Prologue

When being chased for the despoiling of a willing maiden you don't usually expect the girl in question to be at the head of the bloodthirsty mob. Apparently, they did things differently in the New World.

I had a good horse under me, and riding is the skill of which I'm most proud, but the natives rode like devils. I'd say they were born in the saddle, but I hadn't seen a proper saddle since we left York. Your New World natives can throw a blanket over the back of a pony and be off.

The girl's father had given chase after discovering me plucking his little flower, something for which I totally blame her, both on the plucking and discovery front. Her clan had given chase because her father was their chief. She herself had given chase after the trick with the branch.

I'd ridden out of the camp half-dressed and pursued by the bellows of an outraged father. I won't claim this sort of thing had never happened to me before, though this was the likely first time I had left a temporary village of two hundred yurts in my wake. It became definitely unique when, turning down the rocky gully alongside the camp and reducing my speed to keep from laming my horse, the girl dropped out of the sky open-legged and landed right behind me with a grunt.

To be fair this wasn't too dissimilar to the way in which she had initiated the tryst that had so enraged her father, and which he would never have known about save for the volume of her appreciation. I should have politely disentangled myself of course. She smelled of horses, and by that I mean she smelled of what horses smell of, which is horse sweat and horse dung. But long pale legs gleaming beneath a too-short buckskin skirt, and a veritable

flood of dirty blonde hair were more than I could resist after so many days in the saddle with just Barras Jon and Omar for company. And so, I had allowed myself to be led into the malodourous interior of a nearby yurt.

There are certain activities that are much better when engaged in with a partner. Escaping on horseback is not one of those activities. The ideal number of passengers in an escape is zero. And, whilst I may have shared the young lady's enthusiasm for resuming our frolicking somewhere more private, I had still greater enthusiasm for winning clear of her relatives. I galloped out of the gulley just ahead of a band of whooping savages. The nearest of them whirled hatchets with unholy glee or thrust those long thin spears of theirs on high. All of them sported short bows. Before us a stand of moonlit cottonwoods marched along a stream and I rode straight for it, hoping vainly to slow my hosts and open a lead.

It turned out that pride in my equestrian skills came before a fall. The natives on their smaller steeds proved alarmingly adept at weaving through the trees and soon I could practically feel the snorting of the closest war pony on the back of my neck.

"Faster!" the girl urged, unhelpfully, pinching at my ribs as she clutched me.

We were already riding much faster than was sensible. The low branch came on us very swiftly out of the darkness and to be fair there would have been almost no time to shout a warning. The fact is though that I ducked frantically and kept my lips pressed together. The branch swept away my uninvited horse guest and on I cantered.

It was somewhat disappointing to see on emerging from the wood and clattering away across a broad expanse of stone, that all my efforts had won me a lead of little more than a hundred yards. Additionally, Jennifer had somehow found herself a horse all her own and was at the head of the pursuit, whooping as ferociously as the rest of them.

The chase ended abruptly when the rock under-hoof vanished and was replaced by … nothing. If I had been given any choice in the matter I can't properly say whether my fear of being caught would have provided the courage to jump. As it was however, we were already falling by the time I registered that there had even *been* a cliff.

Water is peculiar stuff. Most things give way more easily the harder you hit them. Water, not so much. If you fall from a great enough height you might as well land on flagstones as land in a pool. I don't remember hitting the river or being swirled away. In fact, I don't remember very much at all until the point at which a hand knotted itself in my collar and I was dragged from the shallows onto a shingle beach.

"What is it?" A distant call.

The reply from my rescuer was loud, clear, and regrettably familiar. "The cardinal is back."

I rolled to my side and vomited an unfeasible volume of river water, then groaned and peered up at Bertron Gambini. The predawn light gave me the broad lines of his shoulders and the edges of his disapproval.

Barras Jon limped down the slope from our camp, yawning. "Did you find the natives then?"

"Yes," I said. "We'd better run."