

# FEARSOME



Harp Strathe

# Table of Contents

[Title Page](#)

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

Fearsome  
by  
Harp Strathe  
ISBN: 978-1-954079-50-2  
A Pink Flamingo Ebook Publication  
Copyright © 2021, All rights reserved  
For information contact:  
Pink Flamingo Media  
[www.pinkflamingo.com](http://www.pinkflamingo.com)  
P.O. Box 632 Richland, MI 49083  
USA

Email Comments: [comments@pinkflamingo.com](mailto:comments@pinkflamingo.com)

With the exception of quotes used in reviews, no part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form, by any means, including mechanical, electronic, photocopying recording or otherwise without prior written permission of the publishers.

## Chapter One

*Hic sunt dracones* — “Here be dragons.”

~Notation on the Ostrich Egg Globe, 1504.

The legatus came down the stairs, stopping at the first cell. Hawthorne didn't speak the Scathian language, so he couldn't question the prisoner in front of him as he'd like. He had just learned that the replacement translator had died on the journey to Anwen Pass. The previous translator had broken his neck falling from a horse. You'd think it was a dangerous profession.

It didn't mean he and his men stopped killing Scathians. Everyone understood that language.

One of the prisoners was dying on a cot. The other had a raised scar across his face and graying hair, an old fighter. The Scathian came close, close enough to reach through the bars with those battered hands. Behind Hawthorne, torches sputtered, the flickering light reflected off the shiny mineral surface of the stone walls.

Anwen Citadel was hewn out of the mountain itself, overlooking the pass between great peaks, the entrance to Calthus. There was a constant drip down here, damp, the walls weeping.

The prisoner was bare-chested, his side wrapped from the healer, fresh blood staining the dressing. He faced Hawthorne, tilting his chin up the stone stairs, making a chopping motion, his eyes shifting and then returning. Hawthorne continued to stare in his direction.

“Night,” Hawthorne answered in the trade tongue, which was limited, his face impassive. “Food?”

The prisoner nodded, looking him over.

“Hawthorne,” the legatus said, gesturing briefly to himself. It seemed important to the Scathians that he know their name, and even more important that they know his.

The Scathian nodded. “Borsta,” the prisoner said, gesturing to himself, his voice deep.

Hawthe held his hands open, a general offer. Borsta understood him and made a drinking motion. He already had water. Hawthorne nodded. The prisoner's mouth twitched. He made a universal curvy motion indicating a woman. Hawthorne smiled slowly, shaking his head. The prisoner laughed low and shrugged his shoulders. Nothing else, then.

Nodding to the prisoner, Hawthorne left. He went up the stairs from the prison cells, opening and closing the heavy door at the top, and down the hall, taking the cutback to a new set of stairs. Gunn joined him, the walls stone, the ceiling and floor, the stairs, everything made of mountain here.

"Get the Scathian some food and ale," Hawthorne said as they climbed. "Let him get drunk if he wants. We execute him tonight."

"Yes, Legatus."

Hawthorne ignored the door at the top of the stairs. It led to the alcoves where his men slept, small rooms but private, and to the long room with a table where The Fifty ate, the kitchens behind that. He turned to take the next set of stairs. At the top, he opened the door to the residence of the legatus. Gunn followed, closing the door behind them.

The fire was already warm in the parlor, all of it stone, a large table and seating there, tall vaulted ceilings with wood rafters yawning above them. Gunn went and added more fuel. In the same room, there was a small cupboard for temporarily storing food as well as a chair and huge sturdy desk and a sideboard with delicate turned legs.

The walls were hewn from the rock, the floors fieldstone. A huge window looked out over the mountains pass. Standing in front of the window, one could see the only road below, a small scored line winding in all the green far below. Another road twisted down from Anwen Citadel, a steep decline, to join it.

Hawthorne walked to his desk, pulling off his gloves. He tossed them aside, sitting. Gunn went to the sideboard and

got them both a drink. He walked and handed one to Hawthé, pulling a chair from the table and sitting across from him.

"We'll swear in Neander, the new man, tomorrow," Hawthé said.

"Well, no surprise he can fight. With a name like that, I would have beaten him as a child just on principle," Gunn said. "We'll miss Severis, but I don't suppose it would do for The Fifty to become The Forty-nine."

"What do you think of the new man?"

"Neander? A young fool, like all of them."

"He's seventeen," Hawthé dismissed.

"Well, he's one of The Fifty now," Gunn said, a big barrel-chested man who was skilled with a spear, short brown cropped hair that stuck up in places, his voice always raspy. Gunn was older than the legatus, the eldest of The Fifty and therefore Hawthé's second. Gunn would retire soon, although he'd probably stay to train the new men. Most of The Fifty who made it to old age stayed. Behind the citadel, up a small path, was a place for graves, holding any of The Fifty who died without family to claim the body. This had been Gunn's life, and the man still asked Hawthé the question.

"Do you ever wonder why they choose it?" Gunn said. "To become one of The Fifty?"

Hawthé barely shrugged. The Fifty rarely talked about it, especially the older ones. Their oath was the backdrop behind everything they did. "What was your reason?" Hawthé said to the older man, leaning back.

"Nothing complicated. I was never good at anything but killing, but I was very good at that," Gunn said. "And the youngest legatus in three hundred years? Why did you choose to shelter in this rock?"

Hawthé eyed him. Gunn had never asked him that before. "My father was killed by Scathians in Dewster when I was nine," Hawthé said, looking into his drink. He didn't say

how his mother had betrayed his father to a Scathian lover and then left to live in Scatha, the traitorous bitch, leaving Hawthé to be raised by his uncle and everyone knowing. Hawthé didn't talk about his mother. He looked up to find Gunn's sharp eyes on him.

Gunn took a toothpick from his pocket, popping it in his mouth, rolling it to the other side. "Nasty business," Gunn said. "Revenge, then."

"I was young and hot," Hawthé said.

"A hothead?" Gunn said, his toothpick migrating to the other side. "You?"

Hawthé sent him a glance. "We'll sweep Anwen Road tomorrow," Hawthé said, "six patrols of three, random searches for contraband."

"And if the sky opens and a piss-storm deluge drops on our heads?" Gunn said, sour.

"Then we'll sweep the road tomorrow, six patrols of three, random searches."

Gunn finished his drink, setting the glass down on the desk with a small clatter. "Yes, Legatus," he said, getting up and turning to leave, opening the door and bending to go under the timbered doorframe, closing it behind himself.

Hawthé rose, taking his drink with him. He walked into his bedchamber, passing a whole wall of print books on his left and a chair in which to read them, as well as a deep tub also hewn out of the rock, a small stove for a fire there to warm the water. His bed was under the window to his right. Facing his wardrobe, he went slightly to the left of it and wound through a tight stone tunnel there, just enough for his body to move through. He unlocked and opened a door at the end, bending to come outside onto a small plateau looking over all of it. It was one of the best things about being legatus, this plateau.

He walked and stood at the edge, not bothered by the rain, a dizzying height, standing practically in the clouds. His plateau was the highest reach of Anwen Citadel. From here,

he could look through the pass and see the walled border of Scatha, their enemies, only a wide plain between them.

To his left, in the deep mountains, their jagged peaks, were the Northern Wastes. They fascinated him, tales of their enormous crystal caves, whole shelves of frozen water and lights in the sky that shimmered in darkness like a night rainbow. You wanted to imagine the silence of a place like that, its stark, foreign beauty. Only animals that were hardy enough to survive harsh cold lived there. Certainly not people.

Directly below him ran a single road, tiny from here, small lights winking along its length. They were lanterns visible in the dusk, a constant stream of people flowing through the mountain pass. Traders and travelers. Behind him, if he could have seen through solid rock, was Imber, the huge northern Calthusian trade city sheltering in the shadow of the pass, its round walls and brightly colored houses and markets.

The rain cleared, the evening cool. He watched the sun dip behind the mountains, the stark and sheer granite faces reflecting the fading light, shifting through dusky jewel colors, blues and greens splashing on the side of the mountains.

When it was dark but the stars not out yet, Hawthorne rose and went back inside and into the parlor, putting more fuel on the fire. He pulled off his wool cloak, the water beading, tossing it over a chair there. He was tall, lean and powerful, with broad shoulders and big scarred hands. Above sweeping brows and intense, dark eyes, his hair was black, falling to his jaw.

He began pulling clothing off in the warmth of the room, his stance wide and his legs planted, a padded coat, worn leather, his vambraces. He had a flax linen shirt under the coat, simple, no collar, tan trousers with the distinctive Calthusian metal press-stud buttons down the outside seam.



He went to the sideboard, delicate turned legs, pouring more amber liquid into his glass. He walked to the window, restless, looking out. It began to rain again. He heard the bell from Imber as it tolled the ninth hour and he tossed his drink back, grabbing his coat. Time to execute the Scathian.

The next day, Hawthorne returned in early evening with his patrol, bringing contraband they'd confiscated in the pass, moving the items into storage next to the cells, empty now, and doing an inventory. The evening meal was lively, the men playing music, some dancing together, fifty of them crowded into this space.

Hawthorne was at the head of the very long table, his chair pushed back and his feet up. The Fifty were arranged along its length by age, the oldest close to the legatus and then getting younger. Hawthorne was listening to Gunn tell stories about the previous legatus, who would occasionally take a woman, but who had liked pretty young men the best.

"I was worried about this one when he came all fresh and seventeen," Gunn said, the ale flowing, gesturing to Hawthorne and laughing. "He's so pretty, I thought Ferth was going to rape him for sure."

"Fuck's sake," Hawthorne said to Gunn. Hawthorne didn't say how he'd had to rebuff Ferth at the time, but Ferth had still been a good legatus.

"Sorry, Legatus," Gunn said, laughing again.

"Lots," Hawthorne announced when he heard the eighth bell ringing in Imber, the sound of the bells clear up here at the Anwen Citadel and the way they kept the time.

A portion of the men ignored him, but many of them dug into their pockets as Hawthorne did, all of them tossing the die they kept there, six sides. On one of the six sides was a red dot, although he knew some of the men carved theirs with obscene images, pussy or tits.

Hawthorne was pleased when the red dot came up on his roll, Gunn leaning and looking at it.

"You always get the roll, Legatus," Gunn complained.

“Not always,” Hawthé muttered.

“It’s weighted, maybe, being the legatus,” Stiles teased him, smirking, whose die had come up blank.

Hawthé snatched up the die in front of him and threw it at Stiles, who snatched it out of the air, demonstrating the reflexes that had made him one of The Fifty. Stiles had thrown his to the legatus shortly after the die had left Hawthé’s hand. When it arrived, Hawthé caught it and threw it down, Stiles doing the same. The dice rolled, the red dot coming up in front of Hawthé, Stiles coming up empty, his men laughing and crowing as they traded back.

“Look at that,” Gunn said in disgust. “Fate’s favor, right there.”

Hawthé stood up, picking up his gloves, putting his die in his pocket. “Let me know if Scatha invades,” he said. “Otherwise, don’t fucking bother me.”

Hawthé walked up the stairs. He went into his residence, taking everything off but his trousers and boots, his chest bare, broad shoulders and big arms. It had been a long time since the men had teased him about his beauty. It had always been a burden to him, never of any real use. He heard one of his men ring the small bell on the main plateau six times, six single rings and two double, summoning them. Eight of The Fifty had thrown red dots, including himself. The Citadel consorts would arrive soon. Six women and two men, according to the bell.

Before long, she knocked. Hawthé let her in, straight dark hair to her ass and pretty. Hawthé had fucked her before, but he didn’t know her name. She didn’t know his. They wouldn’t speak to one another.

Ten women and five men were kept in a small house at the foot of Anwen Citadel. They were chosen when they were twenty at festival by petition, only the prettiest flesh. Released from the Citadel at thirty years old, they were given a lifelong stipend for their ten years of service that would keep them the rest of their lives. Their health was

guarded carefully. They only fucked The Fifty. The competition was fierce, young women and men coming from all over Calthus to compete for the honor.

Hawthe had already thrown the ropes over the rafters. She came in, only a cloak over her. She removed it, setting it aside, his eyes on her body, small breasts and large puffy nipples, a round ass.

He brought her to the place he wanted and tied her hands behind her back. She met his eyes and smiled at him, Hawthorne remaining impassive. They didn't kiss. The Mesdame who ran the small house below knew her business, knew his desires, the desires of his men. Sometimes the woman who was sent to Hawthorne didn't like what he did and he took her anyway. He had things he didn't like to do in his job either.

He got the rope and wrapped it across her chest, crossing, and then repeated that until it would support her securely. He brought it to her ankles, and then to her thighs, leaving slack. Tossing it over the rafters again, his hands working, he wrapped it across her hips and under her breasts. It took some time. When he was ready, he lifted her with his arm, face down, pulling on the ropes. He secured them and stepped back.

She was suspended, face-down, her hands behind her back. Her heels were to her butt, her legs spread. He checked her height. Her shoulders and chest were supported, but her head was hanging, the ropes putting tension on her breasts, which jutted to the floor.

He went and checked all the ropes, making sure nothing was too tight and that her weight was evenly distributed. He stripped. When he was naked, he got his crop, a square leather keeper. He tested it in the air. He never permanently marked a woman. What he did here would fade in a few days, during which she would rest and heal before she was given to another. He stood in front of her, waiting. She raised her head, her hair around her face, looking up at him.

He met her eyes, the crop going under her. He brought it up to tap on her nipple gently, going to the other. Her breath drew in sharply as he struck. He watched her small breast jiggle and did it again, walking around her for different angles, sharp snaps on her nipples, every one making her flinch. He felt his cock getting thick as her voice rose. She began to cry out, voicing it, her nipples getting red.

When she was sweaty and sounded desperate, he stopped. His cock was erect, arcing up his belly. She was panting. She let her head hang, her hair brushing the floor. He got in front of her, the best height, and swept her hair aside, grasping it, pulling her head up. He brought the tip of his cock to her mouth. She opened, licking all around the head.

His eyes went to her raised ass. He brought the crop up and began to strike it, hard strikes, every one leaving a blossom of red on her cheeks. She became much more enthusiastic in sucking him. Hawthorne was breathing fast, sometimes grunting, his cock pulsing and moving, but he didn't get closer. She kept having to find him again, her mouth seeking. It felt good, and he enjoyed whipping her ass for a time, enjoyed her tongue. His eyes shifted to her mouth taking him, spit everywhere, her movements desperate, trying to suck him closer to herself.

He laughed softly, doubling his efforts, smacking her ass until she was crying out around his cock. He stopped. He pulled his cock from her lips. Her head dipped again, hanging. He came around behind her. His hand came, huge, smacking her ass, already red, a series of hard cracks. She jiggled and jerked, crying out.

He spread her pussy lips behind her, his fingers gentle. He pressed all around, his touch light on her clitoris, taking his time. She was already wet. She began to swell, her clitoris getting stiff. She was panting for a different reason now, her head still hanging. This particular consort liked his

play. When she was very slick, he pushed his thumb deep in her pussy, his fingers reaching to stroke her swollen clitoris, long strokes. She grunted lightly, her head coming up.

When she was close, he pulled his thumb from her and repositioned his hand around and under, his fingers finding her again, stroking her clit lightly. He lined his cock up and slowly penetrated her pussy, enjoying the sensations, enjoying looking at her red ass. He fucked her steadily, his fingers relentless, grunting softly when she came helplessly on his cock, long surges, her pussy pulsing, her voice high again. He liked that, too.

He fucked her until he felt himself tensing, felt his pleasure getting more urgent. He pulled out, not done yet. He looked at her cunt, her clit still swollen, glistening with slick. The crop landed between her legs. She gave a long, delayed cry, her breath choking out. He was excited now. He stopped, coming around the front of her. Her head came up. He brought his cock to her lips.

She opened eagerly as he raised the crop, starting in again on her ass. He pulsed in her mouth as she choked around him, her efforts entirely aided by the fact that she probably knew he wouldn't stop until it didn't feel so good anymore. She tried to push him deep in her throat, soundless now, but he was big. He thrust as she gagged. She pushed him in again, the strikes to her ass harsh as her bottom began to become dark red. She tried very hard after that, which he appreciated, feeling himself getting closer to his pleasure.

He finally tossed the crop aside and grabbed her hair with both hands. He began fucking her throat, deep and long thrusts. She was gagging and heaving for air. He let her breathe and plunged back in again, grunting with pleasure. He was going up, her throat hot and tight and soft, closing all around him. He let her breathe and did it again.

His head dropped back, his hips thrusting fast now, his hands in her hair. He paused again and went in. He was

going to come. He gave several deep, vicious thrusts and held there, the pleasure washing through him. He convulsed in her throat. She was struggling, her lips pressed to the hair around the base of his cock, her whole body moving. He released in her throat, surging again, his cock lifting, feeling her swallow around him. He grunted hard.

He pulled out quickly, the woman desperate for air, spit and his cum dripping from her mouth as her head hung. He was breathing fast. He began untying her, supporting her and removing the rest of the ropes. Setting her on her feet, he made sure she was steady.

He stepped back as she got her cloak, putting it around herself. Hawthorne walked to his desk, opening a drawer and returning, handing her coins, what she got above what she received from the house.

She took them, her cheeks flushed, nodding her thanks. She put it in the pocket of her cloak and went to the door, closing it behind herself.

A few weeks later, in the morning, there was a knock and Gunn came in.

"There's a fool on the third steppe, Legatus," he said.

"How long has it been?" Hawthorne said from his desk.

"About a year, I think."

"Scathian?"

"I thought I spotted a red cloak," Gunn said, grinning a little.

It was almost always a Scathian. A part of getting to the third steppe of Anwen Citadel involved evading The Fifty on the way. Once a challenger was there, none of The Fifty would touch him until he made the offer. A challenger had to be good to make it this far.

"Is he offering anything interesting?"

"Dow is checking."

Dow showed in the doorway, a tall man with long brown hair and an unsmiling face.

"What did the Scathian bring?" Hawthorne asked him.

“Shapper fur, a large bedcover, Legatus,” Dow answered. Hawthorne rose, buckling his scabbard, grabbing his cloak. Shapper fur was Scathian luxury, their coats long and white, difficult to trap. It was the warmest fur, soft and thick. Somebody wanted his attention.

“It’s a worthy offering,” Hawthorne said, pulling on his vambraces. “I’ll answer. The Scathian?”

“A giant with a big giant sword,” Dow answered, serious, because Dow was always serious, even when he was joking.

Hawthorne grinned. He ducked under the doorway, clattering down the stairs, the sounds of the heels of his boots blending with the men behind him. He turned at the bottom of the stairs and went down a long hall and opened the only door into Anwen castle, leading to the main plateau.

He swung his leg over his horse, turning its head down the single road from the citadel, several cutbacks, steep and winding, his patrol following. He ignored the first cutback and the steppe there, a guard tower. Ascot and Stiles were on watch, both of them nodding when they saw him. He and his men passed the second plateau. Hawthorne could already hear the challenger yelling in Scathian.

“Fuck’s sake,” Hawthorne muttered.

“Like we’ll understand what he’s saying better if he yells it,” Gunn agreed.

Hawthorne saw the man, who saw him, his noise stopping, the giant grinning at him. The Scathian was big, a giant with a massive two-handed sword who stood a good head over him. But Calthus was an ancient civilization that taught martial skill in ways this man didn’t understand. Calthus had held out against Scatha, their neighbors, for over three hundred years because of that skill, although the Scathian soldiers outnumbered them four-to-one.

Hawthorne saw the offering, a bedcover of Shapper fur, high-quality workmanship, the fur clean. Any man could challenge one of The Fifty on the third tier below Anwen

Citadel, provided one of The Fifty liked the offering he brought. An offering that none of them liked meant they'd just shoot the challenger with an arrow for being in their territory. An unusually worthy offering would draw the attention of the legatus.

If he won the exchange, Hawthé would get the Shapper fur bedcover. If the Scathian won, the Scathian would get to say he had killed the legatus of The Fifty.

Hawthé stopped the line. The Scathian looked Hawthé over as Hawthé threw his leg over the horse's neck, dismounting. The giant Scathian smiled at him and pursed his lips and made a series of gentle kissing motions at him, indicating he was pretty, the man's hand running over his crotch, rubbing.

The third steppe jutted out over a long fall, the road taking another cutback. Hawthé strode into the center, joining the giant Scathian there, facing him, side-on to the drop.

"Duther," the giant said, touching his own chest, looking down at him, still grinning.

"Hawthé," he returned, touching his own. "Legatus."

The giant Scathian seemed pleased and then more wary, looking him down and up again. Gunn strode forward, a brass bell there. Gunn took up the clapper and rang the bell, Hawthé's men fanning out. They wouldn't interfere. Hawthé drew his sword, the giant having his in his hands. The Scathian was already moving, taking the advantage he'd been given. Neither of them had a shield, because defended men could battle to exhaustion and a third steppe challenge was, by tradition, quick and dirty.

The Scathian raised his sword two-handed over his shoulder, bringing it down with crushing force. Scathians valued brute strength. Hawthé stepped back, smacking the heavy sword aside with his own, the blades meeting and sliding down each other's length. Hawthé's elbow came up, stepping past the huge sword, his grip on his own reversing,



positioned, doing the next thing. He drove the heavy hilt toward the giant's face, no trouble reaching him here, the man's head snapping back. The Scathian stumbled away toward the edge.

Hawthe's men were silent, watching. Hawthe's sword had never stopped as he unfolded and extending his arm, a constant motion, sweeping for the giant's neck, the giant off-balance and throwing himself back again, alarmed, Hawthe driving him toward the edge again. The Scathian glanced at the drop behind himself and brought his sword up, guarding high, Hawthe's blade deflected.

The Scathian roared and stepping forward with a wide sweep that Hawthe ducked under, bringing his own sword up over his head to meet it, the blades sliding off one another. Hawthe found the angle as they reached their limit and he pivoted and jabbed, one move and one-handed, extending, the Scathian overreached, piercing the giant's throat and withdrawing. He stepped back.

The Scathian dropped his sword, which rang on the stones, looking surprised. He gurgled and choked, stumbling back, his hands going to his throat. His balance tipped, meeting Hawthe's eyes, who was watching impassively, and then he was gone.

Hawthe didn't bother walking to look over the side. He'd seen the view, the broken bodies collected in various stages of decomposition. A few hundred years of bodies, and nobody was allowed to retrieve them. The wind would bring the stench of this one up the sheer face of the rock for a time. Hawthe pulled out a cloth and wiped his blade, sheathing his weapon. He strode to the fur, squatting, looking at it.

"Want me to take that up, Legatus?" Ascot said, eighteen years old, the youngest of The Fifty before Neander had come, and a deadly swordsman.

"Make sure there are no poisoned needles," Hawthe said. "Scathians always think they're clever."

The next morning, Hawthé was riding in the countryside near Anwen Road north of Imber, Josue and the new man Neander with him. They were inspecting carts and wagons coming through the pass, looking for contraband. The sun was shining now, the rain having stopped in the night.

The citadel was strategically critical to Calthus. Anwen Pass was the most likely point of attack if Scatha invaded. The Fifty hunted Scathian raiders who came across the border. They would also hold the narrow pass against the Scathian hordes, if necessary, long enough for the people of Imber to retreat and warn Calthus. In the meantime, when things were quiet, they served Imber by patrolling the roads for smugglers and highwaymen who preyed on the traders.

Hawthé was in the lead when he spotted the wagon in a grove ahead. He saw two men. The thieves saw him at the same moment and immediately abandoned their looting. They ran and mounted their horses, riding hard, joining the road and fleeing.

Signaling his men, who took off after the highwaymen, Hawthé stayed where he was. He wasn't optimistic, given the lead the thieves had and the thick countryside around. The legatus urged his horse, going to the wagon. He followed the indentations on the flat path left by the wheels, dirt softened by the previous night's rain.

Two men were dead by the wagon, an older man and younger. Father and son, probably. Hawthé looked at them closely, surprised. They were dressed as Calthusians, but they were definitely Scathians. Not local smugglers. He approached the wagon from behind, careful. It was a ledge wagon, fully enclosed and ornate. The horse that had drawn it was out of harness in the far field. The Scathians had probably been grazing the animal when they were attacked, the local Calthusian highwaymen doing Hawthé's men a service for once.

Hawthé moved his horse forward, glancing into the back of the wagon, not able to see past the curtains. He

dismounted, looping the reins on a sturdy branch, looking around. Nobody and nothing. He turned, walking, hauling the back door of the wagon open and going up the stairs, ducking inside.

The wagon's interior was dim and overlaid with various smells he didn't try to sort, breathing shallowly. He opened drawers, looked into crates. The highwaymen had been looking for something of value. Hawthorne found the typical contraband. There was Sima, a drug from Hebelin, their neighbor to the east, illegal, the sticky resin for smoking in hefty blocks, and also hides of various types, avoiding the tax.

He set aside a crate, a heavy oilcloth under it covering something large and square. He pulled the oilcloth off, squatting down to look. It was an animal in a cage. He looked at the cage, heavy iron bars on all sides as well as the top and the bottom, stained with what looked like old blood, nothing to rest on and little space to move around. He couldn't figure what the animal was. It wasn't a cat. He thought he saw feathers, but he couldn't quite tell. It didn't look like a bird, either. It was curled up, not moving. He wasn't sure it was real. He couldn't see it properly.

Hawthorne stood up, ripping down curtains all around, pushing open windows and propping them, clattering, sunlight streaming into the wagon. Dust motes danced in the light, the smell of mold and rot more obvious in contrast to a small cross-breeze that rolled through. He squatted again in front of the cage. He could see the animal now, but that wasn't the problem, evidently. He kept trying to figure out what he was looking at.

"What are you?" he said.

The animal raised its head and looked at him, a delicate face he couldn't identify. A fox, maybe? It was the size of a large cat. He watched as its head kept rising, a long neck, and it moved its head into the sunlight, blinking up at him. It had huge oval green eyes with a black slit for a pupil, long

dark eyelashes. It was dirty white, he saw. It seemed ill or abused, its fur filthy and matted, its manner listless.

It was so strange. He was still looking at it. Yes, those were wings. Its white fur faded into the white feathers. At the top of each wing was a black claw, as if it sometimes used them to climb. But instead of a beak, it had a muzzle, small nostrils that flared, a defined skull over a long flexible neck.

Strange tipped ears that swept back were set under two delicate turned white horns—horns, yes, those were horns—curving slightly in an arc behind its head. It had four legs with impressive claws, definitely not catlike. Those were out all the time, like a badger or a bear, although they appeared to move independently, like fingers. A predator, and definitely a little fighter. A very long tail wrapped around its body, thick at the base and then coming to an end that almost looked like an arrowhead.

The end of its tail rose and began to move, waving, sinuous, reminding him of a cat. It was the only thing moving on the animal. A ripping rumble emerged from its throat, hostile and very obviously a threat.

“I see you’re fearsome,” Hawthorne agreed, still curious. He looked at its side. It was such a neat little thing for all it was so dirty, but it seemed thin, its contours too sharp. He didn’t see any food in the cage. “You look hungry.”

Hawthorne dug into his pouch and pulled out dried meat. The animal looked at the meat and then back at his face, unfolding itself. It rose slowly, like moving hurt. Maybe it was injured. Its wings were still partially unfolded on its back, its body graceful otherwise. It padded closer, watching his face. The animal came nearer to him, staring, green eyes. Even dirty and thin, it was awfully pretty.

“Don’t bite me,” he said under his breath.

Hawthorne reached his fingers through the bars with the meat and offered it, ready to snatch his hand back, but the animal opened its mouth, still looking at him, his brows

going up—those were some big sharp hooked canines—and took it gingerly.

It immediately turned its back, holding the meat down with its front claws and tugging at it with its mouth, chewing quickly. Hawthorne watched, frowning a little. The Scathians had starved it. Its wings were partially unfolded still, the feathers trembling. It whined like it was in pain.

When it was finished, Hawthorne waited. The animal turned around slowly, that same careful movement. He'd never seen anything like it before. It had a face all its own, delicate, those huge sea-green eyes like deep liquid pools. He couldn't see any wounds on it, but it was difficult to tell with the matted fur. It came to the bars again, looking at the pouch and back at his face. Smart.

This time when he put the meat through, the small animal surprised him by sitting up on its haunches, holding the meat in its claws like small hands and pulling the food toward its mouth. Its belly was covered with the same white fur. It didn't turn its back, eating as he watched. When it was done, its tongue emerged like a cat's tongue, licking its lips, blinking up at him, alert now. It made a low sound, stuttering, friendly. He smiled slowly. He looked in the cage again. Empty. Who knows how long it had gone without food and water.

"I bet you're thirsty after that."

He went outside to his horse and pulled out his water canteen, looking around and making sure things were still clear, coming back in. He squatted. The animal stood, putting its paw on the bars, pressing its nose through, its nostrils flaring. It smelled the water. It made a small muttering noise.

Hawthorne upended the water and poured it into his palm. He held out his hand, putting it underneath the animal. It pressed its nose between the bars and its tongue came out, trying to touch the water, but it couldn't. The little thing made a desperate sound and then withdrew, turning its