well.

She pushed damp hair away from her brow. Everything was wet with dew and her clothes stuck to her like a cold and clammy second skin. She remembered aloud why she was here.

"To get away from Selium."

Her own voice startled her. Aside from the birds, the countryside was wide open and empty and silent. There would be no tolling of Morningtide Bell here, nor the familiar creaking of floorboards as her fellow students moved around in her old dormitory building preparing for a day of classes.

She stood up and shivered in the chill spring air. Indeed, she was "away" from Selium, and would get farther away still before the day was done. She gathered her blanket and things, stuffed them into her pack, stepped over the hedgerow, and started walking. She carried little more than a hunk of bread, some cheese, a change of clothes, and some jewelry that had belonged to her mother— the only objects precious enough to her to carry away. All the rest had been left in the dormitory in her haste to leave Selium.

She walked briskly to stave off the chill, the gravel of the road crunching beneath her boots. The rising sun, with its bands of orange and gold, drew her east.

As she walked, the glistening grasses of farm fields transformed into thick stands of fir and spruce blotting out the newly risen sun and darkening the road.

This was the edge of the Green Cloak she entered, an immense wood that grew thick and wild in the heart of Sacordia. Its more tame borders marched in snatches and thickets right down to the shores of Ullem Bay and the foothills of the Wingsong Mountains. The bulk of the wood was dense and unbroken, save for villages and towns that made islands of themselves in its interior, and the occasional woods road that, from an eagle's view, she thought, must cut through it like a scar.

Such roads were often in conflict with their surroundings. It didn't take much for saplings to start growing in the middle of woods roads and winter blow downs to topple across them, eventually obscuring the least used. A carpet of rusty pine needles softened Karigan's footsteps and gave this road an abandoned look, though it was the main thoroughfare leading into Selium from points east.

Karigan walked till her stomach growled. She sought out a warm patch of sun surrounded by solid, cold shade, and washed down chunks of bread and cheese with handfuls of water from a gurgling stream next to the road. It wasn't the choicest water, but it would have to do.

Afterward, she splashed cold water on her face. She felt altogether bedraggled after just one night on the road, and she longed for the hot baths and full meals the school served up.

"Don't tell me I miss it..." She glanced over her shoulder as if the entire campus, with its templelike academic buildings looming over the city from atop its hill, might pop into view.

It was curious how a night on the road made yesterday's events seem somehow less significant, less hurtful. Karigan half-turned, gazing back down the road which, within a day's walk, ended at the school. Her hands tightened into balls and she clenched her jaw. She would show the dean.

*Kick me out of school, will you? Let's see how you like confronting my father.* She grinned, imagining her father, his expression livid, towering over a shrinking Dean Geyer.

Then her shoulders sagged and her grin faltered. It was no good. She had no control over her father. What if he agreed with the dean that her punishment was just?

She kicked the ground and pebbles skittered across the road. Gods, *what a mess*. She hoped to reach Corsa before the dean's letter did, so she could tell her father her side of the story first. Either way, she would be in deep trouble. Maybe she ought to hire herself out on a merchant barge and stay away for good. After all, that's what her father had done when he was a boy.

She jammed her hands into her pockets, and with head bowed, ambled along the rutted road at a reluctant pace.

She startled a baby squirrel sitting on an old lightning-racked stump. It pipped and squealed, its tail a-bristle. It stamped in place, then darted from one edge of the stump to the other, as if too frightened to decide which way to go.

"Sorry I scared you, little one," Karigan said.

Chittering, the squirrel dashed into some underbrush and scurried noisily through the leaf litter of the forest floor, sounding like some much larger beast.

Karigan walked on humming an off-key tune. However, when the sounds of the squirrel did not abate but, in fact, grew much louder, she froze.

The racket shattered the woods. Trees and shrubs shook as if some wild creature— many times larger than a squirrel— thrashed in the twined branches and undergrowth. Crazy catamounts and rabid wolves played through her mind. She hadn't a weapon with which to fend off the beast, and she couldn't run either; her feet seemed to have taken root in the ground.

She drew a ragged breath. Whatever the nameless beast was, it charged her way, and fast.

It burst from the woods in an explosion of branches. Karigan's breath hissed in her throat like a broken whistle.

The creature loomed huge and dark in the tree shadows. It huffed with great wheezings through flared nostrils like some infernal demon. Karigan closed her eyes and stepped back. When she looked again, a horse and rider, not some evil dragon of legend, staggered onto the road. Twigs and leaves fell from them to the ground.

The horse, a long-legged chestnut, was lathered with sweat and huffed as if from a hard run. The rider slumped over the chestnut's neck. He was clad in a green uniform. Branches had lashed trails of blood across his white face. His broad-shouldered frame twitched with fatigue. He half dismounted, half fell from the horse. Karigan cried out when she saw two black-shafted arrows impaled in his back.

"Please..." He beckoned her with a crimson glove. She took one hesitant step forward. The rider was only a few years older than she. Black hair was plastered across his pain-creased brow. Blue eyes blazed bright with fever. With the two arrows buried in his back, he looked as if he had fought off death longer than any mortal should have.

He was of Sacordia, Karigan was certain, though the green uniforms were far rarer than the black and silver of the regular militia.

"Help..."

Each step she took was shaky as if her legs could no longer support her. She knelt beside him, not sure how she could aid a dying man.

"Are you Sacordian?" he asked. "Yes."  
"Do you love your country and your king?"

Karigan paused. What a curious question. King Zachary was relatively new to the throne and she knew little of his policies or methods, but it wouldn't do to sound disloyal to a dying servant of Sacordia.

"Yes."

"I'm a messenger... Green Rider." The young man's body spasmed with pain, and blood dribbled over his lip and down his chin. "The satchel on the saddle... important message for... king. Life or death. If you love Sacor... Sacordia and its king, take it. Take it to him."

"I- I..." One part of her wanted to run screaming from him, and another part felt drawn to his need. Running away to Corsa, instead of waiting for her father to collect her at Selium, had held an irresistible air of adventure that she had anticipated. But real adventure now looked at her with a terrifying visage. "Please," he whispered. "You are—  
The last words died inaudibly as blood gurgled in his throat and sprayed his lips, but she thought she caught a breathy *the one*. The one what? The only one on the road? The only one to take the message? "I"  
"Dangerous." He shuddered.

Everything around fell silent in an expectant hush, as if the world held its breath for her decision.

Before Karigan could stop herself, she said, "I'll do it." She heard the words as if someone else had drawn them from her.

"You's-swear?" She nodded.  
"Sword. Bring it to me."

The horse shied from Karigan, but she caught his reins and drew the saber from the saddle sheath. Its curved blade flickered in a patch of sun as she held it out before her. She knelt beside the messenger again.

"Wrap your hands around the hilt," he said. When she did, he placed his hands over hers. It was then she saw his gloves were not dyed crimson, not originally. He coughed, and more blood flecked the corners of his mouth. "Swear... swear you'll deliver... the message to King Zachary... for love of country." Karigan could only stare at him wide-eyed.

"Swear!"

It was as if she already looked upon a ghost rather than a living man. He would not allow himself to die until she swore the oath. "I swear... I'll deliver the message for the love of my country."

Although she had sworn, the Green Rider was not ready to die yet. "Take the brooch... from my chest. It will identify you... as messenger... to other Riders." He squeezed his eyes shut in pain till the spell passed. "Identify you as messenger... to other Riders." The words were gasped as if he were forcing air in and out of his lungs by sheer will to extend his life. "Fly... Rider, with great speed. Don't read my message. Then they can't torture... it from you. If captured, shred it and toss it to the winds." Then, because his voice had grown so faint, she had to lean very close to hear his final words. "Beware the shadow man."

A cold tremor ran through Karigan's body. "I'll do my best," she told him.

There was no response from the messenger this time though his eyes still stared at her, bright and otherworldly. She gently pried his fingers from her hand and closed his eyes. She hadn't seen the winged horse brooch before, but now, pinned over his heart, it glowed golden in the sun. Absently she wiped bloody finger marks off her hands onto her trousers and then unclasped the brooch.

A curious sensation, not at all unpleasant, as if all her nerves sang in unison, tingled throughout her body. The gold warmth of the sun embraced her, and drove the shadowy chill away. There was a fluttering like great white wings beating the air, and the sound of silver-shod hooves galloping...

Moments later, the sensation receded, and she realized the sound was her own excited heartbeat, and the sun had risen sufficiently to widen the patch of light she stood in. Nothing more. She pinned the brooch to her shirt.

She then sensed, like a breeze whispering through a hundred aspen trees, invisible lips that seemed to murmur, *Welcome, Rider.*

Karigan shook her head to clear it of such fancies, and turned to practical matters. What to do with the messenger's body? She couldn't just leave it lying there in the middle of the road exposed to carrion birds and passersby, could she? She wouldn't want to stumble across a body in the middle of the road during her travels. It just wasn't right to leave it there.

She grimaced. The body was too heavy for her to drag into the woods by herself, and how would she bury it? She most certainly hadn't packed a shovel. It seemed wrong to leave the body out in the open, but... she had to try. Then, as if a voice said to her, *Don't waste the time*, she backed away from the body and took up the reins of the horse.

And still she hesitated. The least she could do was leave the saber with the messenger to show how bravely he had died. But what if she met up with the people who had struck him with the arrows? She would need some kind of defense, even if a saber wasn't any good against arrows. Practicality won out, and she slid the blade back into its sheath.

The messenger had told her to fly, but running the horse to his death would serve no purpose. She would walk him and mount up only when he seemed at least partially recovered.

The horse was a sorry-looking beast. His legs were long but thick; obviously he had been bred to run fast for distances with no thought to aesthetics. His neck reminded Karigan of her father's descriptions of some long-necked wild beasts he had seen on one of his voyages. The horse's coarse chestnut hide was crisscrossed with old scars.

"I wish I knew your name," Karigan told him as they plodded along.

The horse curved his neck to look, not at her, but behind her. She glanced back, too. The messenger's body had already fallen behind a bend in the road, and there was nothing to see besides the pointy shadows of spruce trees shrinking as the morning progressed.

She shuddered. The messenger's twisted, tortured form would stay in her memory for some time to come. She had helped lay out the corpses of old aunts and uncles for funerals, but they had died peacefully in their sleep, not with arrows driven into their backs.

This message business was a huge change of plans. Home was out of the question. Karigan bit her lip. Her father would be aggrieved enough by her suspension from school, and now she was running off on some reckless errand without having considered the consequences.

She could almost hear her aunts enumerating her deficiencies: *Feckless*, Aunt Gretta would say; *Willful*, Aunt Brini would add; *Impulsive*, Aunt Tory would declare. Aunt Stace would sum it all up with, *G'ladheon*, and all the aunts would nod knowingly in mutual agreement.

Karigan thrust a strand of hair behind her ear. She could not help but concur with her aunts' assessment. It seemed she always made the wrong choices— the kind that got her into trouble.

It was too late to turn back now, though. She had made a promise. She had sworn to the Green Rider she would take the message to King Zachary himself.

She had visited Sacor City once as a young child, and at the time, elderly Queen Isen, Zachary's grandmother, reigned over Sacordia. Zachary's father had ascended the throne only to fall ill and die a short time later. Zachary's ascension to the throne had been challenged by his brother, Prince Amilton, but why, she did not know. She assumed all royals engaged in squabbles whenever power and prestige were at stake.

Now her ignorance annoyed her. What could be happening in the land that meant a life-or-death message for the king? What did the message contain that was so vital someone was willing to kill for it? She longed to look at the contents of the message, but the Green Rider had ordered her not to.

Belatedly, she wondered how much danger she had put herself in. She was all alone amidst the wild forest lands of Sacordia. She carried a message for which a man had been pursued and killed. She let out a trembling sigh, suddenly yearning for home; to be held in the safety of her father's arms and to hear her aunts gossiping in the kitchen. She missed the big old house in Corsa and the predictable and unimportant concerns of everyday life that pulsed and flowed through it.

The recklessness of her decision to carry the message truly set in. With a sinking feeling, she knew it would be a long time before she saw home again.

[Image]

Three wooden arms branched from a cedar signpost planted in a grassy island in the middle of the intersection. From the south arm hung a shingle indicating the River Road. More shingles, carved with the names of towns along the way, hung beneath it. If Karigan were going home, she would take this road.

The middle arm pointed to the well-maintained King-way which bore east, the most direct route to Sacor City and King Zachary. Her father had said the Kingway would one day be paved all the way from Sacor City to Selium, increasing commerce and prosperity for all the villages situated along it.

The third arm pointed toward an ill-kept, overgrown track. The one shingle hanging from it bore one ominous word: North.

Estral, Karigan's good friend at school— her only friend at school— had hinted there was more activity up north in recent months and that King Zachary had reinforced the borders with armed patrols. But Estral, who pursued the craft of the minstrels and seemed to come by incalculable amounts of information from unguessable sources, never said exactly where the trouble was emanating from. Mysterious Et Wood lay due north, but somehow she couldn't fathom anything from that strange place deigning to bother Sacordia.

The horse had finally cooled down enough for Karigan to mount up. The saddle was a tiny thing compared to what she was used to. A light saddle made sense if you wanted to travel speedily, which she supposed most messengers did, but it would take some getting used to. It felt like there was nothing between her rump and the horse's bony spine.

The message satchel was strapped to the front of the saddle, and a bedroll, two small packs, and the saddle sheath to the cantle. She would investigate the contents of the saddlebags later when she was well down the Kingway. Maybe there would even be food inside one of them.

She adjusted the stirrup irons to a comfortable length, settled into her seat, and squeezed the horse's sides. He didn't budge. She kicked more insistently, but he stood his ground.

"You're a stubborn, ill-trained horse," she said.

The horse snorted and walked toward the North Road of his own volition.

"Hey!" Karigan pulled back on the reins. "Whoa. Who do you think is in charge here?"

The horse stomped his hoof and shook the reins. Karigan tried guiding him toward the Kingway again, but he refused. When she let up, he gained a few more steps toward the North Road. She dismounted in disgust. She would lead him onto the Kingway by foot if she had to. The horse tossed his head back and jerked the reins out of her hands. He took off down the North Road at a trot.

"Hey, you rotten horse!"

More horrified than angry that the horse was running away with the important message, she chased after him. He looked back at her as if to laugh and kept jogging for nearly a mile. Then he waited patiently, cropping the grass that grew in the road, for an infuriated Karigan to catch up. When she was just within an arm's reach of the reins, he swished his tail and trotted off again, leaving her to shout a number of curses in his wake.

The third time, Karigan made no attempt to grab the reins. She stood huffing and puffing before him with her hands on her hips.

"All right, horse. Maybe you know something I don't. Maybe the Kingway is more dangerous because it's the most direct route to King Zachary. We'll try this road for a while."

At this compromise, the horse allowed her to gather up the reins and mount. He responded to her commands as a well-trained horse should, and Karigan frowned at his duplicity.

"That's right, you rotten horse," she said. "Pretend nothing happened."

He then adopted an uncomfortable gait that jarred every bone in her body.

"I do believe you're doing this on purpose."

The horse made no indication he had heard her, and continued on in his ambling, bouncing, potato-sack gait. Karigan clucked him into a canter which was equally jarring, but would make better headway. If foes were on their trail, she wanted to keep as far ahead as possible.

Red squirrels raced across the road before them. "Road" was laughable. It served more as a streambed when the ditches were too overgrown or filled with debris to drain properly. When Karigan reached King Zachary, she resolved to inform him what a sorry state the road was in, and demand that taxes be put to good use in repairing it. Well, maybe not demand. One did not demand anything of a king, but she would make a strong recommendation nevertheless.

Later that afternoon, she slowed the horse to a halt and dismounted. She threw her pack to the ground and searched through the saddlebags to see what would prove useful during her journey. To her delight, she found not only dried beef, bread, apples, and a water skin, but a thick green greatcoat, caped at the shoulders. Though it was a little long in the sleeves, it fit fairly well.

"Now I won't go cold." She took the food and water and plopped on the ground for a feast, and groaned. "Am I sore." She glared at the horse who nibbled innocently at some grass.

After her light supper, Karigan wrapped herself in the greatcoat. She dozed off, and in a dream, imagined that a filmy white figure approached the horse and spoke to him. The horse listened gravely to every word. She heard nothing but a low whisper. *Who are you?* she wanted to ask. *Why do you disturb my rest?* But her mouth would not work, and she couldn't shrug off her slumber.

A nudge on the toe of her boot woke her up. The horse gazed down at her and whickered. It was dusk. "Are you telling me it's time to go?"

The horse waited for her on the road. "All right. I'm coming, I'm coming."

They trotted along the road again, the flutelike song of thrushes echoing in the twilight. The horse compelled Karigan to ride through the night. It was an uncomfortable ride although his gait lacked its former tooth-rattling agony.

As she rode, the woods and the abandoned road began to take on a new, ominous character. Tree limbs clinked together like old bones, and clouds blanketed the moon and stars. Her breath fogged the air, and she was glad of the warmth the greatcoat provided.

A number of times she glanced over her shoulder thinking someone was following behind. When she saw no one, she pulled her coat tighter about her and tried singing some simple songs, but they died in her throat. "Can't keep a tune anyway," she muttered. She urged the horse into a canter, but still the unseen eyes seemed to bore into her back.

## DISAPPEARING ACT

[Image]

By the time morning arrived, bleak and gray, Karigan rode hunched in the saddle. She was exhausted, but the sensation of being watched had disappeared with first light and she finally felt safe to stop and rest.

She slid from the horse's back onto wobbly legs and groaned. Riding class had been one of her best, but nothing had prepared her for endurance riding. Too tired to even eat, she loosened the horse's girth so that he might have some comfort, wrapped herself in her stained blanket, and fell into a deep sleep.

[Image]

She guessed it was late morning when she awakened. Gray clouds foretold showers to come. She leaned against a gnarled ash tree and slipped her chilled hands into the pockets of the greatcoat, and found, to her surprise, a piece of paper. Curiously she unfolded the crisp, white sheet. It was a letter written in bold script, addressed to one Lady Estora.

"A letter from our dead messenger?" she asked the horse. He blinked at her with long lashes.

She hesitated to read it. It wasn't addressed to her, or intended for her, and she feared invading someone's privacy. But the messenger was dead, and reading it wouldn't do him any harm. If she could find out who Lady Estora was, she might be able to deliver it to her one day. With this rationale, she felt better about reading it— until she realized it was a love letter. Her cheeks burned as she read:

*My Dearest Lady Estora,*

*How I miss you these last few months; your ready smile and merry eyes. My heart aches with the knowledge that it will yet be a long month to the day before we see one another again. My brother insists it's not love, but what does he know of it? He has never loved a soul.*

Karigan scanned the private, loving sentiments until she reached the final paragraph.

*It is dreadfully lonely without you and to keep my spirits light, I think fair thoughts of you planning our spring wedding. Do not worry— dark arrows couldn't possibly keep me from you. With Loving Devotion, Fryan Coblebay*

Karigan clutched the letter to her chest and sighed wistfully, imagining that Lady Estora was the most beautiful woman who lived and how distraught she would be over her beloved Fryan Coblebay's death.

Fryan Coblebay. The messenger for whom she swore she would deliver a message to the king. The dead Green Rider. He was no longer nameless. How ironic his last line about dark arrows.

The horse jerked up his head, his ears pricked forward.

Karigan shook herself out of the reverie. "What's wrong? What do you hear?"

He pawed at the road. His uneasiness was enough of an answer for Karigan. She thrust the love letter back into her pocket and cleared up her things. Hooves clipclopped distantly down the road.

She stepped into the stirrup to mount the horse, but the saddle slid beneath his belly. The contents of the

saddlebags spilled onto the road. She cursed and pushed the saddle to its rightful place behind the horse's withers, and stuffed the bags with their displaced goods.

A sudden gust took her blanket and it tumbled down the road with a life of its own. Karigan sprang after it, feeling like a clown as the wind took it just out of her grasp. Finally she pounced on it and ran back to the horse with the crumpled mass.

This time, before mounting, she tightened the girth, skinning her knuckles on the metal buckles. She sucked on them, tasting salty blood. Sweat trickled down her sides. The hoofbeats were drawing nearer.

There was no telling exactly how close the riders were, or even if they were the ones who had pursued Fryan Coblebay. She was determined not to find out.

A fine mist fell and tendrils of fog reached out of the forest as Karigan and the horse galloped along the road. She didn't know what else to do except follow the road. If they cut through the forest, its dense growth would hamper their speed. If the people following behind were hoping to waylay the message she carried, they might have a tracker among them who could find her just as easily off the road as on. If she remained on the road and an archer with black arrows was among the group, surely she was an open target. No easy answer came to her.

They ran hard. She began to wonder how long the horse could endure this pace without rest. The fog, at least, would provide some cover. And where were they? Where did the road lead besides north? The stream of doubts flowed through Karigan's mind. She bent low over the saddle, queasy with uncertainty.

When they came upon an enormous fallen spruce blocking the road, Karigan was prepared to pull the tireless horse aside, but his stride did not flag. As he gathered himself beneath her, she grabbed handfuls of his mane and closed her eyes. He launched over the spruce. Branches slapped his legs and belly. Upon landing, his front hooves dug furrows into the soft road surface. A lesser horse would have refused.

Pain pelted down, the sky darkening as if it were evening rather than late morning. The road turned into a quagmire of mud, and the horse slipped and labored through it. When they reached a stream flowing across the road, instead of under it through a collapsed culvert, she pulled the gasping horse to a halt. "Running through this mess will only break one of your legs," she said.

She guided him upstream. A tracker wouldn't be able to find hoofprints in rushing water. If they were lucky, the rain would wash away their prints on the road. The Horse, as she decided to call him for lack of any other name, seemed to approve, or at least he did not resist.

Karigan pushed away branches hanging over the stream, receiving an extra drenching from water accumulated on each limb. They picked their way over slick moss-covered rocks and through deep mud.

A granite ledge, mottled with green lichen, large enough to hide behind, loomed out of the mist. The road couldn't be seen through the fog, but it was close enough that anyone passing by could be heard. Karigan concealed herself and the horse behind the ledge, and stood miserably in the downpour awaiting some sign.

Though only moments passed, the waiting was interminable. Karigan dismounted and, tired of the rain pounding on her head, drew up her hood. She leaned against the coarse, wet granite, berating herself for having left Selium at all.

When she left Selium, the possibility of encountering genuine danger had never occurred to her. Sure, she had wanted an adventurous life like her father's. And here it was, nothing at all like she dreamed it would be.

If something happened to her, she would be unable to clear her name in Selium. More distressing still, the people who cared about her would have no clues to her disappearance. She closed her eyes and could see her father scouring the countryside for her, calling her name, grieving... Her throat constricted, and she swallowed hard.

The Horse tensed beside her, his ears pricked forward. Voices could be heard from the road, faint at first, then clearer as they drew closer.

"No sign of any horse here."