The sword sliced through the man's throat, blood arching in a glittering spray. It splashed onto Ulrich's already blood-stained tunic and the enemy fell with a gurgle. Ulrich wiped his blade clean on the grass and slid it into its sheath. Staring out across the field, he saw that the enemy had fallen; the wounded receiving medical aid while the survivors threw down their weapons. Above it all hung the thick, cloying smell of blood, sweat and earth. The commander took a deep breath. This is what battle is; the rush of the fight and the healthy fear of Death.

"Commander," a voice called. Ulrich shook his head and turned to the young man approaching.

"What is it, Alexander?"

"Sir, a few of the men and I were searching the enemy wagons for supplies. And . . . well . . ." the young man paused.

"Speak up, son, what is it?"

"I'm afraid it's hard to explain, Sir. You had better come and see for yourself."

Ulrich followed the boy across the mutilated field into the forest. They passed the ruined remains of catapults and carcasses before coming to the supply wagons. Soldiers in stained green tabards called to one another as they passed around wine, meat, and bread. They nodded to their commander as he passed, but Ulrich ignored them and continued after his guide. The duo approached the last wagon in line. Here the boy stopped. Ulrich studied the wagon.

Unlike the others, it was covered on all sides with thick planks of oak, and a door of thick metal occupied the back wall. A chain lay tangled on the grass, its end chipped and broken. Ulrich pulled open the door and was instantly hit by the smell of mildew and sweat. He peered into the darkness. The low light revealed a shape huddled in a far corner. Grimy feet peeped out from the folds of dark rags, and another pair of chains hung from a ring buried in the wall.

As metal clanked against metal, the rags shifted, revealing a head of tangled hair hanging in front of a dirty nose.

"Do not fear," he said softly, "You are safe now."

The prisoner shifted again. A pair of thin, delicate hands protruded past hefty manacles.

"What is your name?"

No sound. Ulrich reached into the wagon and gently touched a hand. It shrank from him, and the figure huddled farther into the corner.

"Do not fear," he repeated, "all is well. My name is Commander Ulrich of Castle Crannog, and I swear that my men will not harm you. What is your name?"

A raspy whisper answered him.

"I beg your pardon?"

"My name is Myrna." The voice was quiet, but decidedly feminine.

"Well then, Myrna," Ulrich said as he reached to unhook the chains from the wall, "May I help you out of those chains? Perhaps we could find you something to eat."

The pale hand reached out to Ulrich. He took it in his and pulled Myrna towards the back of the wagon. She stepped down and clung tightly to Ulrich's hand, her face hidden under a dark hood. "Who are all these men?"

Ulrich glanced around and started when he saw the small crowd gathered, curious to know what was inside the fortified wagon.

"These are my men," he said, "and none of them shall harm you."

He glared at all before nodding to one of the officers present who began shooing the others back to the abandoned battlefield.

"Myrna," he said, turning back to the young woman, "may I take you to my tent? I shall have the physician sent for to assess your injuries and some food and drink brought up."

". . . All right."

When Ulrich stepped away from the wagon, Myrna tripped and fell with a cry.

"My apologies," Ulrich said as he helped her back to her feet, "I should have been more careful. Perhaps I should fetch a horse."

"Yes, I think that would be best."

Ulrich spotted a wandering soldier and called for a horse to be brought. He turned back to Myrna. Her hood had fallen back, revealing a dirty strip of linen wrapped around her eyes. It must be a blind to keep her disoriented so that she cannot escape. He reached behind her head and untied the linen. As the cloth dropped, Myrna screamed and hid her face in her hands.

Ulrich stared at the young woman, the piece of linen still in his hand. For a brief second, two gaping, black holes had stared at him, gaps in sockets where a pair of eyes should have been.