

The Diary of Karl von Kessel

Detailing his Journey with the Freidgang Caravan

by Matt Walsbe

Day One

The Shocked Eel Inn. After the stagecoach journey I took to get here - where I was *delighted* to find myself sat next to an elderly Kisle vite gentleman of a certain mercantile family but dubious personal hygiene (Father would have clipped me for a 'missed opportunity', I'm sure - but then Father didn't have to spend several hours with a scented handkerchief over his nose) - I honestly couldn't imagine being disappointed to be out of that rickety box. I was wrong. The Shocked Eel is a blight on an otherwise idyllic country scene, a great slab of a building surrounded by parked wagons like flies around a particularly tasty carcass. Walking through the door with my luggage in my arms, I was forced to step aside as some lowlife in the doorway spat on the ground before me - either in response to my presence, or in spite of it, I'm not sure which - and I was almost tempted to go back to the coach from which I'd so recently alighted and demand to be taken back home to Altdorf. It was with a grimace I entered the inn and walked to the bar (I remember thinking that phrase I've heard my mother use so many times; '*What Father wants, Father gets,*' damn his bones), and was hailed by a trio of men, including the merchant Father has seen fit to apprentice me to.

I shall do my best to describe them. Sir Pierre Belmont, a noble Knight of that fairytale realm of Bretonnia, is fair of hair but has the tan and the eyes of a seasoned traveller. He greeted me with a handshake, and I noted the rough feel of his skin, quite unlike what one would expect of a nobleman. His grip was strong, though he made no attempt to crush my hand or hold me with a stare - both of which I feel are the markers of a bully or an insecure man (after that wearisome evening I spent with Father's Ulrican business partners) - and he has left a fine impression upon me, which has only increased with time. We shared a few bottles of wine later in the evening (he has a fine nose for it, as I suppose one would expect of a Bretonnian) and I had the chance to listen to several stories of his travels with merchant caravans throughout the Empire, Tilea and Kisle v. Apparently he has travelled to Cathay before, or possibly to Ind - he speaks fine Reikspiel, but with a lyrical quickness common to his people that allows one's mind to wander (something that is no doubt responsible for leading many a serving-girl astray, of that I can attest!).

Ah, but I begin at the end, as I am wont to do. In honesty Sir Belmont appears to be the only civilised gentleman at this horrid fleapit, so it is no surprise that I would desire to write about him. Our employer is a man named Hans Freidgang. Herr Freidgang is a merchant of the lowest caste. I have seen types like him hawking their wares at the commoner's markets in Altdorf, and I can say with some satisfaction I have seen men such him lose the shirt from their backs at card tables up and down the Steiglestrasse. Freidgang is an older man, with a neatly-trimmed beard and a gold hoop through his ear. Gold! As though he were playing the gypsy as part of some comedic theatre troupe! Oh, but he'd suit the part... I digress. His clothes, while not *utterly* offensive to my refined senses, contain a number of schoolboy errors in terms of cut and colour, and, if my calculations are correct, would have been deemed fashionable in the dance-halls of Altdorf about fourteen years ago. *Fourteen years!* And Sigmar's ghost, his *voice*. Booming doesn't begin to describe it - the man could yell down a wild boar. And he talks endlessly. And he sings (this, I fear, will become extremely tiresome).

As though all this wasn't enough, Friedgang has some quirk of personality whereby he is simply unable to hear criticism. I am sure I made my disappointment quite clear when he showed me around the wagon we are to be *carting* with us (ha!), but to no affect. I even sneered quite openly at one of his jokes (which he appears to make for his own benefit, rather than the humour of those around him) and got merely a cold stare from his man Rudolf in return.

Ah, Rudolf, the third man in our little party. He neither spoke nor offered his hand to me - though after the wringing Friedgang gave it I had little feeling in it anyway - and his gruff demeanour is matched by his rough appearance. His clothes give the impression of a common street thug, the likes of which I and my fellows back home would toss a few coins to in order to see a man beaten. Rudolf carries a stout wooden club attached to his belt, with several nails protruding from the end - a ruffian's weapon if ever I have seen one. He follows Friedgang like a dog, and I must say, it was his presence (and the subtle threat he implies, with his small mouth and pinched face like a gutter-rat) that prevented me from openly mocking our erstwhile employer.

I grow tired. Friedgang says we will be heading off the day after the morrow, and it can't come soon enough - were it not for Sir Belmont, I'd surely have attempted to find some other lodgings by now. The Shocked Eel ('shocking hell', more like! Ha!) has sparse lodgings at best, and appears to be a hangout for merchants and the illiterate peasants they employ to haul their cargo and protect their wares. I have the second-best room in the house, and I can reliably say that the stables of Ester Herzzig's parent's estate (ah, such memories warm me even now!) provided more comfortable accommodation.

The bed isn't particularly inviting, but Sir Belmont has retired to his room and I've no desire to join the merchant

and his thug downstairs. I shall spend my time wisely, as my tutors taught me - and will compose a letter to Father thanking him for sending me on this little expedition. The cutting wit that saw me published in the University of Altdorf's annual satire compendium will be put to good use, I can assure you.

Day Two

The madman has stolen my clothes.

After breakfasting with Sir Belmont I took a towel from my luggage and went to bathe in the nearby lake. I found a secluded spot some ten minutes walk from the inn, far enough to cushion me from the vulgarities of that place yet close enough for me to find my way back without embarrassment. It was, all things considered, a perfect spot, a tiny harbour of peace with an early blossom over head and placid waters that glittered with the morning sun; somewhere any man of leisure would *harbour* a desire to see again! Were it not for the bastard Freidgang, of course.

Indeed, so relaxing was the place and so fine was the day that I quite forgot myself and must have dozed off, my head resting against an old wooden board that lay in the shallows like a pillow. As serene as it was, I could not have been there for more than a quarter-turn of the hourglass when I placidly returned to dry land to discover my belongings missing from the willow branch where I had hung them.

I had little time to contemplate the theft as immediately before me the thicket parted to reveal Friedgang and his man Rudolf. Freidgang was grinning hugely, something I have come to associate with my own personal misfortune, and clutching what looked like a pile of rags.

"Out, my boy!" He exclaimed - it is the nature of the Freidgangs of this world to *exclaim* any statement, regardless of need, "Good! Just in time. Here-" At which he passed me a large piece of flannel, with which I presumed I was to dry myself. Rather hesitantly, I began to do so, despite the flannel's musty, damp smell, and Freidgang began to explain himself.

"Caught you napping a few turns back, so I didn't have time to tell you. That Norscan, on his way to Praag? Very stylish man, it seems, gave an *rare* price for those gladrags you've been hauling! Cost and a bit, I'd wager, since fine cloth is a little shy this far north. Made you quite a fair deal, I did!"

He laughed, and tossed me a wrap of coins, as I tried to wager whether this was some bizarre jest. Then, to my horror, he held up those 'rags'.

"Set you up with some of my *personal* collection." (Have I mentioned the queer emphasis he lays on in his speech? I will.) "Freidgang classics, if you will. Deducted it from the profits already, save you the bother."

My jaw dropped. I've had some time to consider my reaction, and I believe it was simple shock - the shirt and breeches he held up are in no great state of disrepair, but talk of unfashionable! Sigmar think, if Ester Herzgig saw me in *those*!

It was that thought that must have galvanised my mouth into action. "You... you sold my clothes?" I asked weakly.

"Course, if you want my talents again," Freidgang continued, wagging his finger jovially as he hung the clothes on the willow branch beside us, "There's normally be a brokerage fee! But considering you're new to this, thought I'd give you a head start - I'll let you back to your thoughts!"

He turned to leave, and I'm afraid to say my emotions darkened considerably. I stepped forward to grab the cur by his scruff but Rudolf, still facing me and with his arms crossed over his barrel chest, stopped me in my tracks with a shake his head. He threw a pair of worn boots at my feet, and left to follow his master.

I stood there fuming impotently for quite some time, I fear, before I took stock of the situation. I'd been 'gifted' a scratchy, grey linen shirt, with generous sleeves but of an otherwise conservative cut, those scuffed but serviceable low boots, and a pair of rough leather-and-woollen breeches, slashed and puffed, in what an illiterate Hochlander might consider a blend between fashionable style and practicality. In reality, of course, the effect of such a wardrobe is to give the impression that the wearer believes personal aesthetics and the ability to withstand a quick crawl up an abandoned privy-chute are the same thing.

Still. I've been wearing these breeches for long enough now that I could quite see myself becoming fond of them, after six months of travelling on the road with other similarly poorly-attired fools. Why am I still wearing them, you ask? I returned to the inn in a foul mood, and immediately unloaded my frustrations upon Sir Belmont, who remained steadfastly at his table in the taproom. His response was a rather rueful smile, and so I retired to my room - *and found my luggage missing*. It dawned on me then that Freidgang would be unlikely to sell just one set of clothing.

Furious, I stormed downstairs, and was caught by a glance from Sir Belmont, who offered me a seat and calmed me down. He'd witnessed the sale, of course, and found my curses amusing, but over a cup of dappled wine he convinced me of the wisdom of Freidgang's decision. Durable clothing was, of course, of more use than the admittedly impractical garb I had brought for the expedition, and the weight of the coins in my pocket implied that the old man had achieved reasonable remuneration, at least. Another cup of the watered-down wine and Belmont had be laughing at the situation. He advised me to buy a weapon for the trip ahead, and suggested we

peruse the wares of one of the caravans parked outside.

The merchant that Belmont guided me toward seemed a fair sort, though a glance at Sir Belmont's own armaments saw him quickly throw canvas over a selection of weapons laid out and reveal a set of obviously superior items. He claimed that he knew a smart customer when he saw one, and almost convinced me to purchase a black powder pistol. With hindsight, it seemed cheaply made and Belmont soon intervened to explain the realities of such a weapon - that it would likely misfire or warp its barrel after a few rounds. But the idea of such power holstered upon my belt gripped hard; I can see now why so many of my fellows back home sought to join the Pistolkorps.

I walked away with a short sword. It is roughly made, but balanced and keeps its edge well. A simple leather wrap forms its handle, with an unadorned pommel and a cheap leather scabbard. A soldier's weapon. I look at it now and feel that my walk back to the tavern saw a change in me - or rather, a change in people's attitudes to me. The servants are less fawning, the mercenary guards of the other caravans pay me no mind. I rather think that, with my clothes and a weapon at my hip, they assume I am one of them. I wonder how long I will find such fancy amusing, and how long before it grates unbearably.

Ah, but it's late. We set off at first light, and there's a long day ahead. I shall continue tomorrow.

Day Three

We assembled at dawn, Freidgang, Rudolf, Sir Belmont and I, and met the three guards that are to accompany us on our travels. Ludo and Willem, crossbowmen (at least one of whom is Tilean, and hence shares their steadfast reputation with the weapons) of undoubtedly low birth and who speak in a bizarre slang that I assume is the vogue with the soldiers and mercenaries they run with, appear to have come relatively cheap. Once can assume they're hard-up, as Freidgang presented them with ammunition wrapped in twine as an advance on their hire fee. The third mercenary seems of little better repute. An Imperial Knight, who Freidgang *reliably* informs me served with the illustrious Reiksguard! As though the noble knights who protect our fair state should deign to serve under a merchant like Freidgang! Though I must admit, if one could fall, this Magnus Klausthaler certainly looks the part. He maintains a haughty demeanour despite his alcoholic's nose and ruddy complexion, and furthermore sports an elaborately waxed moustache. He carries a heavy sword like Sir Belmont, and will form our vanguard, if one can call it that.

One other man joined us, though I have yet to find his position in all this. His name is Gris, he is of middle age, he seems entirely hairless, and he has remained almost utterly silent throughout the day. He sat upon the cart with Freidgang, so one can presume he isn't a mercenary, and both Freidgang and (more tellingly, I feel) Rudolf have deferred to his judgement as to when to stop to rest and make camp.

We left the Shocked Eel inn in the formation upon which Sir Belmont and Klausthaler had agreed upon; Ludo and Willem were to walk on either side of the wagon, while Rudolf took the rear and the knights travelled a little way ahead. I wasn't given a position when Klausthaler barked his orders, so I inquired of Sir Belmont and he suggested I remain near the cart. Freidgang's incessant singing, and Gris' characteristic silence mean I quickly learned that Rudolf had the best position, and I fell into step beside him. I find the man's quiet confidence a little more comforting than the stony silence of Gris.

I write this by light of the fire - we stopped little more than an hour ago, and already the fair weather has faded and left us with grey skies throughout the day and this pitch darkness at nightfall. Klausthaler has organised a watch rota, and apparently I am to get some sleep before being awoken to sit upon the wagon and keep the darkness at bay.

Day Four

My position in this company appears that of a common coachman. Twice today I was expected to make repairs on the cart - two panels of which seem eager to come loose at the slightest bump in this dirt track we are following - and I was mocked viciously by that drunkard Klausthaler when I admitted my inexperience with such work. He found a hammer and a bag of nails and I watched as he quickly repaired the loose boards - the second time he simply tossed the tools at my feet with a snort of contempt. I got to work, but Klausthaler's bulging muscles and alcoholic's bravery (I have bashed two fingers with that damnable hammer, and they will still throb in the morrow, I'm sure) made the work seem much lighter than it appeared; something Klausthaler made a point of reminding me whenever he strayed into cursing distance.

I have taken first watch tonight. I wake Willem in another turn of the hourglass and it can't come fast enough. My hands are raw and blistered, and these boots rub my heels unbearably. As if to remind me of this, my burning hands and feet are accompanied by a bitter chill that took hold as soon as the sun went down. I have so much else to write - the woodland creature's we've passed would fill one of Mother's bestiary textbooks twice again, and I'm certain I caught sight of one of those tiny bats just before we stopped that she adores so - but my fingers hurt too much to write. I shall have to fill these pages with my spite at being forced to listen to Herr Friedgang's cheerful songs about milkmaids some other time.

Day Five

Milkmaids be damned! I wasn't expecting the excitement of today - nor do I hope to feel such excitement again soon!

Only a few days travel from the Shocked Eel and already we have encountered brigands. Walking behind the cart, I wasn't aware of the situation until it was right in front of me - fortunately the others, experienced travellers all, kept their wits about them.

I saw three men in the road - all wearing dirty clothes and brandishing a collection of vicious-looking weapons. One, with patchy stubble growing over his head and face, stood slightly ahead. I assumed him to be the leader - at least, until I noted the brigand behind him, a giant of a man clutching a crude wooden club. Amongst thieves, surely might makes right? It appears not to be always so. The stubbled man spoke first.

"Friendly warning, like. Clear off the wagon and we won't make you squeal,"

I'll admit, I snorted in contempt at this. They certainly seemed the kind of curs one might find at Altdorf Docks late at night - and the kind, I admit with some shame, that I and my fellows have hired as muscle when touring the bars as hell-raising 'jackablades' in our youth - but there was only three of them, and I noted Ludo and Willem already had their crossbows aimed. Rudolf, however, had a pinched look on his face, and I noted his eyes roving around the forest to our left and right. Subtle movements therein revealed to me that we were not simply facing three deranged men - there was a gang of at least six more hidden among the trees. At least six more, and surely only the actions of Sir Belmont and Klausthaler had prevented them from having us completely surrounded. I quailed a little, but managed to chase such expressions away before they reached my face.

Friedgang, whose pistol was drawn and pointed toward the sky, was remarkably calm; "I should imagine we'd all rather trade than fight today, friend," He said. The bandit leader was in no mood to bargain, however, and began to issue another threat before - and I watched this with some surprise - Klausthaler took an almighty swig from his ever-present bottle, smashed it to the ground and made toward the men blocking the road. Hurried movements suggested drawn bowstrings, and Ludo shouted a warning, but Klausthaler had other intentions.

"Which of you is man enough to face me, eh? Bare fists, and to the owner the spoils!" He shouted. He had his back to me, but I imagine rotgut whiskey dribbled from his moustaches. He is a powerfully-built man, but I detected a certain swaying in his gait. Smiles from our opponents implied they had noticed too, and when the brigand's pet giant stepped forward, I feared for the worst.

No sooner had this thought entered my mind, Klausthaler made his move. He ducked and shot forward, slamming his fist into the man's stomach, then driving his elbow to smash the disappearing smile from his face! As the giant hit the floor Klausthaler strode past a step and head-butted the brigand's surprised leader. He crumpled to the dust, and the last bandit on the road took a step back in shock.

Klausthaler calmly walked back to the caravan, passing the giant (who writhed in the dust with blood pouring from his mouth) and stamping on his fingers as he did so.

If I'd heard this story in a bar, I'd call it a tall tale. But Friedgang ordered the horses onward, and we walked past the gang, the bandit on the road dragging his unconscious leader out of the way and the giant crawling from our path. I passed just a meter from one of the brigands hiding in the trees - who I could see was as shocked as his companions - and avoided their eyes, tensing my back. I was sure they'd open fire as soon as we had walked past.

But they didn't, and the rest of the day was uneventful (though I quickly chose to abandon my rearguard post with Rudolf in favour of walking nearer the front of the wagon, and kept one eye behind me at all times). Friedgang tells me we have nothing to fear from an attack in the night - such men only attack when they have the weight of numbers and bravery of desperation behind them, he says, and those 'amateurs' we met on the road were well-fed and posed little threat. As they say in the Suiddocks, you could have fooled me! Even now, as I sit on watch, I half expect some black-fledged arrow to come sailing from the dark. To my great surprise, Klausthaler has had little to say of the incident - I would have expected unbearable boasting from such a man. My opinion of him seems to be improving.

Sir Belmont is waking, and it's his watch next. I shall retire, and hope to sleep better for all today's exhaustion.

Day Seven

I wrote nothing last night, and expect to write little tonight. Such dreary days have been exacerbated by dreary weather and - apart from Sir Belmont - dreary company.

We're still following the road, and Sir Belmont thinks we're near the end of the forest. I shall be glad of a different view. My hands have calluses developing - the damned cart is falling apart out of pure spite, I'm sure - and I've a bruise from where the sword bangs against my leg. I haven't drawn it once, and I've half a mind to sling it on the wagon and be rid of the thing. There has been no sight of the brigands from two days ago, and no sign of anyone else either.

Sir Belmont regaled us tonight with a Bretonnian ballad. He plays the lute like a seasoned bard, and even Willem and Ludo sat rapt with awe. Klausthaler seems unimpressed, though I think we all feel it a welcome change from Friedgang's repetitive and cheerful slaughtering of songs from my childhood. Rudolf and Gris seem the only ones

immune to Friedgang's annoying habits, though of course none of us have raised it with him.

Gris. It's easy to forget that he's here, he remains so quiet. I heard him speak to our merchant leader of rain tomorrow, though the clouds overhead have not changed for days. He sits away from the fire, eats little, and speaks less. He helped me re-set a cart wheel earlier, but I'm none the wiser for it. Perhaps he dislikes company. I asked Friedgang of his role the other day, and gave me the same wink and grin he's given before. Gris seems to be adept at caring for the two draft horses, but that hardly merits bringing him along. Tomorrow I shall press the point further.

Day Eight

Rain. Gris was right. More than just rain - a veritable downpour, as though Rhya herself was taking her annual bath. We made a few hours this morning before Friedgang called for us to make camp - after consulting with the whispering Gris, of course - as he feared the cart may become stuck in the mud. I helped Rudolf and Willem erect a tarpaulin to serve us as shelter from the rain while our vanguard made a perimeter, and Ludo shot our dinner, a scrawny whitetail that nevertheless was a welcome change from the provisions we've been eating so far.

Gris claims not to eat 'the flesh of beasts', and seems happy with a meal of berries and fruit instead. No surprise there. I heard Willem make a joke that he must be Sylvanian, after the man's gaunt appearance (that does indeed remind one of the woodcuts of the living dead).

Friedgang claims we'll be heading off early tomorrow - which I doubt, since the rain gives no sign of stopping - but nevertheless Klausthaler has claimed we've no need to keep watch tonight, as last night. Apparently we are clear of the threat of mercenary bands that wander nearer to civilization, but still early enough in our journey to be relatively untroubled by horrors of the night. I foresee another evening spent watching the fire as Sir Belmont indulges our erstwhile leader by accompanying him on the lute, while Klausthaler drinks himself to sleep and the others play cards. Perhaps I will join them.

Day Nine

Those mercenary cheats took pleasure in relieving me of my money last night. Either I'm a poor poker player, or the men of the Free Companies are as learned in the ways of deception as they are they ways of murder. A little of both, I fear. I shared in a bottle of unidentified spirits that has left me with a headache to match the pains in my hands and feet (which, I might add, seem to be advancing up my limbs to meet in my chest).

Gris was right about today. Clear skies, and finally a little sun. There appears to be more to him that I first thought. The fine weather elicited a bizarre change in Friedgang's 'entertainment', though; the first time his singing may have felt appropriate, and he switches to the morose *Lament of Solland*. If I must hear of 'glory passed away' one more time I will scream.

Sir Belmont says we will be out of the forest tomorrow.

Day Ten

Out of the forest indeed. A hard day's travel, and it feels as though we were never there to begin. The prairie we're on stretches out to the mountains on either side. I can't say I'm pleased, though - the open sky has made me feel suddenly exposed. Klausthaler seems to feel the same, as he's posted a watch tonight.

Something odd; we saw smoke rising from a thicket on the road ahead of us today. It seems we're not alone on the prairie, and Klausthaler's decision suddenly seemed all the more wise. I don't think any of our company dares to imagine who we might meet. I'm reminded of one of Friedgang's long, boring stories - of how he was travelling to Middenheim, and made more money from fellow travellers on the road than from that city of tight purses - but I don't dare to hope these interlopers are friendly. We move out at the crack of dawn, in hope of making it across the prairie to the valley pass before we're spotted. I don't like the idea of leaving the road, but trust in Sir Belmont and, perhaps unwisely, Friedgang.

Day Eleven

The prairie had flooded from rain overnight, and we couldn't risk heading out with the cart over the marshy terrain, so our only option this morning was to stick to the road. We approached the thicket with some trepidation, and stopped the cart some distance away while Sir Belmont took Willem and Rudolf to scout ahead. They returned with ashen faces, and waved us forward.

I fear I lost my wits for a while, as upon reaching the clearing I vomited. The smell of putrescence was strong, but Sir Belmont says the bodies weren't more than a week old. A caravan, just like ours - bigger, in fact, as the smoking remains of the three wagons testify.

They were attacked. Klausthaler said he counted eleven guards - including what was either a Dwarf or a Halfling, he couldn't tell. Several of them had been partially eaten, though Belmont says that could have been

posthumously. Woodland animals have never been great respecters of the dead. There are signs of more bodies having been dragged off, and Ludo came upon a wild dog of some sort eating one a little way off.

My mind reels at what must have happened here. A company easily twice our strength, all slaughtered! But Willem and Ludo calmly picked their way through the dead, looting what they could - though it was clear even to me that they'd been beaten to it, probably by the caravan's attackers - and our vanguard seemed unshaken. Even Friedgang calmly explained that this was why he'd taken a smaller caravan - more mobile, and less of a target. I hope he's right. I wouldn't like to face whatever killed those men. And the proximity... No, I must not think of it. Whatever it was, they seem to have headed in the opposite direction.

Willem says it was Ogres. Klausthaler told him to shut up, but I fear he's right. I can scarcely think of what else both loots *and* eats its victims... though perhaps that is for the best. Certainly, the company seems to think there are worse things than Ogres in these lands.

We found a few shovels in amongst the debris, and used them (and the two in our own cart) to bury the dead men in a shallow grave. I thought Friedgang would want us to continue straight away, but our vanguard seemed to reassure him that the danger had passed. We got it over with in a couple of hours. Even Friedgang and Gris pitched in to help with the digging. I don't think anyone wanted to stay around there long.

I noticed Gris mumbling some prayer or incantation as we dug. Perhaps he's a priest of Morr? It wouldn't be a great stretch. I wanted to share this with Sir Belmont, but he's been quiet as of late. He claims to have travelled on many of the caravans on this route - perhaps he recognised some of the dead. I spoke to Rudolf instead. He's taciturn, but seems more trustworthy than Ludo or Willem, and is certainly more approachable than Klausthaler. Rudolf agreed; apparently Friedgang told him that Gris was once a gravedigger. Mystery solved, perhaps? But why would a priest of Morr be travelling with a merchant caravan?

I don't know. But it's keeping my mind from the events of today, so I'll think about it some more.

Day Thirteen

We should reach the mountain pass tomorrow. Friedgang has been mercifully quiet over the last two days, though he seems to be getting back to his old self. The *Lament of Solland* was replaced with the *Song of Slow Ulric*, but he's been threatening the chorus from *The Miller's Ugly Daughter* since we made camp. Sir Belmont managed to sidetrack him with a Bretonnian lyrical poem, and we are all grateful for it.

I've been able to coax no more information from Rudolf or Sir Belmont about Gris. Ludo attempted to make conversation with me about some facet of his family life back in Tilea, but his normally strong grasp of Riekspiel failed him amidst so many untranslatable curse words. I think he's feeling guilty for taking the lion's share of my money in that card game. Let him. I already won back my money from Willem last night, and he hasn't spoken to me since.

Day Fourteen

We've arrived at the mountains, and already it is heavy going. The cart has been moving slowly to avoid the ruts in the road, and Sir Belmont estimates we've made half the distance we did yesterday.

Mother wouldn't be too happy with the variety of mountain wildlife - I don't think I've seen a bird since yesterday. I trod in some spoor of some kind, I didn't recognise it. A goat, maybe. Don't seem to be any around. I caught my face on a tree branch, and have earned a mighty scratch on my cheek. Even the trees seem uneasy at our presence here.

Friedgang says there's a settlement a few days from here. It would be good to sleep in a bed again. And I must say, some different company would be nice. He's run though *The Miller's Ugly Daughter* and come to *Kislevite Girls*, via a frankly disturbing song about swine, that reveals a little more of his background than I'd like. Sigmar preserve us.

Day Sixteen

Beastmen! And to think I was actually growing *bored* of an untroubled trip! I would feel foolish, if I could stop my hands shaking long enough.

It was about an hour after we set off this morning that we found them. They'd laid a trap, but Sir Belmont says it would have been a lot more deadly if they'd been able to come at us from behind. It seems animal cunning gives out to animal savagery in the end. And what savage animals these are!

I heard a warning shout from Sir Belmont - or was it Klausthaler? (it all happened so fast) - and before I could react we were fighting for our lives. Friedgang shouted for us to form a square around the cart - a tactic, Rudolf later told me, that was common for an ambushed military unit. But we weren't a military unit, and I can't say I even listen to his commands; the surprise made me selectively deaf, as well as giving me tunnel vision. So I can't say where the others were when I caught my first sight of a beastman.

The woodcuts make a joke of them - the ungainly mix of human and beast is a common role for the fool in one of Altdorf's theatre houses. Of course, in the villages they're taken a little more seriously, but can we city dwellers be blamed for laughing, so safe behind our walls? Sigmar, but I'd love to see the walls of Altdorf again...

The beastman, then. It - I don't know if it was male or female - was about my height, and looked a lot more human than beast, with bare, dark skin on its arms and torso, and hairy, shaggy legs. My first thought, actually, was that it was a man in a theatre costume. But its face was a different matter. Human enough, if I run through it again in my mind (and I've been trying not to!), but twisted into a visage of such savage, base hatred as I've never seen before. It screamed as it ran forwards, and I, in my shocked state, did nothing. Two stubby horns protruded from its fell brow, and I wondered inexplicably what manner of adhesive this strange player had used to fix them to his head. It sounds insane (and I'm sure many of Altdorf Asylum's inmates are there by way of their own experiences with such creatures), but that was my thought. I don't remember if it was actually looking at me or not, but it burst forth from the bushes towards me, only veering away when one of the draft horses reared up and made itself known as the closer target.

I think now that the beastman considered the horse a greater threat than me, given my inaction. Or perhaps its savage nature made it unable to differentiate between a man and an animal. Nevertheless, it raised its crude wooden spear above its head and made for the wagon - where its head bloomed into a pink and red flower.

I heard the gunshot afterwards, and my tunnel vision disappeared. Friedgang was pointing his smoking pistol at the bushes from where the beastman had appeared. He was shouting something, but I'm afraid my ears took longer to clear, and I heard none of it. His expression was language enough.

The second beastman was much, much bigger. It clutched a heavy axe, no doubt stripped from one of its former victims, and strode forwards, quite unlike its wilder, smaller kin. However, as it caught sight of me, it soon changed its tune.

I still don't know who put the bolt through it - Ludo or Willem - but my elation turned to dismay as it shrugged off the wound with barely a stumble. And, much worse (it has become clear to me now that I am, at heart, a coward), it still hadn't taken its eyes off me. I drew my sword - more reflex than action - and was set upon. I can't recall the exact sequence of events, but I found myself on the ground, with the beastman on top of me, pinning me with the axe handle and bellowing in my face. Rotten teeth tried to gouge at my head and I kicked as hard as I could, writhing under its weight and trying desperately to avoid its jaw.

I don't know why I did what I did, but I suddenly found myself thrusting my head toward its neck and biting down hard. I got a mouthful of greasy fur, but it pulled away regardless before drawing back its fist and I saw stars.

Sir Belmont proved my saviour. He fell upon the beast as I crawled away, and drove his sword through its midquarters. He grabbed me, pulled me to my feet, and told me to run.

I ran. I feel it was only luck that made me run in the direction of the road, where Friedgang was hustling the horses and where the rest of the company was running for their lives. I noticed Gris was no longer on the cart, and that Willem was lying in his place, his head lolling from the side. I turned to look over my shoulder and saw Ludo behind me, shouting in Tilean. I turned back, put my head down, and ran.

I don't know how long we were running for. Half an hour, maybe. Longer. It doesn't matter now, I suppose. After a while Friedgang, standing at the front of the cart, slowed the horses and took stock. I collapsed to the ground, fighting for breath, and hands behind me lifted me onto the cart. We kept moving.

Ludo, Friedgang and Belmont were unharmed. It seems Sir Belmont had made a good show of himself, cutting down two of the smaller beastmen before dispatching my attacker. Klausthaler hadn't fared so well, and was wheezing as he jogged behind the cart, clutching a bloodied hand to his chest. Sir Belmont had to amputate one of his fingers, smashed by a Beastman club, but he'll live, if he can fight off infection.

Willem got the worst. He was charged by one of the big Beastmen, and it cut a deep wound into his shoulder with its crude sword. Ludo and Friedgang managed to drive it off - it's a blessing that the beast was too stupid to realise they'd need to reload. Sir Belmont isn't sure he will make it through the night.

It shocks me to even write this, but we left Rudolf and Gris there. Friedgang is cracking - he keeps telling me that both Gris and Rudolf shouted for him to leave, keeps telling me this over and over again as though to convince himself. I don't know if I believe him, but I certainly don't blame him. I gave no thought for the others when I ran.

We've no fire tonight. Sir Belmont, surely Sigmar in disguise, convinced me to eat a little, but I brought it back up again. My head is still buzzing. No amount of water can get the foul taste from my mouth. I fear for Willem, who lies, feverish, in the cart. I fear for Ludo, who has reverted to his native tongue and is fretting over Willem like a mother hen. I fear for Rudolf and Gris, but I think they're dead. My heart is tight in my chest. Klausthaler doesn't think the Beastmen will follow us. I think he said something else, too, but I don't know. Something about Gris and Rudolf being the reason. I can't think about it. I won't think.

Day Seventeen

I woke to Friedgang's singing. Another ribald tale of maidens in meadows. Poor taste, you might think, but he was singing for a reason.

Rudolf and Gris! I write with heart today, for yesterday's darkness seems a long time ago. Rudolf and Gris made it back! And separately, no less!

I got the details from Willem (who has improved enough to sit up and take a little water I gave him). He seemed excited, more so about their arrival than his own recovery, and I felt it'd do him good to let him talk for a while. Rudolf apparently arrived soon after I fell asleep, his stout wooden club stained with blood. He'd been behind us all the while, and had indeed told Friedgang to leave without him. Rudolf had been locked in combat with the Beastman that had cut down Willem (he winced as he told me this) and had gotten in a lucky blow that brought the animal crashing to the ground into the ditch at the side of the road- taking him with it. Apparently Sir Belmont had seen this and, assuming that the Beastman had killed *Rudolf*, had fled with the others. Rudolf had extracted himself from his opponent (he is characteristically humble about it's status, but my heart tells me dour Rudolf killed the beast!) and ran. He hadn't seen Gris. But Gris turned up at dawn, and had said only that he'd made sure the Beastmen would be unable to follow us. Then (after Friedgang had embraced him like a long-lost brother!) he'd sat down and fallen into a deep slumber.

The same sleep I'd had, I'm sure - it occurs to me that no one woke me for watch, and it seems Klausthaler and Sir Belmont remained awake throughout the night. Friedgang was eventually guided to the floor (still clutching Rudolf's shoulder and veritably *weeping* with relief) and snatched a few hours. But we'll all sleep well tonight, I think. After the jubilant morning, yesterday's mood returned and we hastened on our way.

I've no illusions about yesterday. We were very, very lucky. Willem is still on the brink - he's caught a high fever and is a shadow of the man he was this morning. Without Sir Belmont's ministrations Willem would be dead. Without his sword-arm, *I* would be dead.

I would be dead.

It still hasn't hit me yet.

Friedgang is, I feel, our anchor point. His mood is back to what it was, despite everything. He let Klausthaler take his position on the cart today and walked beside me, espousing the benefits of a finely made pistol and singing *The Unlikeliest Witch*. The rest of us walked like dead men, dragging our feet and lowering our eyes. The scratch on my face has become infected - probably from the Beastman's stinking breath - and burns enough to take my mind from my numb legs. Sir Belmont has been sullen today - I think his predictions for Willem are lower than he's letting on. Ludo has been walking close to Willem. I underestimated the bond between those two. And I wonder if any of my friends back home would worry for me the way Ludo worried for his 'mate'. I don't think they would. Friendships forged in battle, and all that.

I've been thinking of home a lot, today. I've been thinking of Ester Herzgig, and of how I'd promised to take her to the Feisthall to dance. I've been thinking of Mother and of Father.

I will see them again.

Day Eighteen

There is no change to Willem's condition. Klausthaler says he can feel his hand again, and we've gone back to our previous formation (after yesterday's rabble-march), with him and Sir Belmont at our fore. Gris now walks in Willem's place, and even carries his crossbow. Ludo didn't like that, but Friedgang made him see sense. If we're attacked now, we're already weak enough. Those two crossbows might have been the difference between one casualty and four.

He's become more and more withdrawn. Ludo, I mean. He only talks to Willem now (though Willem hasn't been conscious since last night). Friedgang has tried to start conversation with him. I haven't the heart. Still, he shot and caught another meal for us tonight.

The valley is getting more treacherous, but we need to continue as we're running low on water. Friedgang says there's a stream up ahead. I think I know how he knows this - Gris.

I think Gris is a witch.

Day Twenty

Still no change in Willem. We no longer expect it. He is lucid for about an hour a day, and Ludo has taken over from Sir Belmont in tending to him. The infection isn't spreading, but he's barely eating. We all know he's getting weaker.

Sir Belmont told me we had to drain the pus from the wound on my cheek today. Not pleasant. It will scar. At least with the stream beside us we could wash our clothes, and dampen cloths for poor Willem's forehead.

A little piece of good news - Klausthaler has healed remarkably well. He's regained full use of his hand (though he still favours the other) and his wound has almost completely closed up. He joked about his missing ring finger, that the Beastman hadn't made much difference - he wasn't marriage material anyway. We all laughed, glad of the distraction. At least Klausthaler seems to be in high spirits - though maybe his rapidly dwindling liquor stocks have more to do with it than his wound.

Around the fire tonight, Friedgang reminded us why we were here - what we were doing out in this desolate place. He talked about silk, and how it flows like water through your fingers and is softer than the skin of a Shalayan priestess (we all smiled at the thought). He talked about spices, and how a pocketful could keep you for a year. He talked about jewels and gemstones the size of eyeballs. And, most of all, he talked his merchant's talk about how the Cathayans knew nothing of the value of these things, and would trade all the fat of their land for common gold or produce.

It had it's desired effect, I suppose. Ludo and Klausthaler asked questions, made jokes, and seemed themselves again. Sir Belmont and Gris appear to care little for such things. Myself... I am torn. I want riches, and easy living, and to go home a success.

But I also want to go home alive.

Day Twenty-One

Another dreamless night. Another morning, waking to find Willem still isn't dead. Another day of walking.

We reach the settlement tomorrow. Sir Belmont says it's little more than an inn, a way station for caravans like ours. Friedgang has some sacks of grain and salted fish in the cart to trade with the innkeeper. Apparently they have a barber-surgeon there, who can do more for Willem than Sir Belmont can.

No one has talked about it, but I think we're all thinking the same thing - Willem can't stay with us. He's dead weight. And if Willem goes, Ludo will go too. Friedgang may be able to hire replacement guards at the settlement. We all feel protective about Willem; we've all helped care for him, feed him, clean him after he's soiled himself. Ludo more than the rest of us, perhaps. And I think we've been through too much to lose Ludo too. But we have a job to do. We're a merchant caravan, not a rolling hospital bed... I'm thinking like a merchant. I suppose Father would be proud. I think Sir Belmont is about to...

Praise Sigmar! Gris has disappeared. He told Friedgang just now that he was going on ahead - in darkness - to 'get the lay of the land'. That he'd be back by morning.

I haven't been able to write about him the last few days. Ever since I put down my suspicions, he's been giving me sidelong glances, watching me out of the corner of his eye. Does he know? Can he read my thoughts? I don't know. I've tried not to think about it, just in case. He's done nothing to harm us, but if he is a witch... I'm going to confront Friedgang. Sigmar guide me, I hope I'm wrong.