

Three thousand years ago, the god Deivo raised a wall, and sealed us off from the outsiders. The wall doesn't look like much — dry stone piled waist-high, something to keep sheep from wandering. But no living thing may cross it.

Four hundred years ago, the Tibryn dynasty began their rule.

Every year since, they have taken the children. They call it the Choosing. The crown rides out to the farms, rounds up the talented, then locks them away in the Citadel, where they lose their names and learn magic.

During this brutal training, many are broken. Some die. These are buried in a field west of the Citadel. The graves are not marked, for they are crowded, and why would a mason bother to chisel names so newly given?

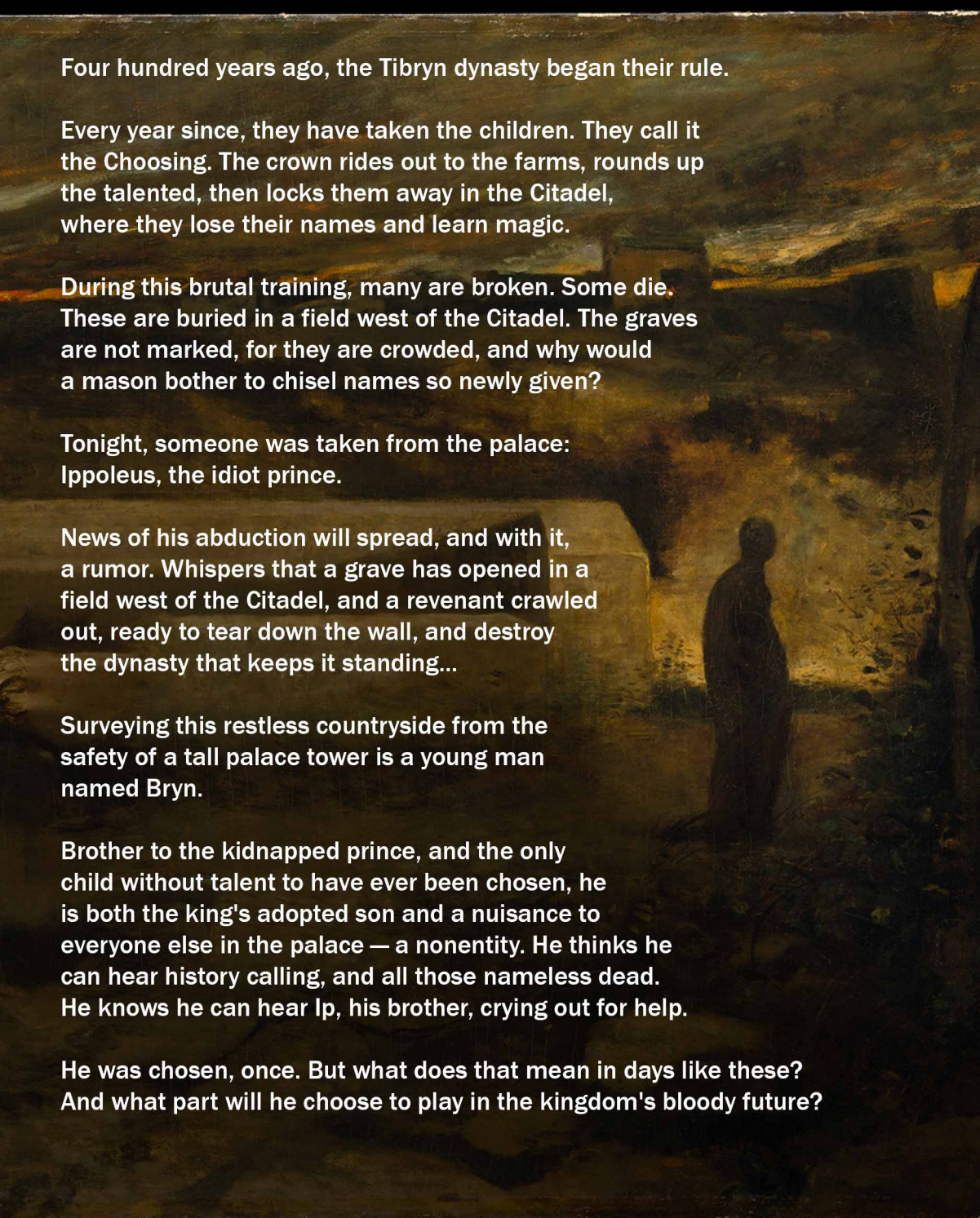
Tonight, someone was taken from the palace: Ippoleus, the idiot prince.

News of his abduction will spread, and with it, a rumor. Whispers that a grave has opened in a field west of the Citadel, and a revenant crawled out, ready to tear down the wall, and destroy the dynasty that keeps it standing...

Surveying this restless countryside from the safety of a tall palace tower is a young man named Bryn.

Brother to the kidnapped prince, and the only child without talent to have ever been chosen, he is both the king's adopted son and a nuisance to everyone else in the palace — a nonentity. He thinks he can hear history calling, and all those nameless dead. He knows he can hear Ip, his brother, crying out for help.

He was chosen, once. But what does that mean in days like these? And what part will he choose to play in the kingdom's bloody future?



THE CHOSEN ONE

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PROLOGUE

THEY BUILT THE KINGDOM WITH BLOCKS. The prince could replicate the buildings he knew — the palace, the Citadel, some of the market buildings — but did not understand maps, and so Bryn was responsible for the forests and villages to the north and east, as well as the wall that encircled the kingdom.

“Now this will be the statue of Arathen,” Bryn said, holding up the prince’s doll. The prince clapped his hands: the doll came from outside, and it delighted him. After correcting the pose, Bryn gingerly placed it within Deiton’s Plaza. “Good?” he asked.

The prince surveyed their work, which covered entirely the floor of his enormous bed chamber. Then he clapped his hands, and the kingdom fell.

“Ippoleus!” Bryn bulged his eyes and protruded his lower lip. “I expect better behavior from you!” The prince giggled and stumped forward on his knees to hug Bryn. The stubble of his beard scraped Bryn’s neck.

Bryn encouraged him to rebuild by clacking the blocks together, but the prince now refused to even look at them. “Enough of those, then? Very well...”

They perused an old bestiary, bound centuries ago with the leather of an animal now extinct and crudely commemorated somewhere in its pages. The drawings’ uncertain anatomy was no fault of the artists: many of their subjects had been dead for centuries, and a few that survived had done so with the aid of hides impervious to dissecting tools.

The ink had faded. The hearth spirits’ blazing viscera were now pink as lips, and the naiads’ scaled haunches merely sky blue, nothing like the infamous shade that had lured men to drown. Ippoleus grew more excited as the pages turned, and squawked when they reached his favorite picture. The dragon’s wings stretched across both pages, the green leather between its flying bones hoarding light like stained glass. A small human figure brandished a sword from his saddle at the base of the neck.

Bryn chuckled. “What do you think, Ip... would you carry a sword if your mount had five on each foot, and spat fire beside?”

The prince blinked forcefully. Bryn believed that somehow, below the level of words and gesture, he understood him.

“If you and I lived a long time ago, we could have looked out a window and seen one of these flying by. Could you imagine? And who’s that? That’s your ancestor,” Bryn said. “Your father’s father’s father’s father’s father...”

Ippoleus began chanting “father” under his breath. He liked the sounds of certain words.

Bryn was holding the bestiary out of the prince’s reach — he wanted to see the dragon more closely, and his curiosity had once destroyed a page of striped, bearlike creatures — when Ippoleus suddenly wrenched about to stare at the door. A moment later there was a knock, and one of the caretakers entered. She was a young woman from the higher ranks of the Citadel, talented like all of the other caretakers. Bryn was only permitted to see the prince because it was assumed that the prince would never choose to hurt him.

“The king wants to speak with you,” the caretaker said.

“He’s outside?”

Ippoleus had begun to moan. Before the prince could untangle his crossed legs, Bryn hopped up and hurried to the door.

Outside, the king leaned against the wall. They could hear Ippoleus beating weakly at the now closed door with his fists, and then the caretaker’s restraining murmurs. The king’s eyes fixed on the door, though he never turned his head toward it.

“Come to see him?” Bryn asked. The wood of the door groaned as it bellied outward subtly. The nails shivered in their holes. Splinters began to pop free.

“No. Come along, Bryn.” The king began walking. Bryn fell into step. “He seems agitated,” the king said.

“He can sense you out here. You should visit. It would make him very happy.”

“Yes, and what would I do with him? Applaud as he drools?” His mouth tightened. “Forgive me. Harsher than I meant. I only wanted to say that it makes no difference to him who minds him. We could use dogs, if

they ever lasted. Your time is better spent elsewhere.”

“I visit the prince because I like to. That’s all. You should spend time. He does not sleep well, and I think you could help him.”

“Bryn, just because the prince’s mother does not care enough to reproach me does not mean *someone* must. The task can go undone. We have more urgent matters.”

“Such as?”

The king shook his head. He did not speak in the hallways about matters of state. Servants were sharp listeners in the upper floors, and great talkers in the kitchens. He knew this because Bryn had told him.

When they reached the council room, the king settled into his chair and spoke. “It is growing more serious. A collector was killed, out in the villages. They bludgeoned him to death with a sack of copper. I have reports that they are organizing. They meet in barns and thickets, to talk about injustice and my heavy boot.”

“One untaxed harvest, perhaps a feast. They will calm down.”

“Maybe not. This is unusual. The crops are growing well, and the pygmies were too sleepy for much raiding this season. We haven’t even had the choosing yet. And still they organize. How am I supposed to placate one who has no cause for complaint?”

“You know they have cause.”

“The Wall?”

“As long as they can look over it and see the other side, they will have cause.”

“Then we should revolt against the birds, too! We can look up at the sky and wish we were in it — but the fact is that the sky is not our place. If Deivo wanted us beyond the Wall, then he would not have raised it in the first place.”

“Sir, I think you know that is not the same.”

“And if it’s the Wall that upsets them, why brain my tax collector?” The king had not heard him: the man’s ears shut when his mouth opened.

“Why kick a dog when it is your wife you are angry with?” Bryn replied.

The king scratched his nose. “What a crude example. No, it’s gold

they want.”

“I’ll go, then? You might as well be speaking with Ippoleus. At least he would enjoy being talked at.”

“Oh, sit down. We must *think*, Bryn.”

In a dream Bryn met the prince, and he was whole. He stood straight; his eyes did not flicker about; and though he was silent, Bryn sensed this was by choice. Bryn wished he would speak. But the prince only smiled at him from beneath a mask that was Bryn’s own face. A profound joy surged in Bryn, to see the prince restored, and to know that he was himself now unnecessary. As Bryn willed himself to dissolve in order to contribute his remaining energies for the benefit of this uncanny being, the prince stopped him. The prince, and Bryn — for it was his face the prince wore — began to cry for help. A begging note, stretched as though coming from a great distance.

When Bryn properly woke, the cry survived the dream’s collapse by a second, and that impossible sensation drove him from bed. His ears had heard nothing: they rang with the pointless exploration of silence. Still, the cry echoed in his mind, as though the prince were in the room with him. He dressed quickly, his sleepiness and panic neutralizing into a keen alertness. In the hallway he decided not to run, then remembered some of Ippoleus’s other night terrors. One morning Bryn had discovered deep gouges on the door of the prince’s bed chamber, as if they had been made by a claw and not a hand. Thinking on this, he fell into a lope. When he rounded the corner of the hall leading to the prince’s quarters, Bryn froze.

Tall windows leaned pillars of moonlight upon the black and white tile. A figure in black passed soundlessly through these patches of illumination. It walked away from him, towards the prince’s chamber. It held something in its hand. Before Bryn could cry out, a double of that dark figure rushed at him from the shadows. The detached horror of the situation relieved him. It had been a false waking, after all. But the clarity of that thought — and the texture of the glove being clapped over his mouth, and the pain of being driven into the wall — made him reconsider. The

ragged eye holes in his assailant's black cloth mask revealed two shadowy eyes. On those black mirrors he found two glints that compacted to a pinprick all light and life; everything else was shadow. Bryn was afraid to look away from this light. He knew that if he did, he would lose it and live forever in the dark.

His breathing shallowed as he succumbed to a prey animal's hypnosis. The masked figure removed its hand from his mouth and stepped back. The eyes never blinked. Behind the fog of his lethargy, something gnawed at Bryn. He remembered another figure, much like this one. It had been headed for Ip. What did it intend? And what had it been holding in its hand? His panic returned. He opened his mouth to scream, but made no sound. His lips had not even parted: the masked figure held a finger to its blank mouth.

Bryn attempted to struggle, but his joints had rusted. His attacker, finger still to its mouth, shook its head, and when Bryn continued to struggle an anger developed in its shadowed eyes. Without his wishing it, Bryn extended an open hand to his attacker. A dagger was laid in his palm. His fingers joined the arm's revolt, and closed around the blade.

The figure crossed its arms and watched him. When Bryn tried a stab, his arm instead began smoothly guiding the dagger towards his own eye. Every impulse of motion drew the blade closer, until the point was too close to focus on. By surrendering to an absolute stillness, he suspended the blade. Its tip bent his eyelashes.

Scuffling to his left, and a guttural moan that a gag could not stifle fully. Three figures passed before his locked, partially occluded perspective. The middle thrashed feebly. "Enough toying," one hissed in passing. "Just kill him."

The masked figure contemplated him as one would any statue. After a long moment in which there was nothing to do but feel the heat of his shame, the knife receded and was reclaimed by the masked figure. His hands were tied behind his back, and then his ankles were bound. A ball of fabric was shoved to the back of his throat and secured with another piece of rope.

"Shhhh," the masked figure said, almost gently. Bryn was lowered,

straight-limbed, to the floor. Now supine, he watched the boots move off at a run. They thumped softly on the thick carpeting, then faded. They were succeeded by a vast, hissing silence. Bryn could feel the rope's fibers on his teeth.

Some time before dawn he was discovered. The maid, yawning, still bleary, nearly walked past him. When he groaned, she yelped and stumbled backwards, then scurried off, returning some time later with the bloodguard Tetny, who freed him with three pulls of his dagger. Bryn contorted to relieve his cramps. "The prince," he croaked, and then Tetny was running down the corridor. After a moment Bryn limped after him, and saw the bed chamber of the prince, empty except for Osmos, trussed with heavy chains. Tetny worked to free his comrade; Bryn began hobbling to the king's chambers.

While Osmos, Tetny, Bryn, and the king waited for Marius to answer his summons, Bryn sat dazed in a chair and was permitted to pick at the tray of breakfast the king was too agitated to eat. The king had questions, and repeated them in a way that suggested he did not want them answered yet.

When Marius arrived, the king's questions were no longer rhetorical. "What happened?" He looked first to Bryn.

Bryn swiped his finger across his underlid. "I woke up from a nightmare. The prince had called me. I went to check on him and found them in the hallway."

"How many?"

"I saw three. All wearing masks."

"You were subdued by three men?" Marius asked Osmos.

"They were strong. One was stronger than you."

"Ridiculous."

"Then you tell me how they got into the palace in the first place. Past *your* guards."

The king's attention slid to Marius. "Answer that."

"I can't yet, my lord. I haven't spoken with my men yet. It's possible — not likely — that one was not at attention."

“The prince is gone because of your guards’ incompetence,” Bryn said. After the kidnappers left, Bryn had been quiet for some time. He regained control of his body by degrees. First he could blink, and this was a relief. Then he could scream, and tried screaming through his gag. When no one came, he had fallen silent, and thought for hours about what had happened.

“Incompetence?” Marius did not look at Bryn while he talked. “Yes, if only my talents were as skilled as you, then the prince would be here.” Marius tipped his head toward him. “I wonder, do your wrists hurt? The ropes seem to have chafed them terribly.”

Bryn leaned forward in his chair, but Tetny laid three fingers on his forearm. “I think we should worry about what happened, not possibilities,” Tetny said. “Edgar is still gathering information, but it seems these attackers scaled the wall up to the prince’s floor.”

“That’s two hundred feet of sheer rock,” Marius said. “This is impossible.”

The king snarled, “Obviously not. The safety of this palace belongs to you, and the safety of my family belongs to you.” His finger trembled as he stabbed it first towards Marius, then Osmos. “Explain to me how this impossible thing is possible.”

Osmos bowed his head and held out his palms, as he had when receiving his bloodguard’s sword.

Marius was thinking. “Outside this room, there is no one capable of doing something like this. Even I would find it difficult — but three? I don’t know, my lord. This can only mean that there is a different kind of animal out there. One we have not seen before.”

PART ONE

GRIFFINS

THE THIRD GRIFFIN

BRYN ROSE EARLY FROM HIS NARROW BED. Dawn had just touched the windows, and gray light leaked into his small chamber. He passed his hands over his face. His dreams went. There had been strong sunlight over the fields, flecks of dirt clinging to the hairs of a man's knuckles, perhaps his father's... Bryn dressed and shaved. His stubble floated in a scum atop the water, each fragment of hair subtly bending the surface. Exhaustion made him careless, and the razor skipped on his cheek. Bryn hissed before the blood even oozed out. He pawed water over the painless cut and watched the drops of blood dissolve like smoke in the washbasin.

He dried his face and dressed well. It was important to maintain appearances while the kingdom convulsed. He shut the door to his chamber — servants new to the highest floor sometimes mistook it for a storeroom — and walked down the broad hallway, wide enough for six carriages and all of it thickly carpeted. A footstep had never been heard in the king's hall.

Bryn nodded at the bloodguard as he passed. Their swords had become ceremonial during the recent prosperity, but now that was over. They might be forced to make good on their oath: *To spill every drop of my blood to save a single drop of His*. A blood-obsessed kingdom. Bryn thought

there would soon be plenty of it. He entered the king's suite without knocking. Since Ippoleus's capture, the king rested more, a fact that had magnified in reaching the peasants; as they understood it, the king slept until sunset and woke for a leisurely breakfast, after which he returned to sleep. In truth, he woke only at dawn, rather than two hours before. The king attributed the excess to his old age. But he was forty-one. Not that old.

On this morning the king was already awake, dressed, and standing at the window. He glowered at the city across the river, rousing itself in the pink light. Tomorrow was the choosing; the protests would begin soon, and Deiton's Plaza would fill with screaming peasant faces.

"Perhaps it is time to loose the Citadel on them, sir. Or the dogs."

The king's smile, and its reflection in the window glass, were the first two Bryn had seen this month. "A man is always hungry, Bryn. If his bowl is full, then he'll hunger for something else." He turned to Bryn and clasped his hands behind his back. "I've given them food, I've given them peace, and now they expect more. They imagine there is something that will make them happy, something I have and can give. They must imagine that I'm the only man alive who could want for nothing." The king laughed sadly.

"We'll bring your son back, my lord."

"That would be good. But it will never be enough, will it?" He returned to the window. "Ah," the king sighed. "I thought this day would never start."

The royal griffins soared past, golden flanks rippling with muscle, gleaming with dawn light. With a few beats of their pale wings they ascended to the palace's tallest spire, their aerie, and alit on its green shingles. After twining themselves around the pole that flew the dynasty's standard, which bore their sewn image, they screeched three times, loud enough to wake the kingdom.

The king frowned and searched the sky.

"Where's the third?" he asked Bryn. The two visible griffins continued to screech, fluttering wings and hopping about the slanted roof. "Where's the third?"

The door banged open. Bryn, who had nightmares of assassins not meant for him, half rose from the chair. But he recognized the servant in the doorway, and the man was too red-faced and panicky to be planning regicide.

“My lord, they’ve shot one. One of the griffins.”

“Where?”

“Watch says it came down somewhere in the slums.”

The king strode for the door.

“Sir, you’ll need your guards,” Bryn said. “This might be a plot.”

The king growled. “Damn it, of course it’s a plot. Everything’s a plot, now. Take me there, and quickly.”

The king shoved the bowing servant out the door. Bryn hurried after.

They charged forth from the gate with the bloodguards Osmos and Arant, and a few of the household guard for outriders. In assembling this sally, the king had grabbed anyone with a uniform and a sword. It was reckless: they were exposed. Bryn watched windows and peered into alleyways. If an assassin wanted to lure the king from his high tower, they could choose no better bait than one of the kingdom’s three remaining griffins. Without a right-minded heir, the king had spent a great deal of time in the aerie, tending to the creatures. He rode now with a murderous scowl.

They had no difficulty locating the downed griffin. The narrow slum street was crammed with shouting bystanders. In the gaps between their shoulders and legs, a large figure could be seen laid out on the cobbles. The king and his entourage reined up behind the last rank of the crowd. Glancing about, Bryn saw the herald was not present. The king nodded at Bryn. Standing up in his stirrups, Bryn gathered his breath and shouted, “Stand aside! In the name of your king!”

No one moved. One teenager glanced back with a casual oath for Bryn.

“Move!” the king bellowed, his voice amplified to something like thunder. The crowd parted then, realizing who rode in their midst. As the king and Bryn entered the oblong of cleared space, a few crouching scav-

engers fled, leaving behind a bloody knife clattering on the cobblestones.

The killing arrow jutted — upright, obscene — from the griffin's chest. The people had not been shy in claiming feathers: the long copper pinions had been plucked, exposing bumpy pink skin. Most of the sinews anchoring the neck had been severed. With its head nearly detached, the griffin was not the invincible symbol of the monarchy, but one of the gods' sad jokes, vulnerable to something so simple as an arrow fletched with pigeon feathers. Blood spread on the street, filling the cracks in the pavers, wetting the hooves of the king's horse as he brought it to the center of his impromptu stage. From the saddle he gazed down at his subjects, who cowered under his eye as they hid feathers behind their backs.

"Useless," the king said, at the volume he used to speak to himself when he forgot Bryn was in the room. Then, again: "Useless," now at oratory volume. "If you think this was anything but a senseless butchery, you are wrong. I do not know if the murderer stands somewhere in the crowd. I do not care. All of you are responsible." The king wheeled his horse, sweeping his scowl across the gathered faces. "If you would stand by and allow this creature to not only be killed, but *desecrated*, then you may as well have held the bow. I should have you put in the dungeons. Or hanged. But I won't. This is useless. Useless!" he screamed. "Can you create nothing? Or can you only destroy what others have built?"

No one spoke. Throwing his hands in the air, the king spurred his horse. The front rank of the crowd leapt aside to avoid being trampled.

As he passed, he barked at Bryn, "We are taking the body with us."

Bryn signaled the other men in the entourage. They hurried forward and stooped, wedging their arms under the corpse. On a three count they heaved, the six of them staggering a little as they distributed the weight. One of the mammoth paws dangled next to Bryn's face. The horses shied away as they approached.

"Horses won't carry it, sir," he said to the king.

"Then we will *walk*."

Bryn reshouldered his burden and looked up at the grey clouds — the day would be long.

In the courtyard, his right sleeve sodden by blood, Bryn asked what was to be done with the corpse. The king put his hand on the griffin's ribs, felt the bones beneath the fur, and explored the black-red crater of the wound. He rubbed clotted blood between his fingers. "Bring it to the kitchens. I haven't eaten griffin since I was a boy. And inform the ladies that they will be dining with me, tonight."

"Very well, sir. I'll have someone see to it."

"If I intended anyone else to see to it, I would not have asked you."

"But we should discuss your plans, yes?"

"You are covered in blood, Bryn. Do as I've said, and find me once the task is done. Enough talk: these men don't seem comfortable."

The king turned, his cloak flaring out, and swept across the cobbles, up the stairs, and into the grand doorway. His bloodguard followed him. The other men muttered.

"Be comfortable if he carried the damn thing. Wouldn't weigh a bit to him," Tulioch said.

Bryn ignored this comment. "A little further," he said, brightly.

They entered the palace by a smaller set of worn double doors. The lintel caught the griffin's wings, and one cracked before the men realized they were obstructed. It flopped down in a shower of small round feathers and fanned before Bryn's face, blinding him. One man's knees buckled. They nearly dropped it, but regained their balance after a round of curses. Groaning, they staggered forward with the short tense steps of men under load.

In the hallways a few servants petted the griffin's tawny flanks, their pinched and exhausted expressions yielding to a childlike astonishment. "Back to work," Bryn shouted. No one minded. Bryn saw one of the cellar boys, a tall man named Larth. "Larth! Carry this." Bryn said.

Larth shrugged him off. "You don't order me about. I answer to the steward."

"And the steward answers to the king—"

"And you are not him, are you?"

"I gave you an order," Bryn said.

Larth, who spent his days hauling and rolling the king's casks, great

oaken barrels filled with gallons of strong fragrant wine, who could carry a firkin on his back, nudged Bryn in the chest.

It was enough to send the griffin and the men carrying it to the floor. Bryn scrambled to his feet and saw Larth vanishing back to his cellars. The hallway filled with dazed groans.

“What in hell was that,” Tulioch said.

“Sorry,” Bryn sighed. “Larth.” He hauled Tulioch up and apologized to the other men, who were brushing themselves off. “You all well?”

Then he noticed a skinny pageboy pinned between the wall and the bulk of the animal. His thin arms strained against the insensate furred mass; he gaped like a fish. Bryn and two other men hurried to pull him free. As the page stood and caught his breath, pawing at the black blood which stained his doublet — the beast bled endlessly, it seemed — exhaustion seeped over Bryn, starting at the crown of his head. The sun was hardly up. He entertained a brief, vivid fantasy about his narrow bed and the feel of the thin pillow under his cheek, how he could slide his legs beneath the cool sheet. He took a gold piece from his purse and pressed it into the boy’s unstrung palm. “You are relieved of your work for the day,” Bryn said.

The boy prodded at one of his ribs. “Think it’s broke.”

“Then see the surgeons.”

“The princesses. I was going to take them a tray—”

“I’ll take it myself.”

The page nodded and wandered off, walking curiously, on the outer edges of his feet. Bryn looked at the griffin slumped against the wall. Its eyes, once capable of spotting prey miles off, now saw nothing but the inner darkness of its skull. The pupils had relaxed into huge black disks, leaving the moon-colored irises just a rim of color. Torchlight lacquered its hooked beak. Bryn sighed and waited for the footmen to ready themselves for a second effort. As they panted, a woman crowed. She had discovered how to extend the beast’s claws. They looked on as she manipulated the large paw, bringing the black claws in and out of their fleshy sheaths. She touched one and whispered, “Ah, it’s a sharp one. Feel!”

Others crowded in to touch. A few grabbed the toes and spread them wide. “Someone already took one!” More went to pet the thing. The foot-

men stood like dray horses.

“Enough!” Bryn shouted, remembering how the king had scattered the earlier crowd. “The king loved this animal. How do you think he’d feel if he heard that the servingfolk were playing with it?”

Reluctantly, the servants dispersed, casting last glances over their shoulders before smoothly accelerating to the stride that carried them swiftly and soundlessly about the palace.

Bryn said, “Once more, men.”

They crouched and heaved, managing after another round of curses to shoulder the body. At the next turning they went right and then down a short hallway to a broad set of double doors. Using the griffin’s skull as a ram, they eased their way into the hot clamor of the kitchens.

The kitchen was a second kingdom hidden in the bowels of the palace. Bryn came there frequently as the king’s envoy, to deliver alterations to the menu. The din of shouting cooks and clattering utensils quieted almost instantly at the sight of the griffin. A passing baker stopped and craned her neck. She patted absently at her apron, then dashed off, returning with the chief cook, Velus.

Before the Velus could frame his first question, Bryn told him to pick a table. Eyes darting, the cook pointed at a long chopping block covered with a few racks of ribs and bowls of spice. They slung the griffin onto what free space there was, upsetting some of the spices. Red peppery dust gouted upwards as the bowls clattered on the floor. The footmen hurried out of the kitchen. Bryn’s eyes began watering instantly.

“Some peasant brought it down this morning, arrow in the throat.” Bryn tried not to breathe.

Coughing and sneezing, Velus asked: “Why is it in my kitchen?”

“Why do you think?”

“Bryn, no — I don’t know how to cook griffin!”

Bryn smiled. Nearly twenty years ago, when Bryn was a shivering, half-starved boy, Velus and his assistants had made a point of fattening him. “You can cook a chicken, can’t you? That’s half the job right there.” A swarm of servants in aprons crouched between them to mop up the spill.

“And do you suppose I have much experience serving lion?”

“Think of it as an opportunity to demonstrate your considerable skill.”

Velus prodded the griffin’s haunch with his thumb. “I am having some ideas, now. This is for tonight?”

“The main course.”

“Then I shall do what I can. Knife!” he called. In moments the hilt of a skinning knife was laid in his palm.

Bryn held up his hands. “Before you start?”

“As you will.”

Bryn yanked one of the last remaining pinions. It resisted and then released with a soft pop. It shone like copper in his hand. He tucked it into an inner pocket and pushed through the throng of helpers now descending on the griffin.

In the corridor beyond the kitchen doors, charwomen swung mops in wide, artistic arcs. The washes of pink water ran and collided with each other. As he skirted past, the women leaned on their mop handles and frowned at him. Bryn wanted to tell them he did not kill the griffin, but the charwomen always frowned at him when he passed, from a stoop or their knees, scrubbing at some surface with a stiff brush. They were of every age, but all were ruddy women with the permanent scowls that came from a life spent erasing stains.

Bryn panted up the stairs that led to his chambers. The griffin’s death had disrupted his schedule. The king would surely postpone his visit to the Sanctuary. He would want to plan some ceremony or speech — a griffin’s death could not pass unmarked. But perhaps the king had a more severe reaction in mind. In that case, Bryn would likely have to locate Edgar — but he was beyond the Wall. He needed to hurry. The king was expecting him.

In his chamber, he plucked at his bloody sleeve: the doublet was ruined. The tailors would replace it if he begged, but better if an order came from the king. Yet knowing the king and his unlimited capacity for grief, particularly for the dynasty and its symbols, Bryn doubted the king would notice a spoiled doublet or consider it worthy of comment, though Bryn owned hardly a dozen garments fit for court, and the washerwomen

were frequently negligent with his laundry.

He hung the doublet from his cloak hook and scrubbed at his arm with harsh soap. The blood had dried on his skin and came out only with great effort. He scraped himself with his fingernails and cleaned those. He took a clean black doublet and pulled it on; the king would take it as a sign of mourning and would be pleased. Bryn looked at himself in the silver mirror. The surface was slightly concave, and so he appeared to be standing at some distance.

It was only when he was halfway to the king's solarium that he remembered the princesses' tray. Groaning, he reversed course and hurried downstairs. He found it in the kitchen, under a beaten silver dome.

A bird-like shriek pierced the hush in the upper halls. Amara's laughter always made him flinch. He righted the tray in time, but could feel his headache, which he carried about like a river stone in his skull, beginning to splinter and multiply. A night's rest reassembled it, and provided he was careful, he could sometimes make it to sunset before the throbbing began.

The princesses inhabited a suite of rooms adjacent to the queen's. Rich carpets the softness and color of pine needles overlaid burnished walnut planks. Painfully white patches of sunlight streamed through the windows, each as tall as a man, spaced at ten yard intervals. Niches held small busts and figurines made by those sentimental craftsmen the princesses preferred.

Close by the door, he heard another shriek of laughter. Bryn nodded at the long suffering bloodguard, Arant, who had protected the girls through their noisy adolescence. He was Tetny's father, once the king's shield, but he had been assigned a task commensurate with his waning talent.

"Why are you here?" Arant asked.

"Doing a favor."

"You're going to hear about that one, I think."

"Believe me, I know. Could you?"

Arant nodded and opened the door, revealing the princesses at rest.

Both occupied couches at unorthodox angles: Amara lounged on a day bed with one leg and arm dangling towards the floor, while Thetia sat upside down on a low couch, hair reaching to the floor in a frozen golden cataract. A skittish dog with a pushed-in face raced about the room and launched into panicky barking when its rolling eyes located Bryn. Thetia lazily chided the dog as it, quivering, menaced his shin.

Amara clapped as she sat upright. “We were wondering what was taking so long, and now we know — it was your fault, Bryn. Should have guessed.”

Bryn frowned at her. Since he saw the king more than she did, she waged a tiresome campaign of resentment. Bryn set the tray down carelessly and wondered if she understood the motive for her animosity, or if it was sourceless and instinctive as her yapping dog’s.

“Where’s the usual boy?” Amara asked.

“I gave him the day off.”

“Whatever for?” Thetia inverted herself with a slow folding and arrangement of limbs. She drew two fingers across her hairline, securing a fall of hair behind her ear like a drape. “Is he sick?”

“A griffin dropped on him and broke his rib.”

“What does that mean?”

“Just what I say. Didn’t you hear? This morning someone feathered one of the griffins.” He had intended to spite them for their condescension, not terrify them. Both sisters stared at him with round eyes.

“One of the griffins is dead?” Amara said around a mouthful of pastry.

“Which one?” Thetia asked. “What happened?”

“I don’t know. One of the griffins. Shot it with an arrow.”

“But which one?”

“Who can tell the difference?”

“Everyone, you idiot. Did you see it?” Thetia gasped. “Is that why you have blood under your nails?”

Bryn clicked his tongue; he thought he had been thorough. “Yes, I helped carry it.”

“What color were its feathers?”

He made a show of remembering, then finally said, “Almost copper,

I think.”

The princesses looked to each other. “Oh, that’s awful.”

There was a knock. The door opened. The queen stood on the threshold, still and watchful as though posing for a portrait. Her thick dark hair was pulled back from her face, leaving the savage contours of her high cheeks unsoftened. Bryn swept a deep bow; Amara ran to be comforted.

“Did you hear about the griffin, Mother?”

“Just now — I was coming to tell you. It seems I’ve been preceded, however.” She squeezed Amara with one arm. Her pale gaze swiveled on Bryn. The queen’s meticulously plotted bloodline could supposedly be traced back to Deivo, but Bryn suspected she had gorgon blood.

Bryn bowed and tried not to fidget. “My lady.”

“It is quite wonderful to find you in my daughters’ rooms, horrifying them with tales of dead griffins — with blood under your nails, no less — but perhaps in the future you will not be in these hallways without express purpose, yes?”

Bryn hid his hands behind his back. The blood was not that obvious, he was certain. “I did come with a message, my lady. The king requests that you and the princesses join him at table tonight.”

“We’re to eat together?” Amara asked. “Why?” she asked her mother, excitedly.

The queen traced an eyebrow with her middle finger and sighed. “Of course he would. Amara, sit down. Bryn, you may leave us.”

“Yes, my lady.”

Outside, he shut the door and leaned against it, staring blindly at the ceiling.

“You feeling well?” Arant asked.

Bryn swallowed. His dry tongue felt like something foreign in his mouth. “Long day. The king will be expecting me.”

The bloodguard retrieved a waterskin from behind a potted fern. “Here.”

Bryn gulped three times, nodded gratefully, and handed the skin back. Then he set off. The king might be in his council room or private chambers. Both were at the opposite end of the wing: he kept his distance

from the queen and the princesses.

Bryn found him in the solarium, paging through reports. The king now frowned when he read: a weakness in the eyes. "Tell me, Bryn, how is it that a kingdom this small can generate so much paper?" He tossed the sheaf of parchment onto the desk and rubbed his brow. "You made arrangements with the kitchens?"

"I did. Velus promised to do his best."

"Good, thank you for handling this." The king sat in his massive carved chair and skimmed another report. As a boy, Bryn would attempt to scale that chair's back while the king wrote missives and studied maps. He would peep over the top, with the entwined dragons, and look down on the known world. He would ask what sort of people lived in the north and the east; he would ask what sort of people lived on the other side of the Wall. And the rightful king of the lands would answer his questions patiently. Even still they didn't believe he had a right: not the queen, the princesses, or the servants. They knew that, whatever house he came from, it flew no flag. For a royal, that was all they needed to know.

Not looking up from the page, the king said, "I've sent word to the tailors, they're working up a new set of doublets for you. About time you got some new ones, wouldn't you say?"

"Oh, yes sir. Thank you."

"Mm. Ready by next week, they said."

"Very good. Any news of the prince?"

"None. I expect we'll receive word only when these clods have argued out an appropriate ransom. They are trying to dismantle us, one brick at a time. First my son, now my griffin."

"I had some thoughts about this, sir. I don't believe that the kidnapping and the griffin were done by the same men."

"Oh? Why do you say this?"

"The ones that took the prince could have killed Osmos and me. But they didn't."

"Perhaps they were afraid to make noise and rouse the guards."

"It could have been quiet. They could have done anything to me. But I think they wanted your attention, sir."

"The griffin killers did not?"

"In a different way. I think the griffin is a protest against the choosing. The prince felt more personal. Whoever took him wants you afraid, not angry."

"And were you afraid? When you were at their mercy?"

Bryn swallowed. "I have never felt fear like that."

"That is interesting. But the council just left, and we agreed that no matter who is responsible for these attacks, the people will assume they are the work of a single author. And that is dangerous for us. We must be careful not to allow something like this to happen again. To be struck twice without retaliating may look like forbearance. But soon it will look like weakness." He sighed. "Now, I have a rather tedious list of tasks for you today. Will you need to write them down?"

"No, sir."

"Then listen close." When he finished the recital, he consulted the golden pocket watch Edgar had stolen from beyond the Wall. A select few of the household staff carried these. "I will be welcoming Edgar back at seven. Can you meet me there?"

Bryn checked his own watch. The back of it bore two inscriptions: one in the bristling script of the outsiders, the other in the king's hand. "Yes, that should be enough time," he said.

It was a few minutes past seven, and Bryn was spiraling into the deepest parts of the palace. At the bottom of the stairs, behind an unremarkable door with a weak lock, a short tunnel led to the chamber that contained the Door. Inside stood the king and three of his bloodguard: Osmos, Tetny, and Cail. Though the chamber was dim, the crimson armor and white tabards of their order shone brightly. The young men smirked at Bryn. The king stared at the Door. He had not noticed Bryn's arrival.

Bryn cleared his throat. "I apologize, sir. I was delayed." The words echoed off the stones and subsided into embarrassed deaths. This room

was old as the Wall and the kingdom.

The king turned and smiled at him. “Not to worry. As you can see, we are just now beginning. Guard, are you ready?”

“Yes, lord,” they spoke as one.

The Door was huge, for in the days of its construction men were larger. It was an arch of common stones set in the dirt of the semi-circular room’s flat wall. When the king reached to touch its keystone, the earth between the doorposts began to shimmer, subject to unseen forces and torsion. The king stepped back, and the bloodguard arrayed themselves before the Door with their swords in their hands. No matter how many times Bryn observed this ritual, it always surprised him when the shimmering earth tore like gauze and parted to admit a breeze from the other world.

The Door now opened on a woodland scene. Bryn could see tree trunks and stones, pine branches subtly undulating in the breeze. There, as here, it was late summer. Strange birds called softly in the night.

“Do you see anything?” the king murmured. The bloodguard shook their heads.

Faced with the other world, Bryn felt the usual urge to run through the Door. They had no talent, beyond the Wall — they were all commoners like him. He took a step towards the threshold. The air smelled different, and the trees whispered. Perhaps this forest was near one of their oceans, which only Edgar had seen. Water so enormous the other shore could not be seen. Bryn desired all of it, that huge and barbaric world which held such a brutish landscape but also produced little ticking wonders like the watch in his pocket. He took another step closer. The other men were all peering out — they would not know his intentions until he was past them. And they had sworn oaths never to leave the kingdom; he would be free of everything. And he would go and see the new world, look on their maps and live among their strange peoples, unknown, expatriate of a land they knew only in stories: no one would have heard of his parentage, there.

They heard a shout from beyond the Door, then another.

Twigs snapped and foliage rustled; Bryn crowded behind the bloodguard to watch from between their shoulders. From out of the darkness

there emerged a lean and agile shadow. It crashed through the underbrush, nearly tripped on a deadfall, and came stumbling over the threshold. Bryn and the others leaped backwards. A strangely dressed man scrambled to his feet, and it was Edgar, shouting, "Quickly, my lord, quickly!"

The king hopped forward and touched the keystone. A mist fell over the forest scene and the breeze diminished. The trees and stones and swaying pine branches began to fade. Before they vanished, Bryn saw a bright light, like a small white sun, shining from the darkness. Behind it stood the silhouettes of two men. Bryn squinted and tried to make them out, but it was too bright. Before the Door shut completely, they heard one of the men ask a question in a foreign tongue.

Then it was shut, and the echoes returned. The king and Edgar performed the homecoming ritual.

The king said, "I again make you welcome in the kingdom, your home."

Edgar responded, "I am grateful to return, lord, and hope never to leave again." That done, he brushed the twigs from his clothes, and groaned when he spotted a rip in the knee of his trousers.

"Who cares about those rags?" the king asked.

"These are considered quite fashionable over there, very hard to get." Like his clothes, Edgar's name was foreign: born Hermenos, he had adopted the name after visiting one of their marble temples.

"Then the tailors will be busy. Who were those men chasing you? Have you news?"

"No one. And yes, lord. We should speak."

"Very well."

They made the long climb back to the king's chambers. The blood-guard stationed themselves automatically at the door, while Bryn attempted to follow the king inside. The hard edge of Edgar's hand held him back.

"Lord? My news is delicate."

The king glanced back and nodded. "Wait for me outside, Bryn."

Bryn nodded. "Of course, sir." Edgar stared at him steadily. His lack

of distinguishing features suited his purposes — he reminded everyone of someone else — and made him handsome, a fact he scuffed with glamors while at work. Having barred Bryn's entrance, Edgar gave a small nod and stepped inside. The door clapped shut behind him.

Bryn attempted to wait with the bloodguard, but quickly grew restless. They made a craft of stillness. He did not envy them: living always with the possibility of death, repaid only with honor. The bloodguard could win no victories, only avert defeats. And wait, silently.

Bryn's stomach rumbled. He said to Osmos, the young leader, "I'm going to the kitchens."

Osmos's eyes revolved towards him. "Why do you tell me this?"

"If the king should need anything..."

"I guard. You serve. If you like, when the king calls for you and finds you gone, I will explain that you were peckish."

"It would not have been for long," Bryn said.

"This is the life we have chosen."

To spite Osmos's rectitude, Bryn slouched against the wall. "We didn't choose a thing. You're only here because your father was a guard, too. And the king chose me, not the other way around."

Osmos nearly smiled. "Why would I shun a great honor simply because my father enjoyed it before me? And do you not choose the king? I cannot leave my post, but if you like, leave the palace. Go look for your father in the villages. I'm sure he has been waiting all this time for you."

"Assuming the plagues didn't take him," Tetny put in.

Bryn snorted. Orders turned men sanctimonious — the bloodguard were nearly as bad as the Citadel's talents. "Do you think," he asked Osmos, "that if an attempt is ever made against the king, you'll be able to stop it? Like you stopped Ippoleus's kidnapping?"

Osmos shrugged. "Yes. And if I cannot, all I must do is bleed and die in his defense."

Bryn folded his arms across his churning stomach and resolved to wait as quietly as these grim red men. But their silence sounded like laughter, so he said, "Do not worry, Osmos — you're safe with me."

The bloodguard smirked and watched the empty hallway for danger.

After a long and hungry hour — Bryn had spent it checking his watch and pestering the guards, who found the questions puzzling, irrelevant — the king exited his chambers with Edgar in tow. The spy was tightening a sort of scarf the men wore in the outer world. Bryn had a momentary tingle of intrigue as he wondered about the men who had pursued him, but knew that Edgar would never tell him that story.

The king clapped his hands and said that it might be time to eat: therefore it was.

Bryn said, “I would be happy to inform the cooks.”

“Excellent.”

“Will you need me during the meal, sir?” Already Bryn was planning his raid of the kitchen. Perhaps the ribs he had seen earlier would be finished by now.

“Will I need you? Of course, boy. You are eating with us.”

The queen and princesses stared at him from their seats. Bryn hesitated, his hands on the shoulders of a chair. He took meals with the king, but only in his solarium. He could not remember the last time he had eaten at this table. But wine was being poured, and the first course was being served. A small flame of defiance joined his hunger. It was the king that invited him, and the king that he served. He pulled out the chair and sat down between Mabry and the empty place where the prince used to fidget, before he had become unmanageable.

Mabry, a robust florid bull of a man and the king’s cousin, squeezed Bryn’s shoulder and demanded he try the wine. “They only let the prettiest girls with the biggest feet crush those grapes, you know.” A goblet was being poured for him, and Bryn grinned when he thought that Larth must have fetched the cask. He tried a sip.

“It’s very good, thank you.”

Provoked by his inturned smile, the queen laced her fingers and gestured towards Bryn with the bony-knuckled morningstar. “It is not my practice to invite the help to my table,” she said, glaring at the king.

The king sampled his own goblet of wine, smacked his lips, and said,

“Is that so? Luckily, this is my table and anyone who sits at it does so on my invitation. Which I have been known to revoke in cases of gross rudeness.”

Amara snickered. Thetia, sitting opposite Bryn, registered the spat with a light flush on her cheeks. Bryn took a more sizeable sip of his wine, less concerned with flavor. He did not dare observe it, but Bryn could sense the queen’s fury lashing at him like ice blown from the peak of the Cithares. Like that summit, the queen soon subsided into a glittering, threatening stillness.

“Good wine though, isn’t it,” Mabry mused. As envoy to the pygmies, his conditional deafness was essential tradecraft, and he employed it skillfully in great halls and fur tents alike. But the appreciation of the wine and the clatter of the service could only cover the silence for so long.

“That was dreadful what they did to the griffin,” Amara said. “Why should anyone want to do that?”

The king tore a steaming roll in half. He lifted his eyes towards his daughter and shrugged. “People do foolish things all the time, particularly if they’re angry.”

“The griffins never did anything. Especially not Octo.”

“No, he didn’t.” The king leaned back in his chair. “That was a mild creature, as far as it goes. Once let your uncle ride him, you know.”

“He did not,” Thetia said. While she looked at her father, Bryn took the opportunity to stare.

“He surely did.” A bluish shadow hugged the cord in Thetia’s pale neck; her jaws, neatly rounded off by the soft pad of her chin, would rest perfectly on his shoulder, Bryn was sure. “Spent the better part of a month in the aerie, till his scent bored it. Then he could pet him, if he was slow about it. After another month, he tried climbing on.”

“What happened?” Amara asked.

“Octo leaped out of the aerie, flew about the courtyard twice, and then threw him. Broke his arm in the fall, and you should have seen how that beast stared at him as he squirmed on the ground. It wasn’t sure if it wanted to play or feed. A cat has some humor in it, at least, but not the raptor. And you never know which of the mix will emerge. We shooed the

beast and dragged Artum in to the surgeons.”

The queen asked, “Have you heard anything from him?”

The king frowned. “Nothing substantial. Mabry brought a letter from his steward, claiming he was still seeing to his lands. Something about unrest in the mountains — it was suitably vague.”

“I should say that I’ve heard nothing of any unrest with the pygmies,” Mabry put in. “A very quiet season.”

“He’s probably hiding somewhere with Ippoleus,” Amara said.

The king glanced towards Bryn. After the prince’s disappearance, they had discussed the possibility. Usurpers needed weapons. “Is this a dinner with my family,” the king asked, “or a council meeting?” He touched Amara’s cheek. “We do not know where your uncle is, and there is no use worrying about it. Even if he did have some foolish plan, that does not matter. I am here.”

“Of course, Father. I know. I’m sorry.”

The next course came, and then another, and then the griffin arrived in a heap of steaks on a silver platter, borne by the cook himself. The fat had been trimmed, and beyond a parsley garnish, the plates were bare.

“Not even potatoes?” Thetia said. Like her sister, she looked skeptically at the meat.

“Still that tongue, girl!” cried Mabry. “One does not eat a royal griffin with something that grows in the dirt. You’ve done well, cook.”

Velus bowed deeply to Mabry, then to the king, who smiled and dismissed him. Before he left, Velus glanced at Bryn: you will report on every sigh and murmur, his look said. Bryn nodded.

“I don’t think I want this,” Amara said.

“Eat,” the queen said. “We should not let it go to waste. Is that not the idea?” she said, looking at the king.

As Amara cut the meat, Mabry tutted. “Now you? You can’t just start in hacking on a royal griffin. We say a prayer of thanksgiving, first.”

There was a pause. “Well, Mabry?” the king prompted.

“What’s that?”

“Will you say the prayer?”

“That? Oh, I don’t remember how it goes. Make your own.”

The king thought for a moment, then lifted his goblet. “I was there when this creature hatched. My father told me not to help it, that even the youngest griffin needed no help from man. Still, I picked away some of the shell when he was not looking. And in two months it was swooping about the palace, snatching up rats and sparrows. I have never seen a creature so suited to its task, so perfectly fit. To the griffin: may we be as fierce and as sharp-eyed.”

Smiling, Bryn and the others lifted their goblets in a toast. As Mabry’s golden goblet clinked against his, and Thetia nodded at him just slightly, Bryn belonged.

The stringy meat had a peculiar taste, but as he ate, a sense of perfect fitness overcame Bryn. His eyes could pick out the fire’s every detail. He felt strong enough to flip the great table. Bryn was not the only one affected. Thetia and Amara began exercising their talent. With their palms on the table, they sloppily poured wine for one another, giggling.

“May I have some more?” Bryn asked. And Thetia complied, squinting as she floated the pitcher towards his elbow. Concentration dimpled her cheek, leaving her expression unconsidered and beautiful. She filled his cup nearly to the brim, and he thanked her before swigging. The king was laughing with Mabry. Of the king’s qualities, his true laugh was one of his finest. Anyone who heard it — the mirth, the plain glee of it — would never have fitted him for the crown. Sometimes the king wondered aloud about his other lives ongoing in history’s forgotten wings. He could never imagine his shadowy alternates clearly, but he felt their pressure, the paths and vocations denied him by the griffin’s crown and his father’s whims. Bryn wished him peace and all happiness, and lifted his cup in a silent toast. The king, still deep in conversation with Mabry, acknowledged him with a sidelong smile. Then Bryn noticed that he toasted with an empty cup, which would not do.

“Wine!” he called, and one of the servers hurried to refill his cup. “Thank you, boy,” Bryn said, and took another sip and a bite of the steak. He felt marvelous with a bellyful of griffin, briefly imagining himself to belong to that famous band of Tibryn griffin hunters. He was just as fast, and as bold — the only way to surprise a griffin was to attack it from

above. At the moment he felt equal to that task. “Good meat, isn’t it?” he said to the table at large.

The queen was the only one who heard. “It’s wretched meat,” she hissed in his ear, “and you are drunk. If you must shame us with your presence, at least have the good sense to do so *meekly*.”

She was right: it was the grapes and not the griffin that had him feeling so well. The realization frosted over him, and he withered into the plush chair. The queen returned to her dinner, and he sensed the princesses looking at him. Too ashamed to meet their eyes, he turned his head to the right and paid attention to the conversation between Mabry and the king.

“Especially considering today,” Mabry was saying. “Are you certain this is wise?”

“I won’t be bullied out of it. You’re here to help me, and if you won’t, I’ll have a horse saddled for you.”

“My lord, you shame me. I am only thinking of your safety. A dead griffin is a rather foreboding symbol.”

“There is no choice in the matter. The peasants whelp yearly, and if we let them keep their talents, what will happen to us? They outnumber us a hundred to one already. No, we will choose and not tremble at ‘foreboding symbols.’ Besides, cousin, it is one thing to kill a griffin, and quite another to kill me.”

“Just as you say,” Mabry nodded.

The king noticed Bryn’s attention. “What do you say, Bryn? Is it unwise to go before the peasants tomorrow?”

“The choosing happens every year, sir, like you said.”

“That’s right. And where would you be had we not had the choosing twenty years ago?”

“I cannot imagine.”

Mabry twisted in his chair and leaned towards Bryn with his cheek distorted across his chapped red knuckles. “Tell us, Bryn, do you remember anything of your own choosing?”

“Nothing, sir. I was very young.”

“This is a great shame, to have never seen our finest tradition.”

The king listened avidly. “I like your suggestion, cousin. Bryn, this is the year you join us.”

Both princesses made choking noises. Bryn heard nothing from his left, where the queen sat. “Are you sure, sir?”

“Yes, I believe I am. You have been old enough for a few years, and as Mabry says, it is the kingdom’s finest tradition.”

“Then why haven’t we gotten to go?” Amara asked.

“Because it is not always pleasant, child, and your gentle hearts would only make it more difficult.”

Amara grimaced and stood. Bryn, who had paid more attention than the king, knew that Amara’s gentleness had left along with the last of her milk teeth. Once she had drowned Thetia’s dolls in the false creek of the palace garden, and when the soaking had proved dissatisfyingly temporary, ripped off their arms. The anger she summoned now was unlike that childish spite. She said, coldly, “I think it’s wrong to eat a griffin — we didn’t eat Ippoleus’s last dog. And it tastes terrible.”

“The griffins are not our pets, child.”

Amara snorted and left the dining room. The king rolled his eyes and Thetia, arm draped over her chair’s back, watched her go with tepid curiosity. Bryn still did not know what the queen was doing. He had not dared to look. He was grateful Amara had spoken of the meal and not him.

“She’ll calm some,” Mabry said.

The king agreed. “Well, Bryn?”

“I would be honored to accompany you.”

The king laughed and nodded. Bryn made to sip his wine but remembered the queen’s remark, and replaced his cup. After more courses were brought out, and they had sampled some of the brown spirits that Edgar imported from the outside, dinner finished. The queen swirled from her chair and left immediately. Bryn was impressed at her ability to traverse the unsteady room. The king and Mabry retired to discuss strategy. Before he left, the king spoke to Bryn: “Make sure you sleep — we’ll be riding out early. And wear your sword,” he added. Cheeks shining, Mabry bowed and waved good night, leaving Thetia, Bryn, and the servants.

The servants cleared the table. Bryn marked their glowers, but was

too tired and drunk to care. Then the servants left, and only Thetia and Bryn remained. She still practiced her talent, marshaling the salt cellar, knife, and three forks into a performance like the equestrians'. The table things swirled around each other. The knife bounded over the salt; the forks' tines intertwined in complicated repeating patterns. Bryn watched in a stupor. The cutlery scraped.

"How do you it?" he asked.

Thetia concentrated on her work. "What do you mean?"

"Magic," he said. "What's it feel like?"

"Didn't you find out when they took Ippoleus?"

He blushed. "To do it, I meant."

"I never really thought about it. It's a little like ordering a servant, I suppose. Everything wants to obey. Even forks and knives. Nearly impossible with people, though. It can be done, if your will is strong enough, and theirs weak enough." Thetia looked at him. The table things dropped with a clatter.

Bryn stood up. His chair softly scraped on the carpet. As he walked around the table, his eyes never left Thetia's. Her tilted, teasing eyes. She turned in her chair to face him, one elbow up on the table and her head in her hand. Her legs uncrossed. When Bryn leaned down to put his hands on her neck and kiss her, he felt a sudden resistance. Thetia's eyes had changed, and she now studied him from a distance of a few impassable inches. "You really would make a great farmer, Bryn."

He lunged backwards, aware of the breach of etiquette. She smiled, and Bryn retreated. Before he got out the door, he heard her laugh quietly.

In his room Bryn slapped water on his face before realizing it was still pinkish with blood. Snarling, he flung the water out the window and located a servant in the hall.

"Daila, may I have some water for my washing? I am sorry to trouble you."

The girl blinked. "Of... of course." She walked off, glancing back once after a few steps. Bryn scratched his jaw, then stepped into his cham-

ber to wait for her. He sat on the bed and stared into the mirror. His fingers — blood still under his nails — kneaded his thighs. Daila returned with a large bucket. Her forearms were wiry, and her cheeks puffed as she set it down, sloshing. Bryn could see her strong firm curves beneath the coarse dress. With the bucket delivered, she straightened up and noticed her surroundings: the darkened chamber, the bloodied doublet on the chair, and Bryn, staring.

“Do you want me to light the candles, sir?”

Her nervous gaze was a puddle. It was a matter of will, Thetia had said. Bryn gripped his knees tightly, and the serving girl looked down at her toes. He could taste his self-disgust and Daila’s fear. “No. And thank you. I am sorry to have bothered you.”

She curtsied. “Just a bucket of water.” She left and closed the door. Her retreating footsteps were nearly silent. Bryn knelt before the bucket and plunged his head into it. His scream escaped him in a burst of silvery bubbles which tickled up along his cheeks on their way to the surface. He drew his head out, fell back, and panted on the floor. Then he dried his head and lit the candles, and set them in a line on his table. While his precious watch ticked in a drawer, Bryn sought to impose his will on the flames. When he sighed, they shivered.

THE CHOOSING

BRYN SWAYED IN THE SADDLE, unable to keep a straight neck, assaulted by every noise: the horses' snorts and whickers, the jangle of reins and the clink of the unfamiliar sword upon his belt. The king and Mabry clopped alongside him on their magnificent steeds, flanked on all sides by Osmos, Tetny, Arant, and Cail. Just behind was a trundling dray that creaked with purses of varying sizes corresponding with the worth of a child. Soldiers and handlers rode with the cart.

The riding party aimed for a piece of the horizon the sun would soon overtop. For now, only a reddish gold haze on the farthest fields hinted at dawn. Noon would be warm, but autumn had begun to lounge in the gray vestibule between night and day. Summer would soon be over. Bryn felt the brisk air as twin augurs boring at his temples.

The king spoke quietly. "Did you enjoy yourself last night?"

"Some," Bryn said. "I did not intend to provoke the queen."

"You were the most convenient excuse to air an old grudge, boy — I wouldn't worry about it. Were you not there, she would have been at me about something else."

"Did she used to love you better, sir?"

"No. But why would she? She was sixteen and betrothed when I was

born. And she would have married that man, had I been less talented — Artum’s talent was not worth such a risk. But our father thought we could improve upon Deivo’s work, expand the wall. Of course he told me that this was not unusual among the first families of Deivo’s time. I suppose I didn’t think anything of it, until one day I accidentally called her sister. I thought she would kill me, the way she screamed. Instead she had to watch me grow up. ‘Mothers old mint talents gold...’ And then Ippoleus. It was the old man’s hubris, but we bore the curse.” The king shook his head. “Tell me, what did you think of Amara’s intuition?”

“It is reasonable.”

“Indeed. The girl’s no fool. It’s likely Artum has the boy. If he can get rid of me, Artum would have the throne.”

“The people would support the princesses.”

“Well,” the king said.

Mabry glanced over with raised eyebrows. The king shrugged at him, then spoke to the bloodguard. “Osmos, give us room to speak privately.”

Osmos stopped peering at the distant tree line and turned. He scrutinized the king’s face as though it were a threat. “A griffin brought down just yesterday, and you want me to stray? No, my lord, that is not wise.”

“You have not earned the right to correct me, Osmos. Your father and I were of an age, at least. Besides,” the king yawned, “no assassin wakes up so early.”

Osmos nodded and spoke to the other guards. They diverted their mounts until they were out of earshot, while Mabry observed the rolling earth with blithe interest. Bryn had forgotten his headache.

“The princesses are not mine,” the king said. “When Ippoleus was born as he was, the old king demanded a real heir. I told her to choose some man to love, if she could, and that I would claim the results.”

“Then their father is the man she was betrothed to?”

“No. He waited eighteen years for her, but took ill. If only he could have survived another two... I do not know who the sire is, or if there are two. I never asked where she went or whom she saw. It didn’t matter, and it was safer for them if I didn’t know. But Artum must know the girls are not mine. And now he may have the prince.”

“Who could support a traitor to his own kin, though?”

“Artum is not a fool. This kingdom follows blood, not men. Between a full-blooded heir to the house of Tibryn and two half-royal girls, he’ll have the talents behind him. And the commoners too, if he can convince them he will be better than me.”

“Why aren’t we hunting him now?”

Dawn broke, a molten disk that burned purple in the eyes. Light spread across the tilled fields and the fruit orchards. The king considered his domain and turned to Bryn. “Because I don’t want to believe my own brother would do that to me,” he said.

The peasants waited to receive the king with their youngest children lined up before their knees, the wind toying with their hair. They were watchful, hollowed at the eyes, scarecrow men and women. The children were nervous but too young to understand why; they twisted rhythmically in their parents’ grasp. Most would continue to feel the reassuring weight of hands on their shoulders. A few would be claimed by the kingdom, and these would forget: the reassurance of hands on their shoulders, what names they may have answered to, and the faces and voices of their parents, except at odd moments when it would all rush back, during a confused transition out of dream or when an afternoon went grey and the air became expectant. They would forget these farms and this hushed bright morning, and learn magic.

Bryn was uneasy. Behind the veneer of submissiveness there radiated from the peasants a frank violence. As the horses halted, Bryn looked about. This was the first of many stops which would all look the same: a collection of white-washed hovels huddled around a patch of beaten earth. Small tilled fields. A few scrubby mulberry trees. Dogs trotted urgently from smell to smell, and oxen stared stupidly, swishing their tails busily as they defecated. Bryn saw no danger, but that meant nothing.

The king dismounted. Bryn followed, rattling his sword in its scabbard to make sure it would not stick. Of the sixteen children, three had talent. One was minor enough to pass over for a life of charming tubers.

The second was a fat little boy whose parents protested.

“We need him for the farm.”

“You are to be paid, as always,” the king said.

“It’s not enough.”

“This year, I think it will be.” The king gestured to the man in the cart, who grabbed a purse and ran it to the king. “Open your hands,” the king said to the boy’s father. Into the peasant’s cupped palms the king poured heavy golden coins stamped with his profile. They clinked and filled the man’s hands, and more came, and the gold overflowed: his wife had to stuff the remainder into her apron.

“There — is that a fair price for one fewer mouth to feed?”

Bryn could see that the peasant wanted to reject the gold. But by never seeing it, a peasant knew gold’s worth better than the king who minted it, and in the wife’s apron there was the profit of three good harvests. He bobbed his head and thanked the king. Mother and father bent to kiss their boy, and Bryn turned his head away. He looked up into the lifting sky, at the furrows of clouds there.

Another of the king’s men, this one employed in the stables, hoisted the boy up and walked toward the cart. When the boy began squalling and kicking, the handler gentled him with the same talent he used on fractious horses. The boy fell into a doze, eyelids slipping shut on his last vision of his parents: their backs turned, shoulders hunched as they rushed back to their hut to bury their gold.

The next girl was so talented even Bryn could tell: it poured off her in waves, conferring some of the king’s charisma. Her parents had fair, lank hair, but hers was kinked and brown, and her eyes were mismatched: one green, one blue enough to startle. For her a slightly smaller purse was obtained. The father complained.

The king considered him for some time. “It is fair. You are saved another mouth as well as a dowry.”

“Only a fool would think I’d marry her off. You leave me this girl and I’ll grow wheat taller than your horse.”

“The kingdom has greater need of her. And consider your words carefully.”

The man spat on the dirt. “This’ll be my third child you took. Did you know that? You get another soldier and my name dies with me. Besides, you aren’t the only one trading gold for talents. Why shouldn’t I sell her to someone with a fairer sense of price?”

“Because what you suggest — and I am certain you do so only in the abstract — that would be slavery, and treason beside. We are not haggling over livestock; I am your king and require your daughter. The gold is only a token of my gratitude.”

“Then I’d like a few more of your tokens.”

The king nodded and another purse was fetched. The man took it into his hand with a solemn frown.

“We thank you for your fealty,” the king said. He bowed to the woman. “I wish you good harvests and many more children.”

The peasants stared at the king. His well-wishing meant nothing under a sky that huge. The handler, having bundled the first boy into the cart, returned to lead away the girl. She went amiably, being odd in the way of most great talents.

The king’s entourage departed. Only when they left the range of a strong Bowman did Bryn relax. He rode alongside the cart and waved at the children who jostled lightly among the sacks of gold. The boy was drowsing, but the girl met his gaze with her mismatched eyes. The left eye was pale blue, threaded with a deeper ultramarine. Bryn wondered what she could see through that blue eye, if perhaps she could see her future as one of the crown’s most precious assets. Suddenly desperate to give her a gift, Bryn led his horse off the paved road and into the grass. There he dismounted and plucked a small white wildflower. When he gave it to her, she accepted with a smile and immediately began plucking its petals.

Bryn drew up alongside the king. “Uncanny eyes on that one.”

“Yes — it bodes well to discover a prodigy so soon in the choosing.”

“Did you think I was a talent like her?”

“I am never mistaken about talent, Bryn. I chose you for my own reasons.”

“Because I look like the prince.”

“In part. But you were ferocious. You tried to tear out the handler’s

eyes. Couldn't be gentled, either. Like a little wildcat."

Bryn felt a new sadness for the boy he had been: he had fought to stay with his people.

They looped through the settlements while the sun arced above them. Other parties like theirs were making similar journeys in the kingdom's other precincts. Near sunset, when they stopped at the last, largest village, fourteen miserable or dazed children rode in the cart. A few score of children stood ready for inspection. The king swung off his horse, dusty from riding but still energetic. Bryn was more ginger in dismounting. His head still ached.

This stop was the tensest. The villagers had devoted the entire day to worry. Now the king was among them, sweeping up and down the line, smiling and winking at the little children — but he chose none of them. Still, the anxiety remained in the faces of parents. Bryn's throat and stomach tightened. He felt like he could see one of those auras that some of the talented claimed to see, a threatening red glow. But that was only the light of the setting sun, he told himself.

The king came to the end of the line. "Sixty-three children I count, and no talents? An unlucky year, I suppose." The king's eyes lingered on the villagers' wooden faces, jumping the spaces between them like the nib of a pen. "I remind you that it is forbidden to conceal talented children from your king." There was some grumbling. "I will offer once: if you bring your children out of their hiding place, no punishment will befall you." None of the villagers moved. "Do not be obstinate. I can sense the talents, here. If my men must root them out, it will go badly for those who defy me. Where are they?"

Bryn felt an urge to speak on the peasants' behalf. Their silence verged on the supernatural. Had some powerful talent lowered a fog of muteness over the villagers? Perhaps their tongues had been torn out in advance of the king's arrival by vicious bandits, and now the stolid farm-folk watched their king with a pudding of blood congealing in their hollow mouths. The silence tautened like a rope, and began to thrum. The king waited; no one spoke. The squabbling of crows drifted across a distance of raw air.

Next to Bryn, Mabry was whispering. “Wrong, this is wrong, he’s in danger. Tell him, won’t you, tell him to stop, Bryn.”

Bryn walked to the king’s side and whispered in his ear. The king said, “If you do not stand back, Bryn, I will have you flogged.”

Bryn took four long paces backward. He was too entranced by the staging to be offended by the king’s words. The king — slim and upright, tutored even in his posture — surveyed a lumpy throng of peons. They kicked their feet in the dirt like shamed children. Yet they defied him in their silence, and Bryn began to wonder just how many men a king was worth. No one man in the kingdom could match the king for wisdom, compassion, or courage, and so pluralities were sought: he was wiser than ten sages, kindlier than twenty monks, braver than thirty soldiers. But it appeared his will could be matched by a gross of peasants.

Finally the king snapped his fingers. “We shall drag them out ourselves, then. Guard.” The bloodguard closed ranks around the king and drew their swords. Held up in the last of the light, they appeared to be splinters of fire.

“My lord,” Mabry entreated.

“Silence! Attend to your king.”

Mabry hastened off his horse, and Bryn followed with his sword in hand. Looking down at it, he could not imagine its use.

With his guard assembled, the king gestured to a small granary. A few chickens pecked and shivered beside it. “In there,” he said. They moved as one across the packed dirt. Bryn felt the farmers watching. The granary was shaped like a beehive, with a hole set high off the ground and a water-tight hatch set over it. At the king’s instruction, Osmos removed the hatch and peered into the darkness. The granary was piled high with feed. Osmos leaned forward and spoke very gently into the darkness.

“Come out, now. You’re in no danger.”

A child’s hand broke the surface of the grain. Switching his sword to his weak left hand, Osmos grasped the child’s wrist and pulled. Out of the small hole came a scrawny boy no older than five. Osmos set him down and turned to retrieve the next, who had freed himself from concealment. Then, all at once: three archers crouched on the nearest roof fired their

bows, another two wielding crossbows spun out from behind a hut and loosed their quarrels, and the small man hiding in the granary sprang out with a cosh and struck Osmos in the face. As Osmos grunted and slumped backwards, his assailant riding him to the dirt, Bryn screamed. One of the bloodguard saw the missiles in flight, but he could only shunt the high-lofted arrows, and the quarrels slammed into their targets. The small man leaped off of Osmos's chest like a cat, a knife now in his hand and drawn back by his ear. There was another scream, and two bearded men in boiled leather appeared at Bryn's side, these holding skinning knives. Bryn swung his sword in a looping cut, head-high. The nearest ducked and then lunged up, his knife slashing for Bryn's eyes. He felt wind moving across his face and tripped backwards, crashing into a body as he landed. The bearded man snorted, then hurdled Bryn without even bothering to plunge a knife into him. The sword lay somewhere nearby — he had lost it in the fall. There was more screaming, now shouting, and Bryn recognized the king's voice in a panic. From his worm's vantage, he saw Osmos, an arm's length away, struggling to his knees. Blood gouted from his crushed nose. His eyes rolled and could not focus. He toppled forward, throwing out a hand to catch himself. When he lifted his face, his eyes fixed imperfectly on Bryn's face. The bloodguard was terrified. Moving too slowly, he tugged a dagger from his belt. He searched for his king with blurred and ruined eyes; seeing nothing, they squeezed shut. Osmos lifted his dagger and slashed his throat.

The blood dropped in a curtain, but did not touch the dirt. It braided into tendrils and hovered in the air, while the remainder exploded from him in pulses. It quickly formed a knee-high homunculus of gore. With Osmos dead and drained white, the elemental leaped to defend the king's blood.

Bryn scuttled backward in convulsions, legs shooting out before him as he distanced himself from the awful martial prowess of the blood elemental. Forming its protean limbs into serrated barbs, it butchered quickly to defend the king and to empty as many veins as possible. Once the assassins were gutted, their blood was conscripted; one man was slashed at the crease of his thigh, then slaughtered when the spurting blood quickly

reversed course and pierced him like needles.

The elemental could not be fought. It had no eyes to deceive, no back to stab, no weak points to target. Like its shape, the elemental's intelligence was only roughly human. It sensed blood alone: the king's, the guards', and the blood of those who had neither. These last were its enemies. Bryn removed himself from the battle to avoid any confusion.

Even at a remove, the melee was incoherent. The elemental produced appendages as needed, unfurling them like whips to sever large arteries. Its fluid locomotion was too irregular to predict. At one moment it would flatten and sweep across the ground like the charwomen's water. The next, it would geyser upward to strike at a man's face. Then it would explode in a red rain, only to reform ten yards away and strike again. Any of the assassins fast enough to hit it could only watch as it reassumed its crude little man shape.

The assassins were routed. Bryn had seen six men downed in the span of a few seconds; another three now extricated themselves from the battle and fled. As they ran, and the elemental bounded after them, one shrieked towards the rooftops, "Slow it!"

A talent crouched there in the thatch, and when she lifted her palms the elemental pulled up short. While it was leashed, the assassins vanished around the corner of a hut and mounted horses. Bryn heard hoofbeats pounding themselves into silence. Meanwhile, the talent attempted to dispel the elemental. Its black-red surface boiled, and some invisible wall was torn down. Shaping itself into a spike as long as Bryn's arm, the elemental flung itself towards the roof. The talent crumpled into the thatch with a hole in her chest.

The fight was over. The elemental dripped from the eaves like rain, to return to the fallen and fulfill its second duty. Bryn's joints thawed, and he rushed forward to identify the corpses. A wordless moan issued from him as he searched desperately for the crown. Finally he heard the king's voice:

"Not me, Osmos! Save him!"

Mabry's head was in the king's lap, and a crossbow bolt was in Mabry's chest.

As the king raged at his servants to do something, the elemental seeped into his wounds and sealed them, leaving pale and unscarred skin in place of gashes. The dirt drank the rest of Osmos.

Eight assassins lay dead. Beyond Mabry and Osmos, Cail lay senseless with an egg sprouted on his high forehead. Too late, the outriders by the wagons spurred their horses in pursuit of the escaped attackers, but Bryn knew they would catch nothing. Looking at the dark patch of earth which had absorbed Osmos, he turned and vomited. He coughed and spat while the nearest of the king's men drew back and muttered.

Mabry was gently taken from the king's grasp and slung over a horse. The crossbow bolt was pulled while the king was not looking. Bryn helped the king to his feet. Mud had spattered his finery, and the assault had mussed his hair: whatever command was needed, the king would not be able to give it. Bryn took him by the elbow. "Come away, sir, it's not safe here."

"Yes," the king said. "Yes, yes, we should... Mabry? What have they done with Mabry?"

"He's riding on Elpos. You know Elpos, sir. A good horse. Mabry's on a good fast horse."

"Good. Yes, we should ride away." They hurried to the horses, which pawed restively at the dirt. The king squinted up at them, with one hand shading his eyes. "Bryn," he whispered, "I do not know which is mine."

Bryn guided the king to his horse, then mounted his own. Tetny, once Osmos's second, now commander of the bloodguard, had loaded Cail in the wagon; the armored man nestled among the tangled limbs of this year's crop of talents, all in uncanny slumber. Tetny signaled the driver, and with a snap of reins, the wagon rolled away. To his father, he said, "Bring me someone to question."

Arant nodded. He pulled his sword and walked towards one of the many houses with shut doors. A few of the palace guards followed him. Tetny then nodded to Bryn and they rode off, quickly overtaking the wagon. Bryn took care to keep close to the king, who sat in the saddle unsteadily. Bryn swigged water from a skin and spat to clear the bile from his mouth. He glanced over his shoulder at the village. The peasants had vanished.

ENVOY

“BURN IT,” MARIUS SAID. “The whole village. Every one of those bastards who went for your life? The night before, they slept in beds. They ate at someone’s table.”

“The villagers were frightened,” Bryn said. “It’s one thing to feed an assassin, another to make the attempt.”

“Careful, boy, your dirty feet are showing. Those peasants are guilty, Arant said so. They knew of the plot and did nothing. Permitting treason is treason itself.”

“That is absurd. If they hadn’t done as told, then it would be the assassins burning their village, instead of your soldiers.”

“And why are you assuming that these peasants were anything but willing conspirators?”

“Because I was there.”

“And thank the Maker you were, to speculate on the peasants’ thoughts and feelings while Osmos and Mabry were killed.”

The king slapped the table. “Silence. The next one of you to use our dead to make a point will have his tongue torn out of his head.” Bryn flinched. The king’s mental fog had lifted with a few hours of rest — Tetny had imputed the addling to a lucky swing of a cosh — but a rage accom-

panied his wits' return. Bryn, Marius, Edgar, and Tetny listened to the fire crackle while the king paced his chambers, his head swathed in bandages.

"I should like to burn it down," he said. "Two men dead, and they only *stared*. But no — not all of them had prior knowledge, and Bryn speaks rightly."

"Someone must be punished," Marius said.

"Someone will be. Edgar's men will be looking."

"I've already sent my best," Edgar agreed. "But I hope you understand that there are a good many bolt-holes in the countryside, and I don't expect we'll find them bragging over ale at some inn. This was not casually done."

"Then *skulk*, man," Marius said. "My lord, let me question these peasants Tetny's delivered. I'll tear out some answers, or some fingernails. It'll be faster than anything the spy can deliver."

The king frowned. "Calm yourself, Marius. Your blood is up: good, but you will channel it properly. If this is indeed a rebellion, and not the work of a few glory-seekers, then I will have need of your legion. Until that time, we must let Edgar find these men."

"And the woman," Tetny said. "She detained the elemental for a moment. Not an easy thing — I would like to know who she was."

"The small man was strong, too," the king said. "Or he never would have given me this." The king gestured at his head. "But it's no excuse. Osmos should be with us. Mabry should be with us. We were caught unawares, because I was impatient and because we weren't vigilant."

Edgar brushed his fingertips across his lips. "Don't punish yourself, my lord. You had no way of knowing they had talents like that."

"It is no excuse," the king snapped, each word's frosted edge well separate from the next. Edgar nodded and murmured an acquiescence. In the hearth, a blackened log collapsed, and the fire rearranged itself.

There was a knock at the door. The king shouted for the messenger to enter, but it was the queen. She lingered in the doorway: at that distance and in that light, she looked young, beautiful, and too much like the king.

"We just returned from our riding," she said.

The king bobbed his head. "I see. No troubles on the road?"

“None,” the queen said. She looked at the other things in the room besides the king. “You are not too badly hurt?”

“I am fine.”

“Good, then. I’m quite tired — we rode very far.”

“Of course. Sleep well. Tell the princesses I am fine.”

“I will.” The queen hesitated in the doorway for another moment, then left.

After the door slipped shut, the king pressed his fingers to his eyes and sighed. “This is unproductive. Edgar, you have some work to do. The rest of you, go and sleep. Yes, Tetny, and you — post someone else at my door. If there’s a second try, they can have me. I’m too tired right now.” The king rose from his chair and turned to his favorite window. He massaged his back with his left hand and his temples with his right.

The others left. Bryn stretched his legs out and scratched his knee. He would have to choose his words carefully. To the king, an ineloquent argument was wrong, so Bryn’s advice would have to be as compelling as Marius’s call for torches. Once he had decided on his reasoning, he cleared his throat. The king turned, angry and astonished.

“Why are you still here, Bryn?”

“I thought we would finish discussing what should be done with the villagers.”

“You were dismissed. Did you not hear me?”

“I heard you, sir, I thought—”

“Go.”

Bryn left.

In the days following the attack, the king was shut in his council room with Marius and his generals. He did not summon Bryn. Edgar came and went, growing more haggard with every reappearance. He nodded at Bryn when they passed in the corridor, but said nothing, and never smiled.

Without the king’s business to occupy him, Bryn slept and dreamed nonsense. When he woke he would lay in bed, inventing symbolisms, feeling the walls lean in. When he was a boy the room had seemed extrava-

gant, particularly the stained glass griffin which cast its warm image — red, gold, blue, as wide as the bed — upon his blanket every morning. Now he wondered why the king had never given him quarters proper for a man.

On the third night of his seclusion, Bryn woke with an urge. Filling the chamber pot did not relieve it. He stared at the lobe of light which came under the door, and identified his desire.

The hallways were never empty, even in the middle of the night. Bryn encountered two servants on cryptic errands: each avoided eye contact. Bryn was glad, feeling certain that speech would break the delicate spell which preceded him through the hallways like a soap bubble, a shimmering wall of iridescence sliding smoothly forward, drawing him down stairways and deeper. Bryn chased it down the spiral staircase, past the wine cellars and dungeons, to where the air grew damp and chilly. He opened the plain door, hurried down the tunnel, and stepped into the chamber of the Door. The stone walls coldly sweated.

The chamber gave the sense to any entrant that someone else had vacated it an instant before. Among the echoes of Bryn's scraping footsteps were smaller sounds that did not correspond to any noise he was making. No living thing could pass through the Wall — but what about a voice? Bryn went rigid and listened, certain he would hear an invitation hissing out of thin air. At this hour of the night he could stop pretending that he was a common boy given up by farmers; he could claim his birthright as the king's secret heir. Now was the time to unlock the talent in him, and the Door. Bryn approached the Door and touched it as he had seen the king do many times.

Nothing happened. The swirling echoes lost their expansive undertones and resolved to the sound of his thin breathing. A drop of water slipped from the low ceiling and struck his neck. Bryn wanted to scream, but would be embarrassed by the echo. He left the Door's chamber and began the long climb to his room, hoping that a few more hours' sleep and the firm blue sky of a late summer morning would deflate his panic into something manageable.

An hour later Bryn was still awake and at his bedroom window, staring past his reflection at the sleeping kingdom. The first families made

their homes near the palace, to reinforce their blood ties through proximity. A few small lights burned in the many windows of their beautiful villas. On the grounds, fruit trees cast pruned shadows under the strong moonlight. Bryn imagined assignations anticipated or broken in those dark arbors, a girl panting against a trunk, waiting. His eyes soon tired of the darkness and trailed up, over the gleaming back of the river and to the middle-ground, where the merchants and burghers lived and worked in well-made stone buildings that climbed away from the riverbank. More lights glowed in that maze of streets. Beyond that, invisible, were the farmlands, where peasants dreamed of regicide. It was difficult to credit: he had looked out on the kingdom like this many nights, and the view had not changed. But the attempt had been made, and he had been useless. His eyes kept wandering back to the town, and the torches burning there. He grabbed his cloak and left.

He did not take a horse from the stables, though the walk was not short. Travelling alone down the king's roads, Bryn grew fearful; not of the night, which had perfumed itself with flowers and inhabited itself easily, peacefully, but of his future. He could no longer say what he had hoped for. Whatever point he had been aiming for was a glamor. In this moment of crisis the king had not called for him.

The bridge planks thumped under his boots. When crossing, most smallfolk tossed a coin into the waters for luck. The bridge keeper was said to lie on the river bed and note the tight-fisted crossers who forgot that every bridge has a toll. Bryn did not throw a coin over, because he knew that every year divers were sent to the silty river bottom with fine nets to scoop up the lucky coins and to perhaps rip free some gold rings from the bloated fingers of suicides. He glanced over the side: it did not look like a killing fall.

The stone balusters had been scratched with crude graffiti. Sprinkled among the depiction and descriptions of male and female genitalia there were more naïve declarations of love. Bryn trailed his fingers over these innocent formulae and decided on his destination.

The courtesan sat with her legs folded before her, knees pointing right. Her thick woolen robe, still warm from sleep, lay over the chair back. Her gauzy chemise suggested her nipples, two shades lighter than her lips. Bryn had argued his way upstairs; the mistress had protested weakly, then led him to Rivane's door and knocked.

Now Rivane gazed at him with half-open eyes and asked, "Who am I tonight, my lord — Thetia? The queen?"

Bryn sat on the bed beside her. "'My lord.' Why do you call me that?"

"You're from the king's house, aren't you?"

"From, not of. Don't call me that anymore."

"Very well. Who should I be tonight?"

He had thought that dropping the honorific would have eased things, but the title had been all that was separating intimacy and commerce. "Just be yourself," he snapped.

"But you don't like my teeth."

"What gave you that idea?"

"You said so, the first time you visited me."

"I never did," Bryn said, but he remembered now, and the guilt came over him as tenderness. He reached out and touched her jaw; with his thumb he moved her lower lip and exposed the crowded off-white teeth. Bryn kissed her and said again, "I never did."

On the sixth morning after the attack, Bryn started awake and found Tetny standing over him. It had been a long time since anyone had woken him with a hand on his shoulder.

"What is it?" he asked. Tetny's hands glowed red by the griffin's light.

"A letter's come, the king wishes to discuss it with you. He's waiting in his chambers. Try and hurry."

Tetny took a last glance at the room before exiting. The gentle contempt puzzled Bryn until he sat up and realized the room was filthy. He had waved off the servant who came to clean it, and now his new doublets — delivered just the other day — were scattered about the small room. Bryn stood and swept his foot under the bed, satisfying himself that

it was unlikely Tetny had seen the wine bottles. Bryn went to the washbasin and cupped water in his palms. It formed the shape of a heart there, and was outlined by morning light. Bryn threw it at his face, coughed, and repeated the process. He dried his face and blew his nose. Then he picked up one of his old doublets and put it on.

The encounter was a ritual they had performed thousands of times. Bryn walked down the great hallway, nodded at the guards, and was admitted to find the king sitting primly in his chair. When the king nodded, Bryn sat down. This time, Bryn was queasy, and the king's nod was quicker than usual.

It took a moment for Bryn to realize the king would not speak first. He would wait for Bryn to speak and identify himself as a petitioner. A stubbornness came to Bryn fully formed, as if he had swallowed a stone. He settled into the chair and kept his mouth shut.

The king tapped the parchment on the table top and frowned. "So, you have not finished sulking?"

"I'm not sulking."

"No? A week ago an attempt was made on my life. I have not seen you since. I can only imagine you are trying to prove some point."

"I thought that if you needed me, you would call on me."

"You are a courtier. Kings always have need of their courtiers. Explain your absence."

"You seemed absorbed in other matters."

"Bryn, stop being a child. I have enough of this with the princesses."

"Very well. I have been wanting to ask you a question, sir. If you had died, what would have become of me?"

"Are you mad? My throat is nearly cut and you worry about *yourself*?"

"It is a fair question."

"You would be looked after," the king said.

"By whom? The queen would bury you, and throw me out."

"I do not like these hypotheses, or your tone. Obviously you're indulging in this ugliness because of some other slight."

Bryn settled in his chair, waiting to see if this was true.

The king composed himself with a visible effort. "If you're still chaf-

ing over Marius's comment, spare yourself. He thinks the only measure of a man is his talent, and sees no value in those without it. I should have corrected him at the time — I was distracted for reasons that are hopefully clear.”

The king observed Bryn carefully as he said these things. Detecting some reserve, he pressed on. “And if you are guilty over the attack, do not be. You are not responsible for my safety, and I do not expect you to have saved Osmos or anyone else. I saw: your sword cleared your scabbard and you fought as you could. That means you have nothing to be ashamed of. While I don't expect you to fend off a dozen assassins, I do expect you to perform those duties I depend on you for, regardless of your pique or hurt feelings. That is how a man behaves.”

Bryn was soothed, but disturbed at the king's adroitness. And the final barb stuck in his throat. “I notice you seem to have survived my absence — perhaps because those duties you depend on me for would be easily met by any pageboy. If you think I've been throwing a tantrum, are you surprised? You still have me playing the child.”

The king settled back and regarded Bryn through narrowed eyes. “Insolent, but I have been thinking along those lines. Which is why I've called on you. I received a message today.”

“From the assassins?”

“It seems not. Here.” The king handed Bryn the scroll. It was written in a neat hand.

We did not attempt to kill you. You will find us far more reasonable than those who did. We have your son and will bargain for his life. Send an envoy without weapons or talent to receive our price, and you will have your idiot prince home and whole. Meet us tonight in the grove of the half trees. If you do not know where this is, ask one of the peasants who feeds you.

Long live the king.

“Not your brother, then?” Bryn said.

“Thankfully. Though he might be behind this ‘we.’”

“What will they want?”

“Two palaces made of gold, my mother’s bones, the unconditional annihilation of our dynasty — who knows. Anyone foolhardy enough to steal a simple boy is not likely to be reasonable. But you will go and hear them out. It’s time you moved on from fetching things. And Ippoleus will be delighted to see you.”

Excitement flashed in Bryn, followed by a rumble of dread. A moon-lit meeting in a grove with the prince’s kidnappers. He stood up and began pacing the room. “I’ll need to know what kind of offers I can accept, and what I can’t,” he said.

“You will not be there to make any decisions, Bryn. You will hear their offer and ensure that Ippoleus is unharmed. But, if they ask for gold and gold only — any sum — you may grant it. I doubt it will be so easy. Tetny has offered to accompany you on the road. But you’ll have to parley with them yourself. They want to bargain. Remember that.”

“They claim as much, anyway. Maybe they want another hostage — as you said, anyone who would capture the prince must be reckless. Or maybe this is simply the assassins trying to lure someone out.”

“Then they would not ask for someone without talent. Killing you would accomplish little for them. But if you feel the danger is too great, I will send another.”

“No, I will do it.” Bryn clapped his hands. “But why not send a detachment of Marius’s talents, and attack them? We could take Ippoleus back and give up nothing.”

“Or they could cut his throat at the first sign of danger. No, we will give them every opportunity to be wise. Never force a man to desperation. That’s when the animal emerges.”

When the journey had settled into a clopping monotony, Bryn made conversation. He began by thanking Tetny for accompanying him. The bloodguard rode against an unmarked blue sky. Bryn was so accustomed to seeing Tetny in his magnificent red armor that leather and mail seemed

garish on him. His posture in the saddle — a swaying slouch — indicated skill and capacity for action temporarily relaxed. At first it seemed he had not heard. Then he waved a gloved hand.

“I’m here just to get away from the palace for a few hours. All the whispering and grieving.”

“I appreciate it nonetheless.”

“You’re near enough to the king’s blood.”

“I think you are the only who feels that way.”

“Nobles don’t know what to pay attention to. Besides, now we’ve been in battle together.”

“Marius did not seem impressed.”

“Marius.” Tetny spat elaborately. “Some free counsel: don’t compare yourself to that one. Most dangerous man in the kingdom. More dangerous than those men who tried skewering the king.”

“He’s loyal — he respects the king too much.”

“Oh, at the moment. How long do you think his respect will last when he realizes he’s stronger than the king?”

“The king is as talented as ever.”

“Then you tell me how those assassins were able to get so close. The little man laid hands on the king’s person. Ten years ago, he would have treated that attack like you and I would treat an ambush by a litter of kittens.”

“He was surprised.”

“No. I love the man, and if ever the moment comes, I’ll do like Osmos. But if I’m to protect him — if *we* are to protect him — we have to recognize he’s not the same. He’s ageing hard. Meanwhile, Marius? I hear things from the soldiers.”

“Like what?”

Tetny squinted at the setting sun. “You heard about that border town, the one the pygmies took at the start of spring? Did you hear how Marius took it back? He goes to palaver with the pygmy chief. Marius tells him to surrender. The little man tells Marius he awaits the pleasure of gutting him in battle, after he’s managed to scale the well-fortified walls. Marius says nothing, just picks a rock off the ground. Size of a big turnip,

maybe. Suddenly that rock is burning in his palm.” Tetny demonstrated with his own hand, spreading the fingers wide. “He rears back and flings it. This soldier told me it’s like watching a comet fly. Tears a hole in the wall big enough to ride two horses through. The chieftain surrenders right then, and humbly requests that Marius not aim another one of those rocks at him as he’s riding back to deliver the news.” Tetny shook his head. “Let’s stop up ahead.”

The inn was crowded, and Tetny waited impatiently. “Should have worn the red,” he said. “That would get her attention.”

The serving girl came, and then another wait preceded the food. As they gnawed on black bread and sopped up a stew, Tetny quickly drained two tankards of beer. “Have some,” he said to Bryn, “you look nervous.”

“I’ll need to be alert.”

Tetny motioned to the serving girl for another. As he swigged, he squinted over the lip of the tankard at Bryn. Sighing and wiping foam from his lips, he said: “Osmos never drank. And he could fight like hell and he was more talented than me and better with a sword. And it’s me here. So drink up. It’s good.”

Bryn attempted the severe expression the king used for quiet rebuke. Tetny ignored it and drank more. Eventually, Bryn beckoned the server. He thought it would be good to feel like he had at the king’s table, lofty on wine, temporarily at the height of nobles.

Tetny was right about the beer. As Bryn went swimming after the bloodguard, he began to smile. The room had begun to subtly readjust its dimensions, particularly in the corners. The din blurred further into a pleasant throb. The fire in the grate was warm. The sooty rafters were reassuringly low. Bryn put down his drink and asked Tetny if he was afraid to die.

“Me? No. You think that’s bravado, don’t you? I would if anyone else said it. But I swore my oath at twelve, and the king took me aside and spoke to me like a man. I never had any romantic ideas about what the oath meant. The king said I might have to die for him, and asked me if I appreciated that. I did. I do.” Tetny covered his upper lip with his lower and gazed myopically across the inn’s common room. “Though no one

told me what it'd be like watching Osmos go. Those fucking peasants."

Tetny's eyes took on a lacquered shine. Bryn began talking rapidly. "I was right next to him, you know. He'd been struck in the head and I'd fallen, and we were right there next to each other in the dirt. I saw him reach for the knife. He wasn't scared. Do you hear me?"

Tetny nodded gratefully. "And his elemental — he fought well, didn't he?"

"He did. I have never seen anything like it." Bryn hoped he never would again, either. Tetny kept nodding as he took another drink. Bryn withdrew from his purse a night's worth of beer and extra, for whatever Tetny had the wits left for. He set the coins down in a neat stack between the puddles of beer and stood up.

"I'm going, now."

Tetny tried to get up. "I'm going too..." Bryn pushed him back into his seat by the shoulder. He was stronger than a drunken bloodguard, at least.

"One person, those were the instructions. These aren't even the right people to try killing."

"They're close enough," Tetny mumbled.

"You don't owe it to Osmos to die," Bryn said. "Just a few drinks, maybe. Stay here. I'll be back later."

Bryn sobered in the dark, aided by the chill in the air and his growing fear. The horse plodded on, tireless. Bryn's concerns were too abstract for it to feel, and he envied its ignorance, envisioning at length his life as a horse. First he would throw his fretting rider, to rid himself of the acrid fear scent. He would spit the bit and then roll in the dirt until his girth came loose and the saddle fell off. Then, on long and powerful legs, he would race to the far north of the kingdom where the wild spotted stallions stampeded away from the sight of the world. He would eat grass and die years later, kneeling in a pasture, his huge heart never troubled by anything more complicated than fire and wolves.

The trees of the grove were visible in the distance, silver by moon-

light. The shadows under their spreading branches were deep. Wolves lived inside, Bryn was sure. He patted his mount's neck and whispered encouragement for them both. But once he pulled up and dismounted, he lost his nerve. The trees loomed taller than anything that grew in the palace gardens, and of the sounds in the darkness, he could only identify a few. As he peered into the dark, his horse began to graze, contentedly ripping up grass. She watched Bryn sidelong as he began to pace.

The king had sent him here in the belief that these kidnappers would bargain. Yet Ippoleus might already be rotting in a hollow, ants trundling through the slit in his throat and the small orifices of his pale face. And if Bryn entered those dark woods they would do the same to him, crowing about how obvious their paper snare had been.

Bryn considered these things for some time, and possible excuses were he to gallop away from here. He might tell the king the kidnappers had never appeared. As he argued with himself, he did not notice the man who sat in the crotch of a tree, holding a crossbow.

"Are you going to come forward, or not? My legs are stiff."

Bryn took a large step backward and reached for the sword which was not on his hip, but in his saddle roll. As he lunged towards the horse, which shied away from the sudden movement, the man in the tree dropped like fruit, straightened out of his crouch, and leveled the crossbow.

"No need for that, boy. You're here for talk, yes?"

Bryn could not manage a word, but nodded. The crossbow dipped.

"This way, then." The man turned and walked into the shadows. Bryn took his horse by the reins and followed. The leaf litter deadened their footfalls; the man's voice disembodied. "You came alone," he said.

"As instructed."

"Takes more grit than I would credit you for."

"I can think of more cheerful places to parley."

"You have your palace and city. We've the woods, and the fields, and the hills."

More sentries appeared on either side, drawn by their voices. Bryn felt himself measured by stony eyes. His horse stepped daintily over a log four times. They led him to the far end of the grove, which ended abruptly

at the Wall.

In places where the vain or magnificent looked upon it, the Wall had been improved, heightened and topped with merlons. Here it was weathered slabs of limestone fitted without mortar, as Deivo had built it. A drover's wall, meant to restrict bovines and seemingly incapable of discouraging anything more nimble. Yet no living thing crossed the Wall without the king's permission. Where the trees tried to overgrow the Wall's bounds, their branches terminated, as though hacked by a saw. Between the trees Bryn glimpsed what was beyond the Wall: a broad plain, quilted with moonshine and shadow.

As he looked on that unreachable land, six figures emerged from the trees, carrying blue-hearted torches. When his eyes adjusted to the glare, he saw the leader clearly: ten years his senior, taller than most women and some men. Her blonde hair was worn in a thick braid, and a shapeless padded jacket suppressed her breasts and hips, which made the femininity of her face more startling. The muscles in her jaws flexed as she studied him.

"Which one is this?"

A tall man beside her leaned in and said, "The adopted peasant."

Bryn cleared his throat. "Yes — my name is Bryn. I come here on the king's orders and under his authority. I have his signet ring," and he fumbled in his pockets to show it.

The woman's eyes flicked towards it briefly. She made a thoughtful noise. "I'm not certain if I'm meant to be insulted." The torches spat and wavered, but her fixed eyes did not blink.

"I can't speak to the king's strategy," Bryn said, "but I can tell you I mean no insult and have come to deal plainly."

"Very well, Bryn. I am Varra. Have you heard my name before?"

"I have not."

"Tell the king. Tell Marius. See if it means anything to them. Now, I assume you want guarantee of the boy's health?"

Bryn nodded.

"Then you'll have to do a little more riding." She gestured to the tall man, who stepped forward with a rag. He fashioned a blindfold and

secured it around Bryn's head with a few sharp tugs. Bryn was turned about until he felt dizzy, then put in the saddle. Without a word, they began moving. Someone took his horse's reins and led it. Now blind, Bryn felt himself calming as though he were a hooded hawk. He would soon see Ippoleus. There was nothing else to do now. He used his sharpened hearing to eavesdrop on the nearest kidnappers, two men who mumbled desultorily about unfamiliar individuals. When one of the men clearly said "Artum," Varra gave the order for silence.

After some time, they halted and Bryn was told to dismount. He gingerly complied. Hands guided him forward, then pressed at the back of his head as he was led through a low door, then another.

"Steps down," a man said close to his ear. Bryn, his hand on the earthen wall, probed with his foot before committing. After clumping down eleven uneven wooden steps he was told, "Last one," but it was not, and Bryn stumbled. The man snickered and pushed him lightly forward.

"Take off the blindfold," Varra said. Bryn did, and found himself in a dim root cellar lit by a few candles, with a swept dirt floor and two rickety chairs. Sacks of potatoes and jars of jam were stacked in the corners. Varra motioned Bryn into one chair and moved to the other, while the remaining men flung themselves onto the potato sacks and began ostentatiously toying with daggers.

"Where is he?" Bryn asked.

"Joining us presently," Varra replied, adjusting her jacket. There were footsteps on the stairs, one set measured, the other irregular. The door opened and Ippoleus entered, with the tall man behind him.

Ippoleus did not know many words, but he knew "Bryn," and whispered, shouted, then sang it as he rushed forward to hug him. Bryn laughed and jumped out of his chair. Ippoleus's hands clutched at his back. Though he was older than Bryn, Ippoleus only came up to his chin and had bones that felt like a bird's. Bryn did not hug him long — he could quickly become overwhelmed — and drew back to look him over. His clothes were plain and a little dirty, but the prince's face was unmarked and he

seemed no thinner than usual.

"I missed you," Bryn said. "Have you been well?"

Ippoleus was too excited. His hands spasmed and he looked everywhere and nowhere with his distant, intense eyes.

"As you can see," Varra said, "We've taken good care of him. Which has been no small task. Are you satisfied?"

Bryn took Ippoleus's hands in his own. This focused the prince. Bryn ducked to look up into his eyes. "Have you been well?" he repeated. Ippoleus laughed.

"I am satisfied," Bryn said to Varra.

"Good," she replied. "Someone take him back upstairs."

"You can't," Bryn said. "Now that he's seen me."

"Then keep him quiet, somehow."

For that, Bryn had brought the prince's knight. Ippoleus squeaked, then took it in both hands and promptly sat to play. Varra's men smirked at him. Bryn stared murderously, but it was Varra's lifted hand that silenced them.

"That's from outside, isn't it?" she said. "How interesting — our king sees some value in the world past his Wall. Perhaps he will appreciate my offer. Are you ready to hear it? I must trust that you will listen carefully and reproduce it competently for the king's ears. How persuasive I am — and in turn, how persuasive you are — could save the prince's life."

Bryn was glad he had stopped drinking. He leaned forward. "I have a good memory."

"Then I should first say that the king will die. There is no question of this. Don't mistake me — I am not saying that we have justice on our side. Justice is nothing. I'm speaking of dice and simple chance. Your king rolls a die every day, and he only lives if the crown comes top. He rolls that die long enough and he will be certain to see the skull. I don't think he will see the spring. Though he might — I am not yet interested in dagger work, and hoping that this conversation will accomplish my aims.

"I see two possibilities. If the king must die, there will be bloodshed, before and after. He may burn the countryside trying to hunt me — better kings have done worse. After I have killed him, all the power-mad and the

talented will ruthlessly seek the throne. More dying.

“But he can stop this rebellion before it truly starts. How does one end a rebellion? Killing me will do nothing; that is like destroying a dandelion by blowing away its fluff. It will only grow again, elsewhere. You kill weeds and rebellions by removing them, from the roots up.

“So all the king must do is allow us an exodus. He opens the Door and gives everyone a choice: stay in the kingdom or try the world beyond. Me and mine will walk through that doorway and salute him as we pass — no strife, no blood. The king will rule only those who desired to be ruled. And this is fair, you will agree.”

Bryn shook his head. “I doubt the king will.”

Varra sighed and pulled her hands down her cheeks, exposing pink crescents below her eyes. Bryn sympathized. He was tired, and conviction seemed exhausting. She shook her head and began again.

“Do you know much about the history of the outside?”

“More than you, I expect.”

She laughed. “Then you know that out there, as in here, kings take their power from blood. Some can stir the blood of the commonfolk with charisma, and these are awarded power. Some spill the blood of every challenger, and so take it. The worst are granted power because they share blood with the *last* king. And that is King Aelius. A great talent, but king only by the accident of his birth.

“Beyond the Wall, if I reject a king’s authority, I may go searching for some foreign land with a greater king, or better still, no kings at all. But where may I go in this kingdom? To live with the pygmies, our oldest enemies? Or north, where nothing grows and even the foxes are starved?

“No. Every one of us deserves the right to choose our own lives. If the king takes my choice, then I can only destroy him. So that is the offer: the king opens the Door, rids himself of all his enemies, *and* regains his son. Or he keeps the Door closed, and he dies along with his family. That is all.”

Varra and Bryn stood. “Would you like to say goodbye to him?” Varra asked.

“Better to not disturb him,” he said. The prince was absorbed in his play, and might be upset to see Bryn leaving so soon.

She nodded at him and gestured for one of the men to blindfold him. As the cloth passed over his eyes, she asked: “You know the king well. Do you think he will agree to my terms?”

“Yes,” Bryn said, before he realized he was speaking only for himself and that it was foolish to concede anything.

“Good,” Varra said. Her voice was smooth and precise as the angles of her face. Bryn regretted the blindfold. “Travel safe, Bryn. And come back to the grove when you have the king’s answer.”

Bryn was guided back up the stairs. He could hear Ippoleus playing with his doll.

THE KING'S ANSWER

BRYN REPRODUCED VARRA'S SPEECH FOR THE KING, Edgar, and Marius. Though he heard some muttering — particularly from Marius — Bryn watched only the king, looking for some hint of his true feelings. But the king knew even better than Edgar how to be watched and reveal nothing.

When Bryn finished his recitation, the king clicked his tongue. “As I feared. We will not be able to strike a bargain with these kidnappers.”

“Sir?” The objection was reflexive and unwittingly sharp. The king glowered. Finding himself midstream, Bryn lunged for the far bank. “Forgive me for saying, sir, but this offer doesn’t even sound like a compromise. They’re giving you everything you want. All you have to surrender is a good portion of your danger.”

“You’re forgetting about opening the Door.”

“What of it? Edgar comes and goes all the time.”

“With my blessing. The Door has *never*, in the history of our line, been opened through coercion. Only those the king wills may leave. All else stay.”

“Sir... why would you want to keep these rebels? They’re trying to kill you.”

The king's cup jumped when his palm slapped the table. "Because even a traitorous subject is still my subject. Choice — this woman speaks of *choice*. All of us live in accordance with Deivo's will. King and farmer, we all must obey. How dare she speak as if I am impeding her, when it is the god himself!"

Edgar said, very gently: "The Wall was made in different times, for reasons we can only speculate at."

"It was made for the best of reasons, and they still hold. The Wall was made to keep the peace, to protect us from the outside and to protect them from us, and before I drew a breath my life was sworn to keeping that wall standing." The king returned his attention to Bryn. "Now. Do you believe she is a credible threat?"

"Yes, sir."

"Every threat seems credible to a coward," Marius said. "Are we cowards, now? We do not need to worry about this 'Varra.' Perhaps you remember that name, my lord. When I was a boy there was some talk of giving her the legion."

"I recall — the prodigy. As I remember it, she regularly trounced you in your training wars."

"I won our last."

"Yet if she lives, your victory may not be so complete."

"She is dead. This is some other peasant with a knack for glamors, decided to take up a name we might recognize. I'll correct this brazenness."

"There's no need for that," Bryn said, shrilly. He felt violence condensing about them like a red mist. There was no need for any of it. He had disappointed Varra's argument, which had been so simple coming off her tongue.

But the king stood and said, "Thank you for your counsel, and thank you for bringing me this news, Bryn."

"What will you do, sir?"

"Do? Nothing. They made an untenable offer."

"And what about your son?"

"They won't touch him."

"You can't know that, sir. I do not think this woman threatens idly.

There's harshness in her."

"They won't. He is a key to them, not chattel. They think he can open the Wall."

The king sent a runner with his answer instead of Bryn. When Bryn protested, the king said, "Meeting the enemy as a dispassionate envoy is one thing — bringing unwanted news is another. A pointless danger." So Bryn stayed in the palace and made sure he was the third man the runner saw on his return, after the king and a cook. While the lean youth wolfed sausage and fried bread, Bryn pressed him for information.

"Nothing happened," the boy said. "I told them to fuck themselves as gracious as the king said — while still making sure they knew to fuck themselves — made my bows, and left."

"But what did they say?"

"Nothing, really. They shook their heads and shouted. The woman made a speech." The boy's throat worked as he upended a mug of wine.

"Did they say anything about Ippoleus? Was he there?"

"Naw, nothing."

"What about the woman?"

"I'd give her a roll, if that's what you mean."

Bryn was disgusted. "I count about three hairs on your lip, boy. If you've bedded anything, it was maybe a mule in the stables, and then only if you poured enough wine in its trough."

The boy set down the mug and wiped a few crumbs from his shirt-front. He looked up at Bryn. "I will break your nose if you talk to me like that again, your lordship."

Bryn struck the boy with his open hand, driving him to his knees. Seeing him there — he was quite thin — Bryn was suddenly certain he would kill him. The moment the boy stood, he would smash his hairless lip. But the boy did not come off the floor. Some cooks looked askance: they punished with spoons only. Horrified by the discovery of his rage, Bryn fled the kitchens and made certain to avoid the king for the rest of the day.

Two days passed before Varra replied. The king was routing Bryn at dice — they used some of the crown jewels for stakes, and the king sat behind a pile of sapphires and rubies — when Edgar appeared. Once Edgar finished his unusual report, the king frowned and announced he would see it for himself.

“That is not necessary,” Edgar said. “It is just as I described, my lord. I do not think you should leave the palace.”

“I will see it because I am king and need no other reason. Do not try and frighten me with talk of an ambush. It is broad daylight, and we will be in the shadow of the Citadel.”

“As she was just last night. And in your hallways not long ago.”

“Enough mothering. Send word ahead to Marius. Tell him to meet us there.”

The land between the Citadel and the Wall was given over to a necropolis for the talents of the tower. Without families to order them, they were buried according to ability: the first ranks occupied handsome black mausoleums in the nearest fields, while the second ranks were buried just beyond them. Those talents killed in training were buried in the farthest and largest field, a gently pitched sward uninterrupted by headstones.

A single stone monument presided over the anonymous graves: a small figure of a barechested child in a trainee’s simple trousers, hands clasped in sorrow, face desecrated by roosting birds. The whitish-green excrement resembled tears, except on the torso, where it resembled blood. Placed in the crook of the statue’s elbow was a banner blazoned with a golden snake coiled upon a black field.

“What is the significance of this?” the king asked.

Marius’s arms were folded tightly across his chest. “That was the standard Varra fought under, in the mock wars.”

The significance of the bones was clearer. Below the statue were dozens of disturbed graves, their occupants exhumed and reassembled on the grass. Their skulls faced south, towards the palace.

“And where is her grave?” the king asked.

Marius led them to a particular grave, and the four men looked down. Inside there was no skeleton, but a scarecrow wrapped in a blue cloak and painted with a white face. The iron banding of a small cask served as a crown.

“It hardly looks like me,” the king said.

Marius laughed, and Edgar smiled thinly. Bryn rubbed his hands and said nothing. He was looking south, with the skulls, and so was the first to see the rider galloping for them. Soon this rider would rein up before them, and vault from his lathered horse, and report on the Citadel patrol ambushed and butchered in one of the hill villages. But at that moment, Bryn knew none of this. He could only hear, faintly, the hooves pounding across the unmarked graves, and see beyond to the palace: it was small at this distance.

Tetny was in the courtyard, drilling. His sword glided slowly towards the neck of a young talent named Hulch, new to the bloodguard and Tetny’s instruction. Hulch’s own sword drifted upwards in a block, and the sequence was completed, then repeated again and again at an accelerating tempo, until the swords blurred and clanged. Bryn would watch these practices, sometimes, but that day he asked Tetny if he could join.

Tetny called a halt. Hulch took this opportunity to pant, while Tetny pushed his hair back and squinted at him. “Why would you want to do that?”

“I want to learn.”

“You’re a noble. Sword fighting is of no use to you.”

“I thought so. And then two men tried to kill me.”

“I do not have time to indulge your boredom,” Tetny said. “Hulch must train.”

“I won’t ask you questions. I’ll work alongside.”

“Very well. But if you’re going to swing a sword in my presence, you will first hear the lesson. Same one every bloodguard must hear. Agreed?”

Bryn asked, “Is it a very long one, Hulch?”

Hulch refused to smile. In normal circumstances he would never

have been admitted to the bloodguard. But Osmos's young son had not yet discovered the purpose of a chamber pot, and Hulch came from the correct bloodline, so he had been initiated, despite unexceptional swordsmanship and talent.

"Very well," Bryn said. "Let me hear the lesson."

Tetny began. "In a duel we make two types of cuts. What are they?"

"Offensive and defensive," Bryn answered.

"No. That is a common mistake. There are chosen cuts and there are forced cuts. For instance, I choose this one," he said, and swung his sword at Hulch's thigh. Hulch yelped before he blocked, and the flat of Tetny's sword had already slapped him. "Pay attention, Hulch! You are not nearly good enough to ignore me. Which of the basic lessons did I just remind you of?"

Hulch ground the heel of his fist against the place he had been struck. Wincing, he said, "Any time someone with a sword is at arm's length, you are in a fight. Even if it doesn't look like it."

"Good," Tetny said, and cut at his student again. Hulch blocked this with some irritation, and ferociously parried the third cut. Tetny scowled at him, feinted once more, and then sheathed his sword. He returned his attention to Bryn. "Yes, Bryn — it sounds like I have said the same thing. But we can choose some defenses, and be forced into some attacks. Hulch, tell him what this means."

"It means that if you're forced into every cut, you will die very quickly."

"Why?"

"Because they have chosen for you, which means they will not be surprised, and they will have a response ready."

"Yes," Tetny said. He returned his attention to Bryn. "And if you are very fast, perhaps you can survive on reflex alone. Or perhaps you will be lucky. But speed and luck will leave, and there will still be more battles to fight. So we must have self-control. We must understand that every attack and defense has unlimited possibilities, and fight like we understand them all. Every cut selected — our own and our enemy's. This is how winning can look like losing. It keeps the enemy complacent, and therefore

less dangerous. Then he looks down and sees most of his blood is on the ground.”

“Done?”

“Done. Pick up a sword.”

They were rehearsing a simple blocking maneuver, and Bryn had submerged himself in the bodily perfection of repetition, when the opening gates and a storm of voices stole his attention. Tetny whapped his upper arm with the flat of the blade, but Bryn did not mind him. He was staring at the eight manacled prisoners stumbling in before a captain of the legion.

“No, no,” he whispered as he dropped his sword and jogged forward. “Captain! Captain! Who are these people?”

The captain looked over his charges like a disdainful father. “Connected with the assassination, Bryn.”

“No, these aren’t the right ones. I was there, none of these are familiar.” Encouraged by the arrival of an apparent advocate, the fettered prisoners watched the conversation with wide eyes.

“Right you are. These are the assassins’ cousins. King’s orders.”

“Cousins...” Bryn turned to look up at the king’s tower, but the sun had blinded the windows with glaring cataracts. “What is the purpose of this?”

“About that.” The captain leaned close. “Could you send the builders to me? We’ll need gallows.”

Bryn set off at a run, and the captain called his thanks after him. But he had no intention of finding the builders. Tetny shouted a question, but Bryn did not hear. He rushed inside, bounded up flights of stairs and sprinted down the long hallways. At speed the palace became natural, all its rich tapestries and portraits just strangely colored foliage, all the servants lumbering animals of prey. He slowed to a walk because Tetny’s comrades were tense men, but barged into the king’s chambers without waiting for an announcement. He found the king in council with Edgar, the spy paring an apple for himself while the king spoke to him from the window. Ingrained courtesies kept him speechless and panting while he waited for the king’s acknowledgement.

“What is it, Bryn?”

“May I speak with you privately, sir?”

Edgar shrugged. “I hear everything that goes on in here anyway.” He winked at the king, who laughed, and then he left, popping a chunk of apple in his mouth as he did. Bryn’s clenched teeth hurt. The door closed. Bryn collected himself. “Reconsider,” he said. “Sir, this is not just, or wise. What you’re planning is petty revenge.”

“I plan retribution, and damn justice and wisdom. I lost my cousin, and they shall lose theirs.”

“You hang eight innocents and, in the eyes of your people, you’ll have as much standing as the assassins. You’ll lower yourself.”

“The opinion of the commoners does not matter. If they are loyal, they support my decision. If they do not, they are traitors.”

“I know you loved Mabry well, sir, but that love is making you unreasonable.”

“Of course. This is my family, Bryn. If something were to happen to you, don’t you know that I would tear apart the kingdom to avenge you?”

“If I was dead I don’t think I would care, sir.”

“You speak so because you haven’t lost anything yet.”

“I lost my whole family when I was just a boy. Perhaps you remember.”

The king sneered. “It’s easy to be nostalgic for absent fathers, isn’t it? They are so much less disappointing than the present. I’m sorry, Bryn, if you think this will be some evil. But this is a rebellion, now. And the kingdom must know that the price for rebellion will be borne by all. We are finished if the rebels can be supported painlessly.”

“There must be some other way.”

“A fortnight ago an attempt was made on my life. A peasant — protected by my soldiers and my laws — came at me with a knife. A *knife*, Bryn. And it passed just here.” The king traced a line across his throat with his fingernail. “And do you know how I stopped it? I didn’t. He missed.”

“This is what the rebels want from you. Once they have turned you to a despot, the other peasants will see the justice in their cause. If you do this, they’ve already killed you.”

A flush spread up from the king’s tight collar like fat red serpents. They intertwined in his cheeks and constricted about his eyes, making

them bulge. His voice was a thin thread drawn tight. “Tomorrow those cousins will be executed before the public. You will stand at my right hand and witness it. After that you are banished from this house until I recall you.”

“Sir? What are you—”

“Banished. You will go and live among these peasants you love so well. And you will no longer trouble me with veiled threats.”

“It was not a threat. Please, believe me.”

“Go.”

“I am not a child anymore, and I will not be bullied into supporting this error.”

“Unlike you, I do not threaten idly. Tomorrow will be your last day in my house.”

“Very well. Then I will need gold. And a horse.”

“You will receive both, and that will be the last thing you get from me. Now leave.”

The next day, Bryn bore witness to the king’s mighty whim. Throughout the entirety of the proceedings — the preparation of the nooses, the proclamation of the heralds, the appearance of the prisoners, the futility of their tearful pleas, the fitting of the nooses, the opening of the gallows doors, the twitching of the bodies — the king did not once look at Bryn, who stood dutifully by his side. Bryn had thought he would. He had believed that the king would master his wrath and forgive him, as usual. But he did not, and Bryn preferred this silence. He had never before held the king in contempt.

The sun warmed the skin but not the air, which flapped the great griffin banners. The cousins had died piteously; the assembled crowd was aghast. Bryn looked out on their faces and wondered which had turned rebel with this farce. Perhaps the king was right, and he could overwhelm them with fear. Bryn remembered Varra’s eyes, and doubted. He wondered if she was in the crowd.

When the kicking had stopped and the faces began to blacken, the executioner and his assistants cut down the bodies. The crowd dispersed, and the royal party stepped down from the dais.

Bryn looked over the exposed surfaces of his emptied room. The desk's coat of dust now had dark spots, the footprints of his lamp and smaller trinkets. He had thrown them away in a fury. Now he was calm. Afternoon light filled the small room; elongated shadows distorted the emptiness. Bryn briefly wondered what would be done with it, then thought better of caring. His possessions filled two heavy trunks. He toed one of them and frowned.

Bryn dropped into a crouch and tipped over both trunks. He began flinging his formal clothes and the new doublets into the far corner. He tossed his felt shoes with the pointed toes, and the fine hats. He threw his brooches and rings against the wall, where the soft gold *tinked*. He threw things until he had a small bundle of simple clothes, a blanket, a thick woolen cloak, gloves, and his pocket watch. These he stuffed into a sack. Standing up, he slung the sack over his shoulder. It was light enough.

He told the first servant he encountered that there were some golden things in his former room, and she was free to have them. Daila bobbed her head at the information, but seemed not to have understood. Only when he passed did he hear her footsteps accelerating.

Bryn first paid a visit to Tetny, at his usual place outside the king's chamber. Tetny reached for the door upon seeing him, but Bryn shook his head. "Here to see you."

Tetny nodded at the sack. "What's happened?"

"The king has banished me."

They spoke quietly, to not be heard behind the door. "Why in hell would he do that?" Tetny said.

"I don't know. I'm not sure if we're both wrong, or if it is only him. Either way, we'll have to postpone my next sword lesson."

"Stay a few more days. He'll change his mind."

"He might, but that doesn't matter. Osmos told me I was here because I chose to be, and he was right."

"Where are you going to go?"

"That inn. You slept well there, didn't you?"

"I was too drunk to remember anything above the stairs."

"I'll try my luck there. Keep yourself safe, Tetny." He nodded at the

door. "Him, too." They shook hands.

The princesses were at their music lessons when Bryn interrupted. The tutor glared at Bryn, but Amara, who hated the lute, was eager for a distraction. Thetia watched evenly, her fingers still fretting a chord.

"I'll just be a moment," he said to the tutor, known behind his back as 'Turtle,' and sometimes to his face, if Amara was feeling spiteful. "I wanted to say goodbye."

Amara grinned. "Off on some trip? Gone to live with your true people, the pygmies?"

"Your father has sent me away." Only when he was disappointed by the princesses' reaction did he admit to himself he had been hoping for one.

They were mildly surprised. Amara, who gossiped like a servant, asked, "To where? What did you do?"

Seeing not even a twinge of remorse in Thetia's eyes, Bryn wanted to leave quickly. "Ask him, if he'll tell you." Bryn bowed deeply. "Goodbye, Amara. Thetia."

"Farewell," they said, as lightly as if he were a tedious relative and not someone who had known them their entire lives, who had allied with them to torment the insufferable children of minor royalty. Thetia owed him some respect for years of constancy, if nothing else. But farewell, and again to plinking lute strings. Bryn could not summon any real anger, not for these highborn girls whose fundamental ridiculousness would never penetrate to their inner lives. They would live a certain way because they were beautiful and scions to a great house, and Bryn could begrudge them neither. His proprietary feelings were mistaken, now released; he had only been looking in through a window.

He nodded and left. His last visit would be with the steward, a vile and effective man. When Bryn turned from the door, he nearly collided with Cail, the oldest bloodguard and the queen's protector. His ward stood behind him.

"Come with me," the queen said, overriding Bryn's stuttered greeting.

They went to her chamber, where he was commanded to drop his belongings and sit on a long couch. The room dazzled with light. A vast patchwork grid of glass in every color formed the southern wall. The queen had windows put in the ceiling, too. Cut glass figurines poured rainbows across spindly walnut tables. The paintings on the walls were of unsentimental landscapes; Bryn knew she had painted a few.

The queen settled herself on a couch opposite Bryn, plucking her gown until it draped to her satisfaction. "Tell me why the king has banished you," she said.

"We had a disagreement."

"Yes, yes, of course. What sort of disagreement?"

"I was against the hanging. My arguments were not well-received."

"Dispense with the congratulatory self-pity, Bryn. Wherever you go next, no one will want to hear it from one raised in a king's house. But I am worried. That display today was monstrous. And for you to be thrown out for disputing it?"

"It wasn't that exactly, my lady. It was something else I said."

The queen twitched her eyebrow.

"I said he was letting the rebels turn him into a tyrant. He wouldn't hear me after that."

"Which only proves the point. Oh, I am worried." The queen did not look worried, as she turned to look out the enormous window. Her profile was ready to be minted.

"I am worried too, my lady. You might influence him more, when I am gone. Keep him reasonable."

"No, I think not. Rule sickens the mind. Perhaps it is not healthy to have so much gold near your brain." She offered a measured smile, and Bryn realized she had tried a joke. "Have you thought of where you will go? What you will do?"

"No, my lady. There's not been time for that."

"You will be fine, I believe. You may be a resourceful man."

"Kind of you to say, but why do you say it?" Bryn gloried in abjection's liberty. "You have never been fond of me." This was euphemism: were it not unqueenly, she might have spit on him a dozen times over the years.

Competing impulses reconciled themselves nearly instantly — the only evidence of turmoil was a momentary furrow in her ivory brow. “Try and forget any cruelties I did you. It was not fair to you. No matter my opinion — you were always good to the boy.” She never spoke Ippoleus’s name. “Like a brother. I could tell he thought so much of you. He looked well when you saw him, didn’t he?”

“Yes, my lady.”

The queen composed herself with a deep breath. “And you were good for the king. With you gone, I can’t say what he’ll do. That worries me. But,” she said, “it is not my intention to sit here and shame you for the king’s juvenile behavior. These are not your worries, and I’m certain you wish to be away from here.” She stood up and gestured to the door. Before he passed through, she grabbed him by the elbow. “Only one more thing, Bryn: if there comes a time when you can, forgive him. Even if he doesn’t deserve it.”

He nodded. After a moment’s consideration, she gave him her hand to kiss. Her knuckles were warm and smooth, scented faintly with lavender.

The steward ran his finger along the tables of his ledger, and said, as though to himself: “A tick really should know better than to complain to the dog.” He checked the paper in his hand — tooth white, imported from outside — and grimaced. “Of course.” He filled a purse with gold coin and placed it on the scale. Sighing, he gave it to Bryn, and said, “At least this is the last you’ll cost me.”

“Remember that the king pays you to handle his gold only because he finds its greasiness unpleasant.”

“Is this so? Well, we have need for a great many unpleasant things.”

“Clearly,” Bryn said, looking the steward over.

The steward scowled. “You are also entitled to a horse.”

As Bryn left, he heard the steward’s pen striking out his name.

At the stable, Bryn chose a sturdy mare on the assumption that one of the king’s mammoth chargers would draw unwanted attention. The groom bid him a safe journey with no great feeling: to him, leave-taking

was commonplace.

Bryn had not had time to prepare a grief, and found himself surprised by joy. Weights he had never considered as such were now lifted, and Bryn felt glad to be rid of all of them, their scorn and security. An orphan could disappoint no one. Someday soon the king would realize his mistake and stand in Bryn's empty room.

WILDFLOWERS

AT THE INN, BRYN NEGOTIATED FOR A MONTH'S OCCUPANCY. According to the innkeep, gold in advance entitled him to the finest room and a reduced rate. Tired from riding and unaccustomed to haggling, Bryn did not ask to see any of the other rooms, or what they might cost; he accepted a key and was directed to the top floor. The steps creaked quickly. A streak of finger grease ran up the walls at waist-height, the trail of retiring drunks. His room was at the end of the hallway. The key scraped in the lock. Bryn pushed the door and entered the room.

For furniture there was a chair, a small rug, and a massive iron bed that he tossed his belongings onto. The floors, walls, and sloped ceiling were raw wood. It was, he estimated, slightly smaller than his chamber at the palace. But the washbasin was different — the enamel more crazed — and the view from the window less grand. Bryn leaned against the frame and looked out the rippled glass. A small stable with lichen-spattered shingles leaned away from the road: mucky, pocked by horseshoes, unfurling into the pines. He paced a few circuits to get a feel for how the planks would resound under his boots. Then he removed them and sat in the chair. It would be dark soon, and soon after that dinner. After that would come the night. Bryn spread his toes wide, and attended to an itch under his jaw.

Meals were served twice daily, always with the muddy brown stew. Bryn imagined a bottomless cauldron of the stuff, bubbling thickly even at night. Alongside it were boiled potatoes or crunchy carrots, not always with the dirt off. The taste of earth complemented the beer, whose subtleties he became expert in. The meals — announced with the clanking of a cow's bell — were the two seams in his day; the rest was formless. He lay in bed until he was sore. He rambled through the pines to listen to the muted wind and inhale lungfuls of greenly scented air, which he recognized as a remedy not meant for him. Nights came in steady procession, and watching from his distorted window Bryn knew it was the same one endlessly returning. It settled over the earth with vindictive monotony, to satisfy a grudge no longer felt but still useful for its structure. Bryn slept easily, and at odd times. When his exile solidified from concept to physical truth, he began sleeping later to be roused by the sound of the food bell. In the brief dislocation of waking, he believed he was a peasant and the cow had come trudging indoors to hide from a winter storm. But then he saw another pitiless autumn sky, smelled the stew fumes slithering up through his floorboards, and remembered.

When the few clothes he owned began to reek of stew, beer, and his oily sweat, Bryn realized that the washing was his responsibility. It was on its face an unremarkable conclusion, but the absence of those light-footed washerwomen was a disaster, a more startling privation than the food or living quarters. Holding a bag of fetid clothes, Bryn felt no great integrity. He approached the problem stolidly, turning it in his mind and encountering blank faces until he remembered that most days he saw the young woman of the inn carrying an armful of linens through the trees. He shouldered his bag and traced her path towards the river.

Women were washing, there. Four of them hunched in the shallows, throwing clothes against flat rocks with a wet slap. Then they scrubbed with bars of soap, reimmersed the clothing, and repeated. The finished clothes sun-dried on another set of rocks, with wildflowers laid atop. At work, these peasant women bore no resemblance to the palace's servants. They toiled with benign frowns, until one murmured something and they all smiled. Their dresses had been gathered and knotted above the knees,

exposing thick white calves that appeared to have been rounded, like soap, by the river. Ribbons of suds revealed the river's current.

The river sparkled at the edge of his vision as he approached. When they saw him, the women responded like deer: they straightened up, leery, and held still while the river flowed against their shins. But Bryn felt no possibility of flight in their bodies. For a moment he was afraid.

"Good afternoon," he said.

The women nodded.

"Could I wash here?" He held out the bag of laundry.

The nearest woman shrugged. "Nobody owns a river."

"I haven't got any soap."

"Use this."

"Thank you." Bryn leaned out over the river bank, arm extended with a golden coin.

"You keep that. It's just a little soap."

Bryn hesitated, waiting for her to take the coin. But she had already returned her attention to a stained shirt, so he thanked her again. He took his clothes a little downstream of them and removed his boots and stockings. He rolled his trousers above his knees. Laying on the grass in full view of the sun, his legs and feet were luminous. He understood now that the women's legs were in fact tanned in comparison to his, and the youngest of the four was making the same observation. He hurried into the water, which was warmer than he expected. After a few moments, the women lost interest in his presence and Bryn could begin a furtive mimicry.

It did not take long to clean his few clothes. The sight of his clothing in flat array on the rock evoked the fable of the transmogrified prince. Had the boy been turned into a guppy, or a toad? He tried to remember as he walked the bank downstream, careful not to step on any sharp sticks.

Once he had reached a spot screened from the women's view by a boulder, Bryn stripped naked. He stood for a moment and felt the air on his body. No one else was near. Bryn bathed and listened to the women upstream; one of them sang a song he did not know. At that moment it was easy to believe they were the only people in all the kingdom, brought into intimate relation by that fact.

Unlike the steaming copper tubs in the palace, the river left its own residue on his skin. Still, emerging from the water, now doubly sensitive to the air, he felt clean enough. He pulled on his trousers and returned to the rock where his clothes were drying. With a smile and nod at the woman who was watching, he lay down in the grass and closed his eyes. He resisted sleep for a few moments to wonder at the weightless pressure of the sun's warmth on his chest.

When he woke, cold, the women had gone and it was late afternoon. His clothes were dry: laid atop them were wildflowers.

Around Bryn the peasants spoke carefully. But their circumspection was discarded to accommodate the huge quantities of beer they drank, and since Bryn soon seemed to them as mute and inert as the naiad skull protecting the hearth, he overheard things. Most related to Varra.

"She's come from outside, tunneled under the Wall. It's why no one knows anything about her."

"You idiot — if she tunneled under, then why's she want the Door opened? No, she's descended from Arathen, and lived up in the mountains with the pygmies. Now she's down to take revenge for her forebears."

The next night it would be a new topic. "It's glamor, you know — she's truly a man. A bastard son of the king's." Or they would discuss the latest victory. "Seven talents, one of them a second, goes into the barn. They heard she's there, but they only find Tomos and Corl. Well, two walk back out of that barn, and neither is from the Citadel." They spent much of the time between sips muttering about neighbors and kin: who had joined Varra, who had informed for the king, and who had simply vanished. Bryn registered all of this, and practiced his drinking. No one said anything to him except the innkeep, an old man with an exhausting suite of tics that gave him the illusion of vitality. He liked Bryn's gold, and would offer some conversation as he delivered a new tankard. Bryn rarely replied. He was focused on his dissipation. Occasionally he would stare at the accompanied women who came through the inn. He was invisible to them as he was to the rest.

Weeks later, someone found him. Bryn was gazing into the black foam-rimmed mirror of his beer when the other chair scraped. Edgar settled in, stretching his legs and stacking his feet heel to toe. His boots were worn and muddy as the rest of him.

“You look a proper peasant,” Bryn said.

Edgar inclined his head proudly. “Some rely too much on the glamor. Right clothes, right amount of mud, and it can just be the smallest thing — a crook in your nose. And with luck, not a person here will remember my face. But I’ve been riding all day. What’s good to eat?”

“The beer’s good.”

“Yes, I can smell you.” Edgar drew the attention of the server mildly, and made a polite request for bread, beer, and a bowl of the heavy brown stew. As he waited, Edgar slouched comfortably. His elbows were propped on the chair’s arms, and his fingertips rested lightly on his thighs. He studied Bryn, who self-consciously drank and then snapped, “What?”

“Nothing. It’s good to see you.”

“How did you know I was here?”

“Bryn,” he said, pretending to be aggrieved. “It is my duty to know such things. You didn’t think the king would allow you wander off unmonitored?”

“That was my hope.”

“Well, then you should not have told Tetny where you would be. You make my job disappointingly easy.”

Edgar’s food came in a cloud of steam. The spy sat up straight and applied himself to the meal. He was a precise, busy eater: the left hand managed the bread while the right alternated between spoon and beer. The bread he dipped into the stew, or occasionally tore into a chunk and tossed into his mouth. It wasn’t until his meal was nearly finished that Bryn regained his interest.

“How have you been spending your time?”

Bryn shrugged. “The beer is good.”

Edgar lifted his tankard. “It is that. Tastes a little like the beer they make outside. But surely you’ve done something with this new freedom of yours besides drink.”

“Aren’t I free to do nothing?”

“I think not. Every man must make himself useful.” Edgar removed an apple from his bag and took a bite.

“I’ll not go back, Edgar. I don’t ever plan on going back.”

“I am not here on the king’s business, not really. In fact I could find myself in some trouble if he knew I spoke with you. The king has become... exceedingly demanding of late.”

“Then why have you come?”

“To make sure you were well.”

“I am.”

“You are not. That’s plain to any of these drunkards, let alone a trained watcher such as me. These weeks must have been hard for you. But you had no other choice. That business with the cousins was shameful.”

“And you had something to do with that.”

“I make myself useful. But I do not agree with all of the king’s orders.”

“Then why do them?”

“Because I am the king’s instrument, and he is mine. I locate people, ask questions, gather information. In return, he opens the Door for me. If I did not find those cousins, I would never again go beyond the Wall. And if you had ever been, Bryn, you would agree with my decision.”

“No. I wouldn’t.”

“There are wonders there! They have these contraptions like our wagons, four wheels, but these move themselves, without horses! You cannot even see them properly, they move so quickly.”

“Why don’t you live there? The next time the king opens the Door, run and don’t look back.”

“I asked him to release me, once. But he keeps my family in those fine chambers, and I do not think it is for charity.”

“So the outside world is worth eight innocents you never met, but not two you know.”

Edgar sighed. “And here is the king’s failing. Raised in the great house by the great man, but still you have no family. I remember how it felt, before I met my wife. So.” Edgar withdrew a small scroll from an inner pocket. He handed it to Bryn.

“What’s this?”

“My reason for coming. Your true family lives in a village out in the east. Those are directions to them.”

“My family?”

“The king has given you a gift, Bryn: he released you. You can choose your own way, and that’s rare. Don’t squander this.”

When Edgar stood to leave, Bryn fumbled coins onto the table to pay for the meal. Smiling pleasantly, the spy threw up his cowl and walked away. No one marked his leaving.

His family’s name was Tecles. Independent of anything else, it cohered. He could envision the sort of people who might carry it. But in connection with his own name it became meaningless. Bryn glanced over Edgar’s directions again. These too were losing their sense. A few words in Edgar’s stout hand, arranged in their own geography, mimicking a course which would lead him home. East and south, these were simple words a weather-vane could point to. But what would he find there?

He could no longer envision his future. This gave him a sense of mutilation, not possibility. Scenarios could not be tested in advance, only treated as bizarre and complex propositions unyoked from all meaning, like Edgar’s directions or the name Bryn Tecles. Imagining an encounter with his family, Bryn’s mind resorted to the familiar: he pictured a strained reunion with the king and queen. He knew his true parents would be different, but could not think how. They would be poorer. What would the village look like, and how would the sun be positioned when he reached it? The uncertainty of every particular shook the imagined world into fragments and blankness. He reread the directions.

The door of the inn opened, but it was only when the entrant began shouting about gold and traitors that Bryn paid attention. Three armored men in the king’s colors stood just inside the door, their cloaks stirring in the night wind. The leader did the shouting, and brandished large sheets of paper. The other two stood comfortably, resting their palms on their sword pommels.

“Help us find them,” the leader was saying, “and you will have the crown’s gratitude, and so much coin you could not drink it away in a year.”

“I doubt that,” said one man.

Another said, “Close the door — you’re letting in the cold.”

The soldier scowled and continued. “Albeire, Corl, and the woman Varra. Who among you knows where they are hiding?” No one spoke. “Very well. Remember: you can tell us now and have gold. Or, if we find that you have been hiding them, we’ll burn this village and anyone in it. Something to mull as you enjoy your drink. I will be at the garrison, if any of you remember something worth my time.”

The leader left his subordinates to nail up the prints to the inn wall, over the innkeep’s mumbled protests. Bryn ambled up along with some others to study the woodcuts.

The soldier rolled the hammer’s haft in his palm. “See anyone you recognize?”

Bryn said no. The soldier took his answer for a lie, but soldiers only trusted other soldiers and whores. He grunted, and turned away to squint at the other patrons. “Well? Any of you?”

They grumbled sullen varieties of ‘no,’ the quieter the nastier. The soldier could not distinguish a particular insult, and so he spat on the floorboards for a general response. A man holding a tankard objected slurrily.

“Repeat yourself,” the soldier said. The man did not, and the soldier wrenched the tankard from him and jabbed it into his face. Bone or tankard cracked, and the man collapsed. “You’ve seen them — where?”

Drops of blood sprayed from the man’s nose as he shook his head. The soldier kicked him four times in the chest and belly, then motioned the other soldier out. Bryn expected an outrage when the door closed, but the peasants quietly tended to the injured man’s wounds. No one cursed the soldiers, or chided the man for his masochistic reticence. It made no sense to Bryn. He had recognized the images of Corl and Albeire: once they had sat in the corner of the inn and talked in low tones, making sure not to be overheard. Bryn wondered at how instinctively the peasants — and he — had protected them.

Bryn leaned forward to examine Varra’s image. Beyond the drawn-

back hair, every detail was wrong. The artist had depicted her as a common seductress whose only possible involvement in the uprising was as a spread-legged muse. Bryn's eyes lingered on her blocked in face, then glanced down and noted the asking price for that head, with its tensed jaw. As he climbed the stairs towards his darkened room, he considered the sum. For a royal, nothing — but gold stretched further in the farmland.

The next morning, it did not take long to gather his things, or to coax his sleepy horse from the stable. By now Bryn had committed the directions to memory, but he consulted the grubby scroll for luck before mounting up. A touch of the heels, and the horse began to walk east, towards the sun.

TECLES

TREES FRINGED THE FIELDS, their leaves a cold red, their branches cutting the sky into scraps of blue. The peasants harvested with bent backs. They straightened to watch him pass. A few children waved shyly. Bryn waved back and watched the men and women at work. Scythes swung in heavy rhythms. The wheat shushed itself for falling. It was gathered and bound. In other fields, other crops. The peasants moved frugally among the plants, watching their feet. The days were growing shorter, and there was work to be done.

Bryn saw a group at rest, eating bread and chicken, drinking from steaming cups. Among these smudged faces was one like his, and in this glimpse Bryn felt the rush of his old potential life. He had an urge to call out and beg permission to join them at their brutal work, to leave the king's cobbled roads and stand on cultivated earth. But he had many more miles to ride.

The road wound east and east, beginning to meander as it passed beyond the concern of the crown's engineers. Cobblestones yielded to dirt, and the road became a path, its course reflecting the desires of the peasants and the shaggy woodland creatures that had blazed it. Bryn realized, without alarm, that he would not reach his destination before nightfall. He

rested the horse by a stream as the sun set. While she grazed and drank, Bryn sat among the rushes and watched their indistinct shadows stretch across the water to the far bank. In the dusk light the turning trees assumed dream hues, and their forms were lost to the insubstantial delirium of color. A perfect clarity settled over Bryn. If he kept riding, he could outpace his hunger and misgivings.

Each night, a second world woke in country darkness. Astonishment numbed Bryn like the cold: it was all brighter than he had imagined. Under that moon he kept his shadow; the constellations burned atop smears of cosmic green and purple. Insects shrilled in the near distance. He passed a scummy pond and a trio of bullfrogs that lived there in constant uproar. The horse snorted and plodded on. The king owned all of this, but would never pass here, and his knowledge would extend no deeper than the paint on a map. Bryn felt a drowsy glee at the thought.

Late in the night the horse slowed, and Bryn dismounted stiffly. They moved from the path to a clear space in the trees. Feeling that he was already dreaming, Bryn prepared for sleep as reflexively as a dog in its circling. He tied the horse to a branch, took his bedroll from behind the saddle, and covered the horse with her blanket. Then he wrapped himself in his own and lay down, pushing at his rucksack until the softer things lay beneath his head. Bryn fell asleep with no sensation in his fingertips.

He woke with hot blood trickling down his lips. Groaning, he sat up and hung his head between his knees while he waited for his nose to drain. It was the uncertain time, just before or after dawn. The horse was awake, and twitched her long ears in the direction of his groggy distress. The clarity of last night had frozen solid and opaque in him. Sore everywhere, Bryn got to his feet and loaded the horse. They walked gingerly back to the path, a few brittle leaves crunching under their feet. Bryn's head cleared enough to interpret a repetitive thocking, and they soon came upon the woodcutter responsible. The man split wood on a scarred stump, a thin jet of steam issuing from his lips with each downstroke. When he spotted Bryn

he paused — then nodded amiably.

Bryn nodded and approached. “I slept just over there,” he said, pointing to the woods. “I had no idea there was someone living out here.”

“Unlucky thing, from the looks of you. Are you well?”

Bryn remembered the dried blood on his upper lip, and rubbed it off with the back of his wrist. “Colder than I’d like. I was wondering if you could tell me if I was headed the right way.”

“Sure enough, though it depends where you’re headed.” The man hefted one of the logs. “There’s a fire burning inside this is due for. Go sit down, and I’ll join you just shortly. Hitch her up, if she’s a wanderer.”

“No, she’s as awake as I am.” Bryn patted the horse’s neck and ducked inside the low door. Like any home with a single inhabitant, the space represented its owner as solidly as a nose. He was a trapper, with well-kept equipment hanging from pegs on the walls. The open spaces were claimed by furry six-pointed stars — pelts. Bryn saw wolf, mole, deer, bear, and others he could not recognize. By the narrow bed was a crude hearth, and burning in it a kindling fire. Bryn hunkered before it, holding the backs of his palms to the meager heat. Outside the hatchet struck four more times, and then the trapper appeared with his armful of wood.

“Get warm, but don’t stay long. No place to hide you if the crown comes looking.”

“I’m not a rebel.”

The trapper fed a log into the fire. “Then you spent a night freezing under trees for no particular reason?”

“I don’t know these woods.”

“You’re from the city.”

“I am.”

“Let me tell you, then: winters come cold out here. Put your hand up.”

When Bryn did, the man laid his palm against his. It was warm and rough with callouses. The trapper grunted. “Fairly well-matched. Spare me a moment.” He rummaged in a chest and pulled free a pair of heavy gloves. “These are gulix. You know the beast?”

“A little.”

“Wild bastard, mad and vicious and impossible to exhaust. Clever, too. Hard not to admire. Even more admirable when he’s gloves. Try these.” He handed the gloves to Bryn. They fit snugly on his fingers and trapped the warmth.

“You’ll sell me these?”

“It’s my only aim in life.”

After a mild haggling, the gloves were Bryn’s, along with a day’s worth of rations, sure directions to the village, and finally, a small flask of potent-smelling liquor.

“How much for this?” Bryn said, sniffing.

“That’s a gift. Tastes too bad to charge for. But you keep that with you, for when the gloves aren’t enough. Though I might not drink it. Maybe just to clean a wound, Deivo forfend.”

Bryn thanked him. Beneath the skins of dead animals on the wall, the trapper’s answering bow was almost courtly.

The trapper had predicted he would reach his family’s village by the afternoon, and was proven correct a few hours later. It was a score of houses clustered at the foot of a hill. Up the slope a scatter of white points — sheep — grazed among the outcrops. From this vantage upon the ridge, Bryn could see the herd’s contours, like another animal. He swept his eyes up and down the hills and plains, in hopes that the topography would vivify a dormant sense of home. But this village was only a place, and an unfamiliar one. He shook the reins and the horse began a fussy descent of the switchback worn into the limestone. Bryn kept one eye on the village, while the bulk of his attention observed his feelings. Nothing stirred in him. Bits of gravel crunched under the horse’s hooves.

Up close, the meticulously white-washed houses exuded a tang of desperation, abandonment. The buildings felt like scree kicked loose by the sheep uphill, the only genuine vitality for miles; an old man diligently smoking a pipe infringed on the integrity of this dead, semi-civilized landscape. Bryn reined up and waited for the old man’s eyes to lift from his pipe bowl.

"Afternoon," the old man said.

Bryn nodded. "I'm looking for the Tecles house."

"Just east. Follow this road to the first fork. You'll want the rightward path. See it shortly after."

Bryn thanked him. Before he rode on, the man stopped him. He was prematurely ancient, Bryn realized, his face gullied by forces that were hard to imagine. "Anything spare in that purse of yours?"

"Nothing for a pipe, I'm afraid."

"Coin is fine."

Bryn shrugged and gave him a silver piece. Feeling that the alms entitled him to a final comment, he said: "Where is everyone?"

"Crown came, took a portion of the young men. The rest?" The old man drew a vague glyph in the air with the pipe stem. Satisfied with the gesture's eloquence, he subsided to smoking. It was like watching a hand close on a coin. Bryn knew he would hear nothing more, and rode on.

On the way out of town, Bryn spotted a shepherdess on the hill. She perched on an outcrop, long crook laid atop her thighs. Seen from below, there was an intimation of flight in her posture, as though she might launch from the rock and glide down to pluck him from his horse. Bryn felt the weight of her patient attention as he rode on.

When he reached the fork, Bryn saw that the Tecles house was in fact a villa, as big as those inhabited by the first families. Its white walls rose pristine from the golden froth of the wheat field. Gangs of peasants were harvesting the crop under the sidelong observation of plump crows perched upon the spine of the red tiled roof. Bryn counted thirty windows on the façade as he approached. Suddenly impatient with travel, galled by the unexpected size of the property, Bryn galloped the horse to the great double doors. He dismounted, sprang up the broad stone steps, and dropped a heavy knocker in the shape of a ram's head.

The door opened. A middle-aged woman looked up at him, and Bryn identified her immediately as a servant.

"Yes?" she said.

"I need to speak with the master of the house."

"What about?"

“A private matter.”

“We don’t have a thing to do with those rebels. The soldiers already came, you go talk to the captain, he’ll tell you.”

“Tell your master that someone from the palace is here, and have a groom come see to my horse.”

“The palace...” The woman went on tiptoes to peer over his shoulder at the weary horse. “Come in, then.”

The foyer was a chilly cave of tile buttressed by stout squared beams. The serving woman led him inside over carpets that would seem expensive to the locals, then stationed him at the foot of the stairs while she ascended with a handful of her skirt in her fist. Bryn squinted at the dim portraits of fierce-looking men with outmoded facial hair. After a moment he recognized them as ancestors. Something in the eyes, or the set of the mouth. Before he could decide, there was a noise above, and he looked up to see the living issue. A tall man with gray hair leaned his forearms on the railing.

“Up you come, then.”

Bryn was surprised, as though he had encountered an unexpected mirror. He made a half-noise and started up the stairs. The man was already entering another room before he reached the top. Bryn followed him into a study. A large window overlooked a courtyard. A bearskin, with empty face like a mask, pointed towards the door. There were no books.

The tall man sat down in a chair by the window, and waved Bryn into its opposite. As he sat, the man adjusted his robes and cleared his throat.

“What happened to the other man?” he asked. “He was never late, you know.”

Bryn was slow to answer. He was cataloguing the likeness. “The other man?”

“You told her you were from the palace.”

“I’m from the palace,” Bryn said, “but nobody sent me.”

“Ah, a riddle. How diverting. But the harvest season is busy, and I was writing my letters, so if you would please.”

“You’re Tecles, aren’t you?”

“I am.”

"Twenty years ago the king claimed one of your sons." He hesitated. The complexities of the situation were suddenly obvious: he did not know how to speak to this old, suspicious, shabbily dressed man. More than desire, it was the impulse to be polite that made him speak. "I'm the one who was taken."

Discrete confusions drifted across Tecles's face like cloud shadows on a field. His expression resolved into an inflexible neutrality. "No, that can't be the case."

"Isn't my face proof enough?"

"No, it is not. You could be the bold son of any farmer. You heard about the boy who was taken — somehow, somehow — and now you've come for gold. You see this house and think it's quick gold, to fool an old man."

"Twenty years later? I don't want your gold. And here's my proof." He took out his watch.

"What is this?"

"A device from outside. Read the back." Bryn slid it across the desk and made a fussy, embarrassed shrug.

Tecles's lips moved as he read. *To my boy, Bryn. Love always. — Aelius*

"Bryn," Tecles said, looking up. "Bryn. Is that what he named you?" His voice was faint. He pushed the watch back.

"Yes, my name is Bryn. It wasn't always?"

"No, it... it doesn't matter. You should leave. That is the arrangement's first provision, we are not to speak to you, to make contact in any way. You shouldn't be here — how did you find us?"

"What arrangement?"

"The gold. It comes every month. But the man, he didn't come at the usual time — what happened?"

"How much gold?"

"Twenty-five pieces, every month. Is it not..."

"I don't think so. It seems like the king's done renting me."

"But what did you do?"

"What did I do?"

"We *depend* on that coin."

“Three hundred a year, for every year since you gave me up? Even less the house, I imagine you will be fine.”

“You don’t understand, there are expenses.” Tecles lurched out of the chair and dug a ledger from a small chest. His long index finger streaked down the pages. Finally it stopped and stabbed at a point. “Yes. Bryn: whatever you did, go and make it right. Beg the king to reconsider. He is a just man, a fair man, there has to be a way you two can make peace. Take the watch, show him that, remind him of your piety.”

“Aren’t you curious why I’ve sought you out? Or why I’m no longer wanted in the palace?”

“No, it’s none of my business, I only care that you repair whatever’s been broken. As someone who was once a father to you, Bryn, believe me — it’s an evil thing to lose a son.”

“Forget your gold. I won’t be returning to the king.”

Tecles’s face grew stern. “You must.”

Bryn laughed. “You orphaned me and profited on it for twenty years. As I see it, I built this house you’re living in, Tecles. And now you think to order me about?”

“You were no orphan. I did you a favor. You were raised by the king and queen of the damn kingdom. You’ve been comfortable your whole life, haven’t you?”

“I was a foundling. To be discarded when I became inconvenient. And now I’m here.”

“You understand that there’s no place for you here. There are expenses—”

“Yes, I’ve heard about those. Do not worry yourself. I haven’t come for a room, or my share of the inheritance.”

Something slackened in Tecles. He inhaled deeply. “What is it you’ve come for, then?”

Bryn had not considered the question beforehand. “Curiosity, maybe.” His disappointment had sullied the encounter. Now it was a tiresomely absurd drama to be completed and forgotten.

“I suppose you have questions you’ll want answered?”

“Questions. Yes.” He tried to think of everything he needed to know

from Tecles. "Where's my mother?"

"At rest for some time. The birth of your brother did her in."

"What was her name?"

"Celia."

"And I have siblings?"

"The brother, and a sister, too, but they both died young. A plague for one, and a brain fever for the other. You have some half-brothers and -sisters."

"And their names?" But Bryn stopped him midway through the recitation. "It doesn't matter, does it?"

"As you like," Tecles shrugged.

"Tell me why you gave me up."

"No why about it. King commanded, we obeyed."

"He would never have forced a mother and father to give up a child, not one as untalented as me."

"We were starving. Your mother had another child in her belly, and she needed to eat. I wasn't worth anything — I am not worth anything — and I thought I could save her and the baby and you, too, if I gave you up. You were so thin, and we didn't have any hope for you. There wasn't any talent in our family, but at the choosing the king said he wanted you." He clapped his hands softly and spread them. Having explained the course of Bryn's twenty-two years in a few moments, Tecles studied Bryn's face. "That's her nose you have," he murmured.

"Where is she buried?"

"On the hill, under a tree."

"I would like to see her grave."

"I will find my cloak."

"I'd like to visit alone."

"As you like."

"I could use a meal."

Tecles scratched at the corner of his mouth. "I suppose we could gather together the children, make up a story about who you are..."

"No need. I've taken plenty of meals in servants' kitchens."

Tecles's relief repulsed Bryn. His true father mumbled some tepid

farewells and sat down to scratch out his letters. Bryn jolted down the stairs. When the servant woman intercepted him at the foot of the staircase, he said vaguely, “The master offered me some food...”

Bryn was taken to the servant’s kitchen, which was much like the servant’s kitchen at the palace. Here the unoccupied servants cheerfully prepared their own supper: no servant ever tired of cooking with the master’s ingredients. Chains of sausage hung from the ceiling, along with smoked fish and dented copper cookware. Older women milled about, checking the boil of certain pots, flipping sizzling meats in other pans, while the younger help obstructed their passage and stole bites from half-finished dishes. Bryn had a few moments to enjoy the warmth and benign havoc before his presence was remarked by one of the loafers. The near dozen servants turned to look at Bryn with eyes backed by a lifetime of learned courtesies. There was neither unkindness nor ingress there.

The woman beside him became solicitous, and introduced him. “A visitor for the master. Come from the city on special business.”

A few of them nodded. The youngest — a boy of perhaps thirteen who held a plug of strawberry between stained fingers — said, “This is servant’s quarters. Master’s guests eat in the main house.”

Grateful to him, Bryn answered. “I asked to eat here. I found the master’s hospitality... scarce. I hope you do not mind my eating with you.”

The servants were pleased by how circumspectly he had sprayed venom up the stairs. A few laughed and returned to their cooking, while the rest became curious.

“Should be something edible shortly,” said an elderly woman. Bryn smiled and thanked her, having been fed for years in the king’s kitchens by a series of women just like her. He was installed on a stool near the back. While waiting for the good smells to resolve into something tangible, he settled in and fended off the prying questions of the younger servants. They asked about his reasons for coming, and where he came from. It was not until the meal materialized and the group retired to the adjoining dining room, a dim and cool space with a long table and rough-hewn plank benches, that Bryn began speaking openly.

He was asked about the city.

"I have no news. I haven't been there in some time. I left after the hangings."

"Which ones?"

His fork hovered between plate and mouth. "The first — the cousins. How many—"

"Another fourteen have swung," said a woman named Ianna.

"And we're keeping close count, believe me," the young man added around a mouthful of strawberries.

"*Marcu*," Ianna snapped. "Watch your tongue. Excuse him. Of course we are all loyal servants of the king."

"Do not worry," Bryn said. "I'm no friend of the king." The servants studied their plates, and Marcu's cheeks reddened. "How is Tecles, as a master?" he asked.

"I've had a few worse, I can tell you."

Another nodded. "True. He's a miser, but he behaves himself. Never takes advantage, or raises a hand."

Marcu said, "He beat me black and blue not a month past."

"But you deserved that," one of the women said, and the other adults nodded in unison.

An older man shrugged with his knife and fork. "Still, he's a master, and a master's a wolf. Oh, there's friendlier wolves, and friendlier masters, but if you're smart you don't expect kindness from either."

Bryn listened and sipped his drink, a cider whose taste of apples and spices passably concealed the potent alcohol. "Might have been my mistake," he said. "I was a servant for years, to a good master."

"You're dressed rich for a servant."

"He was a rich master, and I'm done serving."

"What did you do?"

"I broke a rule."

"And now what do you do?"

"I don't know." There was a silence, and then conversation restarted along a more amiable path. Every servant's life was enmeshed with all the others'. They knew each other so well that they fell into laughter at even half-finished comments. Their gossip and jokes were difficult for

Bryn to follow.

“May I ask you a question?” Bryn said. The table’s attention tilted towards him. “What do you think will happen, if Varra succeeds?”

One of the oldest servants, a wrinkled man whose ears dangled to his jaws, grumbled. “Nothing. She’ll take power and be just the same as the king.”

Ianna corrected him. “She does not want the throne. She wants to knock down the Wall, give us an opportunity to live as we choose.”

“No one can do that,” the old man said. He pulled at the white hairs growing like weeds on his chin.

“But if she did open the Wall,” Bryn said, “would you try the outside?”

For some time the servants did not speak, debating, through glances, his trustworthiness.

“I would,” Marcu declared. “I’d steal a team of oxen and go claim as much land as they could plow. Grow some barley, whatever the soil out there prefers.”

“Would you grow strawberries?” Bryn asked.

Marcu smiled. “Course I would, strawberries big as my head. I hear it’s good earth for growing.”

“Plenty of land, too,” one of the men said. “Enough for every one of us to have our own farm, each one a hundred times the size of this.” His tan and rough hands marked him as an outdoor laborer. His fixed squint widened under Ianna’s glare. “What?” he said. “I hear rumors, that is all. Hearing a rumor isn’t any kind of offense.”

“I don’t mean to make you uneasy,” Bryn said. “I was just curious.”

“What would you do?” Ianna asked him.

“I suppose I would work on Marcu’s farm,” he said, and the servants laughed.

Ianna rotated her plate with small turns, and looked about the room. “It would be good to have a place of our own,” she concluded. All around the table, there were nods.

The servants began talking of other things. The plates, heaped with sausage and potatoes; the squat mugs of hot cider; the common faces: all blurred as Bryn stared beyond them. “Where’s the stable?” he interrupted.

He was given directions. Dusk was approaching, and the lamps were being lit in Tecles's hallways. In the stable, the horse was gorging itself on feed. He patted its neck and reached into his pack. When he returned to the supper, he was welcomed back loudly, for the cider had been at work.

The gold made a resounding clank as he dropped it on the table. Some cider sloshed out of mugs. Bryn unlaced the purse and showed its contents to the servants. He had kept only a small portion for himself. "If any of you can tell me where I can find the rebels, this is yours."

Under a lighter burden, the horse moved easily to the top of the hill. From there he could see the property spread out like a well set table. On the hillside opposite, the dusk light turned the sheep to sparks. The field workers limped towards the house, no doubt to eat some of the same food Bryn had just enjoyed. Squinting, Bryn dismounted and opened the low gate of the Tecles family graveyard. There were eight stones there, and the tree. It was a slim birch with the white, wounded bark typical to the species. As the wind moved through its branches, an armful of yellow leaves drifted onto the graves. Bryn squatted before each marker and read. Perhaps the names belonged to his brother and sister, or to beloved ancestors. He came to the stone closest to the tree, marked "Celia." The yellow leaves covered the grave in a blanket. Bryn picked one up and twirled it by the stem, awaiting his reaction. A moment, and then it caught him: a subtle joy at being alive and on this earth, to see the last of the sunlight and walk freely from this pleasant cemetery.

GEVIO'S FIELD

FOR THREE DAYS BRYN LOITERED at a field that had belonged to a man named Gevio. The servants had sent him there with instructions to look each morning for a patch of blue flowers in the field's southeastern corner. This, they claimed, signaled a rebel meeting would take place that night. He suspected that he had been swindled. But on the fourth morning, they were there, where yesterday there had been grass.

He spent the remainder of the day watching peasants amble past the field. Now the night had come, and an owl called softly. Bryn crouched in the underbrush. His knees and back ached. Men and women he had seen in daylight now returned, creeping towards a certain tree at the far side of the field. One man crossed before him with long strides.

At this hour, it seemed inevitable that an encounter would end in flight or violence. After whispering sharply to himself, Bryn rose to his feet and hobbled on stiff legs to intercept the peasant. The man noticed his approach, and hesitated in the open. Bryn tensed, and loaded his weight on his toes — but the man simply nodded, and Bryn returned his greeting. When they came face to face, Bryn realized his mistake. It was not a man, but a broad-shouldered woman. Together they crossed the field. Before they reached the tree, where shadows massed, the woman leaned towards

him and said, "I thought you'd never come out from those bushes."

Bryn started to run, but the woman seized his wrist. He tried to yank his arm away, but she held him tightly. When she squeezed, he felt the bones in his forearm flexing towards each other. "Don't," she said. "I am very fast. Can you see what I'm holding?"

"No," Bryn said.

"It is a skinner's knife. It is as long as your hand and just about as wide as your finger, and it's flexible so I can reach all those little bits that keep the hide attached to the meat. You're alone?"

"Yes. Let me go and I promise you will never see me again."

"Why would I let you go? You were so patient. You deserve to be rewarded. This way." Still holding his wrist, she led him away from the gathered figures. They passed close enough for Bryn to hear mutters; he considered calling out, but down by the woman's side the moonlight had discovered something the length of a hand and the width of a finger.

The forest thickened about them, and they made a brief passage through a comprehensive darkness. The woman could only have been moving by instinct. Soon she stopped him, and summoned an inconstant green light to her palm. With this she showed him the heavy root structure of a massive tree.

"Low ceiling, so careful." At her touch, the roots unlaced themselves, rearing out of the loam like serpents to form a small portal at the base of the trunk. The woman waved him into the blackness. On hands and knees, Bryn entered.

Roots brushed through his hair like fingers, and the heady reek of damp earth plugged his nostrils. The first few yards were only as wide as his shoulders. Further in it broadened, and admitted light by which he could see his white and muddy fingers. Another few yards and the tunnel terminated in a small chamber. The woman clambered out into the room and straightened, brushing the dirt from her knees. He followed, eyes adjusting slowly. The room was warm and redolent of human bodies, as well as the deeper grave smell. Bryn ran his fingers along the smooth wall, and noticed that the chamber was a flawless box. Burrowing like this required a talent that was not supposed to exist outside the Citadel.

Seven figures stood in a horseshoe at the far wall. Moss-green lights orbited their heads in the lazy trajectories of fireflies. By this talent light the room was illuminated.

A mild voice spoke to the woman beside Bryn. “Only one, Tomos?”

It was her. Varra stood poised and forceful among her lieutenants. Her hair was drawn back, as it had been. She wore the same bulky jacket.

“More above. I assumed you would want to see this one first.” Tomos shoved, and Bryn stumbled forward. “We kill him, yes?”

After a moment, Varra recognized him. She raised her hand. “How did you find us?” she asked. Her voice was even and her body still as an archer’s at full draw. The impossibility of escape focused him.

“A weight of gold and a polite question,” he said.

Her eyes narrowed. “If you’ve come to bargain on behalf of your king, I’m afraid that time has passed. The last negotiation did not bear fruit, you might remember.”

“I’ve come like everyone else. I want to destroy the dynasty. Open door, free lives — all that the peasants say you fight for.”

“And you understand why I find that difficult to believe,” she said.

“Seeing as you’ve suckled on the royal teat your whole life,” Tomos added from behind him.

“My mother was a peasant named Celia. She’s buried on a hill in a village east of here.” He addressed Varra. “I’m here, and I want the same things you do.”

“But why do you want them? Tell me, Bryn, do you know your own reasons for being here?”

“I tried to dissuade him. I told him the hanging was foolish, tyrannical. He threw me out.”

“And does that mean you are here because the king offended your sense of justice, or for spite?”

“The king isn’t who he used to be. I don’t believe in him anymore.”

“So you claim.”

Tomos gestured with her knife. “More likely you’re planning on turning us over to the crown, so papa can give you a hug.”

“If that was my plan,” Bryn said, “it would have been armed talents

of the Citadel wriggling through that rat tunnel and not me. Just think, Varra: if I wasn't earnest, you and the rest of your rebellion would be dead or headed for a dungeon right now."

"Yes, quite a dismaying prospect. Of course, you're assuming that we cannot handle a few talents. And the rebellion is large, so how do I know you're not feigning meekness until you have the opportunity to fill a few of the larger cells with our people?"

"Because I was raised by the kingdom's greatest man." The rebels murmured angrily. "He was. And because I lived in that man's house, I recognize greatness. And I see it in you, and I believe in what you're trying to do."

"Please," Tomos said. "let's not let some boy's flattery distract us from the fact that he more than likely means to see us hang."

"And when was I ever distracted by some boy's flattery, Tomos?" Varra asked. "Still, Bryn, she speaks rightly. Betrayal can be an ugly habit."

"The king cast me out because I named him a tyrant. If that's what you'll be when you take power, then expect me to turn cloak. Otherwise, I'm as good as my word."

"Then I should have nothing to fear."

"Yes."

"Quite persuasive. You make it seem almost common-sense to welcome the king's adopted son into a conspiracy against him. But I see more than a few risks, and I'm not in the practice of taking snakes into my bed without some benefit."

"You still have Ippoleus, don't you?"

"Yes."

"I'll tend to him. I spent half my life doing it. He loves me, he behaves around me. He must have given you trouble."

Her eyebrow lifted. "Perhaps. Tomos, you and the others fetch our new brothers and sisters. I'll need a moment to speak with Bryn. When I'm ready, I will signal you."

Tomos frowned. "I could stay."

She laughed at Tomos, and waved her followers out. They exited by the low tunnel on the other side of the room.

When they had gone, Varra folded her arms. “The boy is nearly unmanageable. His night terrors...”

“I remember. The king’s offer will still stand, you know. He will give you gold if you let me take the boy to him.”

“You just swore you had turned your back on this king. And now you counsel that I give comfort to this king, and surrender our greatest asset?”

“I’m thinking only of the prince’s welfare. He’s sensitive — I don’t know how long he’ll stay peaceable. Has he killed anyone yet?”

“No. But nearly. He broke one man’s leg, and another went deaf. If we bring you in, can you guarantee that he won’t have any more of these outbursts?”

“You’d need more than me for that. He is happier when I am around, and a little more tractable. I can gentle him if he’s near a tantrum, but once he breaks... the king had a team of men for the purpose. And in the worst event, the king himself could not blunt him.”

“Just how powerful is this boy?”

“I believe he could level this whole kingdom.”

“The others think the prince is too volatile. They tell me to cut his throat and pursue a safer plan. Enlisting you is a solution to a problem they don’t think we need.”

“I have a little gold.”

“That is something, but useless past the spending. What are you willing to do?”

“I don’t know.”

“At last, honesty. Explain to me how you came to be here.”

He related the story, at first slowly, because he was surprised by powerful emotion as he described the king’s edict. Varra listened so quietly he felt like he was confessing to the air only. When he finished, she replied: “Why not live alone?”

“What?”

“You were given gold, and leave to walk away. Why not find some quiet place and wait out this conflict? If you’re not on one side, must you join the other?”

“I don’t know.”

“You told me you saw something in me. And I see anger in you. You’ve been shunned by your people. But is this a child’s pique, or something durable? That’s what I need to know. Your frustration has carried you this far. This is nothing — merely talking. But if you join us, you may reach a moment that requires more. And if what’s brought you to us is pique, you’re more danger than you’re worth.”

“A moment,” he said. “What does that mean?”

“The peace has ended. It’s blood from here on.”

“An army needs envoys, too.”

“Not answer enough.”

“I’ll do what I think is right.”

“All bloodshed begins with differing ‘rights.’ But — I don’t think you aim to betray us. For now, that’s good enough. And now you will do me your first service. When the recruits come in, I will ask you questions of the outside. Answer honestly.”

“If I don’t know the answer?”

“Then answer however — as long as it serves the cause. We are trying for a better world, in here or out there. Be convincing.”

Varra briefly left, and returned with the other rebels and a score of recruits. The chamber was now full of pinched faces with eyes underlined by dark and tender smudges. Varra first took their measure with a long pause, an orator’s trick that the king favored. In the quiet Bryn could hear the king’s gentle lecturing tone: “We hate talk only for its abundance. Build them a silence first, and then they’ll be eager for any speech.” Once the silence extended to that point — then three heartbeats past — Varra began to speak.

“I am Varra. You know my name and my cause, if not my face. No doubt you have heard stories of what I have already done and what I plan to do. But we peasants know not to trust our ears overmuch. So you have come here to see me, to see if I am real and if this rebellion is real. Here I stand. As you can see, I am real — ‘The Bitch Who will Break the Wall.’ But if you want to see that this rebellion is real, I am not your proof. He is standing beside me.”

Varra gestured towards Bryn. “Do you recognize this young man? Call out his name, if you know it.”

In his years standing on the king’s dais, Bryn had become accustomed to many eyes focusing on a point six feet in front of him and three feet to the left. But now they looked at him only. He flinched as the peasants studied his face. None recognized him, and he felt relief.

“He is called Bryn,” Varra declared, “and he is the king’s adopted son. The king has lost the faith of his own people. They know — and he knows — that the dynasty’s three-thousand-year reign will soon end. They tried to keep the world out. But no wall is strong enough. There is always a crack. Why does the Wall exist? Do you know? Bryn has studied the histories, he will tell us. How did the kingdom come to be built, Bryn?”

Shocked that she would offer his name so freely, Bryn was slow to answer. “The first tribe lived in this land, hunting and driving cattle. Some strangers arrived.”

“And? Speak clearly.”

“They knew unusual crafts. One used a spear to kill one of Deivo’s cows, not knowing it was his, or who he was. And it is said that when Deivo saw the bronze blade which had done this, he declared a wall would be built.”

“But why? Are we to believe that Deivo feared a bronze blade? He, who could raise unbreachable walls? Tell us, Bryn: what did the great founder see in that bronze blade?”

“Proof that the strangers were warlike. He wanted to spare them a futile war against his people.”

“No. Deivo did not raise the kingdom for love of peace. He did it for fear. He saw in that blade’s reflection the doom of him and his kind. In his smallest finger flowed all the talent that remains in this kingdom. But here was a savage, with no gift, who had made his own talent. And if he could make one thing, he could make a greater thing, tools to make tools to make tools. And Deivo knew that one day the savages would command magic and his people would be powerless. Because the few, no matter how great, will never resist the will of the many. So they shut themselves away. And it has come to pass. Outside the miracles are like dirt. Even the poor-

est peasant has his talents. Strange devices capable of sending their voices through the air. Weapons more powerful than any crossbow. Wagons that draw themselves faster than a fast team of horses. Do they starve out there, Bryn?"

Edgar had told him of the abundance and variety in even the poorest's diet. "No."

"Are they sick?"

He had spoken of buildings dedicated to healing, ten times the size of the Sanctuary. "No."

"Do their women die in their labor?"

Bryn thought of Celia. "No."

"And still we live here in Deivo's tomb. They would pity us. Do you know that we live as their ancestors did, hundreds of years ago? And why? Why are we here? Because the crown wishes it to be so. No power ever desired change. The powerful build walls. They try to keep the world out. Let us show them. Let us hold the bronze blade in our hands and show it to them again."

Varra lifted her chin. "Like many of you, I worked the earth. I began to believe that nothing changed, that even winter's worst storm would be forgotten by the summer. This is the way of things, my people said. They said that it is shameful, to dream of a different world. But why? There *is* another world, just beyond the Wall. And if the king will not stand aside, we can build a new one on the rubble of his palace. If you believe that as I do, step forward and give us a name. Make it a true one, if you choose. But remember that if I am taken, I may be forced to reveal it before dying."

A man came forward and bowed his head to the assembled rebels. "My name is Potro, and that's the name my father gave me. I will join you, if you'll have me."

"We take everyone with a will, Potro. Do you swear to fight the crown and protect those it would harm?"

"I swear it."

"Then come and stand with us."

"Thank you, my lady." Potro crossed the chamber, and the next person spoke. Each was welcomed in turn, until Bryn was the only one who

had not offered an oath. Varra told Tomos to take the recruits above and give them orders. Tomos nodded, but frowned at Bryn before she ushered out her new charges. When they had left, Varra led him from the chamber by the second exit, another low tunnel on the other side of the room.

They were disgorged at the base of a different tree. She led him down a gentle slope to the banks of a small pool. She sat on a rock and gestured him to sit.

Bryn collected himself before speaking, having learned from the king that charging the clever with an unsheathed weapon was useless. “Was it necessary to give up my name for that piece of theater?”

“Yes. I need warriors more than anything. Your value at that moment lay in who you are. A king needs legitimacy, and you can hurt that.”

“My *value*. And if the king hears?”

“That should only concern you if you were lying to me, before. Were you lying to me?”

Bryn did not know how to answer.

“You are not certain yet. I understand — I have had years to build my conviction. It was selfish of me, to risk your life like that. I realize this. But it is still more than likely you are the king’s agent, come here with a convincing story of exile — as you just showed, you can play a part well. I needed to test you.

“I now offer you a place in this war. If you are afraid, we will stop. You can go home and tell your king you attempted to gather rebel secrets on his behalf, and failed. I think he will believe this.”

“If I am not afraid?”

“Then you will join us, and I will determine what value you have, beyond your name. I do not think I will have to look hard.”

“No?”

“In this war I have had to find a use for every kind of soldier, ones the crown would never choose. And already I can tell the king was a fool to throw you away.”

Bryn had been taught to suspect any words he wanted to hear. For some it was an easy thing to discern the desires of others, and speak appropriately: the king could do it. Only Bryn could sense when he did so, and

Varra showed none of the signs. Under her gaze Bryn did not believe in a necessary separation between his desire and the truth.

“Now what?” he asked.

“Tomorrow morning I will wait for you at the field. I’ll wait until noon and no longer. Think hard on whether or not you meet me there. It is quite a distance between ‘exile’ and ‘traitor.’”

“Very well.”

They both stood, and she turned to leave.

“Wait. Which way is the field?” Bryn asked.

Chuckling, Varra stepped towards him. She took him by the shoulders and turned him about, then made finer adjustments to his orientation. “Walk straight,” she said. “Good night.”

After blundering through the dark woods, Bryn came upon Gevio’s Field. From there he walked to the inn he had stayed at for the past three days. As he crawled into his bedding, exhaustion collapsed on him like a wall. But before he slept, he thought about Varra’s hands on his shoulders.

The next morning he found her basking on a rock near the tree, in full view of any passersby. Her trousers were rolled above the knee, her sleeves above the elbow. The bulky jacket lay beside her, along with a skin she drank from occasionally.

“Aren’t you worried about being in the open like this?”

“No,” she said.

“Your face is everywhere, and it’s worth plenty of coin.”

“I am not concerned. You’ve made your decision?”

“Yes,” he said. “I will join you.”

“Then come along.”

PART TWO

COUNTRY

A SADDLED HOUND

AS THEY RODE, Varra would interrupt the silence to conduct a fitful interrogation. Her questions were offered lightly, but had thorns. Bryn considered each carefully before answering.

“Why won’t you haul Ippoleus back to his father at your first opportunity?” she asked. “Or whisper for those who will come and collect him?”

“I care about the prince, not the king.”

“Is the boy not safer with his father? Does he not belong there?”

“I see no difference for Ippoleus if he’s in the palace or not, provided he is well looked after.”

“You’re easy to believe. Very trustworthy.”

“Thank you.”

“I’m not sure I like that quality.”

This time he was brought to Ippoleus with eyes uncovered. The shack they kept him in seemed like an accident of deadfalls; only after a moment’s contemplation did the architecture reveal itself. A crude door clung to the frame by one hinge. They stepped inside.

Bryn gagged. “Did something die in here?”

“Nearby. Lenos dragged in a carcass, to keep out anybody seeking shelter. And if Inogen hears footsteps, she’ll conjure up a hissing to scare

them off.”

“And what about the animals who come sniffing after the meat?”

“You will have to be careful opening the door, I suppose. It’s under this. Do you feel the catch? Pull that and — ah.”

He swung the hidden door open, pulling a draft of cool damp air on his face.

“Call out when you come down the stairs. Everyone’s anxious about your prince’s health, so don’t let them mistake you for somebody else.” Raising her voice, Varra said, “Deiton.”

Bryn did not stumble on the steps down. Varra opened a second door and ushered him into the familiar root cellar. A young man and woman sat scowling at hands of cards. The man shuffled his cards about and half-nodded towards them. “Varra.”

“Why are you sitting down?” she asked.

“I recognized your voice,” he said.

“And if someone had a knife at my ribs?”

“Who could possibly keep a knife at your ribs?”

“I was just explaining to our new minder how fiercely we protect the prince. Stand up, Lenos. The game’s over.”

The girl, sweeping the cards into a pile, grinned and sang “I win” under her breath. Lenos hopped to his feet easily.

“I apologize, my lady. Shall I kill this one?” he said, and winked at Bryn. Bryn grimaced.

“No. He’ll be making your life much easier. Bryn, this is Lenos,” she waited for them to clasp hands, “and this is Calline.” Calline did not curtsy as the court girls might, but offered her hand. She had small fingernails, a mild grip, and a convincing smile. “Calline, is your sister about?”

“Gone to the market. Should be back soon.”

“Good.” Varra looked to Bryn. “You are never to come or go during daylight, not if you can help it. It’s possible the crown is looking for this place, and I doubt you would know if you were being followed.”

Bryn nodded.

“These two can tell you their routine, and you can correct their mistakes. In all matters of safety, Lenos’s word is law. Assuming he’s not

busy at cards.”

Lenos rolled his eyes. “The girls look after him, mostly. He doesn’t care for me much.”

Bryn smiled. Though he knew nothing about it, Ippoleus was a good judge of character. But something disturbed him, beyond Lenos’s charm. It might have been the low ceilings, or the smell of death above them. “Can I see him now?”

Calline led them to a door on the opposite wall. “He’s asleep, I think.” She eased the door open and Bryn poked his head inside. Beyond the toy knight, in reach of the bed, and a few handfuls of autumn leaves, lined up small to large, it was a cell. Ippoleus was curled up on a narrow cot, facing the wall. Bryn felt like pulling the quilt over the prince’s shoulder, but stayed where he was. Varra’s presence at his elbow made him shy.

“Now,” Varra said, “let’s see if you can end this rebellion.”

Varra ordered the prince woken and brought to the Wall, where Bryn would encourage him to knock it down. Bryn demurred, first because it was risky — Varra told him the Wall was close, and she would protect them — and then because the prince did not like to be woken.

“More he sleeps now, the more I’m awake at night. Rattle him,” Lenos said. Varra nodded, and Bryn scooped his fingers against his palms. The space between dream and waking was risky. Once the prince had mistaken his pillow for something dangerous, and exploded it with a single touch. Bryn sat down on the bed. First he spoke to him. “Prince. Wake up now. Prince.” Then he touched him on the shoulder.

Ippoleus’s eyes slid open — as if the nap had been pretense — then widened when they fixed on Bryn. Ippoleus grinned and reached up to tug at Bryn’s nose.

“Easy enough,” Varra said.

“Odd, to see an infant so big,” Lenos observed to Calline, who was busy with something outside.

Ippoleus refused to ride a horse, and glared whenever one was near. He glared at the chestnut horse while its lips delicately grasped the apple in

Calline's hand, then powerfully masticated, its long jaw rocking back and forth. Varra, hopeful, held the horse's reins out to Bryn and asked if he could convince the prince to mount up. "He nearly killed me as we escaped the palace," she said.

Bryn shook his head. "I think you overestimate my persuasiveness."

"You cannot get him on a horse?" Calline asked.

"He doesn't like them," Bryn said. He spread his hands. "He prefers dogs."

Lenos laughed. "Excellent — then all we have to do is find a hound and fit it for a saddle! Varra, this is absurd."

"It is not necessary that he ride. It is not far," she replied.

Ippoleus was as suspicious of the Wall as he was the horse. When Bryn leaned against it and waved to him, the prince did a nervous dance. His head tugged back, as if a fisherman had a hook in his cheek. Bryn smiled and coaxed, but he would come no closer. He became so agitated that he began to slap at his legs, and did not stop until Bryn passed out of the Wall's shadow.

"Is this usual?" Varra asked. For the moment she was only disappointed. Bryn did not know her well enough to say if she could rest on disappointment, or if it was an edge to anger, and would tip that way.

Worried, Bryn said, "No, actually. He has been in the chamber of the Door and never seemed to care."

"Try again. Lead him there."

Bryn took Ippoleus by the hand and guided him. Whenever Ippoleus stopped, Bryn stopped. After a long pause, he would tug the prince's fingers, and they would take another step. Bryn could hear Lenos sighing somewhere behind him. The prince tensed as they entered the Wall's shadow, and its zone of cold air. The sun flashed in Bryn's eyes and then he could no longer see it, only the dark stones. Their hesitations grew longer. Finally they were close enough to touch the weathered stone. Bryn reached out while Ippoleus watched him, shivered. The prince's apprehension infected Bryn. He reminded himself he had just leaned against the

Wall. He put his fingers to the stone. Nothing happened. Then Ippoleus touched the stone, and still nothing happened. Ippoleus laughed, and took his hand out of Bryn's.

"Now make him push," Varra said. Bryn looked back at her: she stood in the light, her arms folded, a hip cocked skeptically. Bryn nodded and pushed at the Wall with both hands. Ippoleus mimicked the posture but not the force, and found it uninteresting. Some small flowers grew up against the Wall, and Ippoleus dropped into a childish squat — knees against the collarbone, feet flat on the ground — to study them.

"One minute he is terrified, and the next he does not care?" Varra said. "Tell me, Bryn: will he do what I want him to do?"

"I do not know. He has no reason to destroy the Wall. There is nothing he wants on the other side of it."

They returned to the hidden cellar and Ippoleus raced to his bed, then fell asleep. Lenos challenged Calline to a new game of cards. She declined, leaving Lenos to reluctantly grab a small wooden figure and begin carving on it. The figure's amorphous shape captured only its maker's indifference; Bryn guessed it was meant to be a wolf.

Hearing thumping footsteps on the stair, Bryn spun and gaped at the closed door, while Varra and Lenos pointed bare swords at its handle. "Deiton," someone shouted, before swinging the door open. A woman stood panting on the threshold, red faced.

Calline, emerging from the other room, saw her empty-handed sister before she saw Varra or Lenos holding swords. "Where are the potatoes?" she asked.

"Boral is gone," Inogen said.

"Gone how?" Lenos asked.

"I don't know. I went to ask him for news and he wasn't there. No one knew where he'd gone."

"Captured?" Lenos suggested.

"No," Varra said. "He's turned. He is that kind."

"But he didn't know where we are exactly," Calline said.

Lenos shook his head. "But he knew there are rebels in these woods. They'll be searching."

“We need to move the prince,” Varra said. “This is more sudden than I’d like. Our new burrow isn’t ready yet.”

“What about my village?” Calline asked. “I can think of a place, and it’d be almost safe. You know we’re loyal, there.”

“I’d rather not put him among people. Trees don’t read bounties or take bribes.”

“We keep the prince hidden and we don’t need any more Borals for news or supply,” Calline said.

“Perhaps. But we must leave now.”

“What about waiting till dark?” Bryn asked.

“I can conceal you. Lenos, I want you and Inogen to stay here. Give the crown something to chase — otherwise they’ll keep looking. Meet us tonight, if it’s safe.”

“Excellent,” Lenos said.

“You are to run, is this understood? You are not to fight them.”

“He won’t,” Inogen said.

“Do we have time for this?” Bryn asked. They talked quickly, but no one had moved.

Varra nodded. “I’ll need to fetch a dray. Let him sleep for now.”

The cart groaned as its huge wheels turned. The two horses leaned against their harnesses without any apparent effort. Their slowness made Bryn uneasy. He sat beside Varra, who held the reins, while Ippoleus lay behind them, hidden among barrels. Calline sat atop one and played baby games with him. She ducked behind the casks, then popped up and surprised him. The prince crooned and giggled. He snatched up a sack and covered himself with it. Calline made a show of not being able to find him. The sackcloth shifted as Ippoleus’s muffled giggles emanated from it.

Varra knocked Bryn’s knee with her own. “Enough looking. Nobody pays so much attention to a cask of cider.”

“Someone will notice,” he said. “If they don’t hear the barrels crying, they might wonder why you’re driving a cart.”

“If you’re this sort of passenger, swap with Calline. She worries

quieter.”

Bryn crossed his arms and settled back. It was the choosing once again, but before he could tell her as much, his nerves steadied. He did not know why. The day of the choosing had been this clear, and he feared for Ippoleus as he had the king. He decided it was Varra and the practiced way she flicked the reins that calmed him.

“Do you remember how you lied to me, Bryn?”

He started. Varra’s eyes gazed empty at the horses’ bobbing necks. “I haven’t,” he said.

“You told me the king would take my offer. I asked and you said he would.”

“I thought he would.”

“Why were you wrong? You have known him all your life.”

“He used to ‘consult’ with me on matters of state, when I was younger. I understood hardly a word, but he told me that you will go mad trying to predict the behavior of kings.”

“That is nonsense. Everything is predictable.”

“Seems you were surprised when he denied your offer.”

“Before you can predict, you must know what you are dealing with. If you know what a creature wants, what it needs, and what it abhors, then it cannot surprise you.”

“You’re confident. But the king has put down uprisings before. Why will yours be any different?”

Varra turned her head towards him. Bryn learned that her irises were light green, with jade rims. “Because he has no idea what I am,” she said.

“They’re coming,” Calline murmured. Pretending she was still playing the game, Calline refitted the prince with the sacking.

Bryn had known they would, and so at first his fear was dull, a dreary winter malaise. When he turned to confirm the approach of the king’s men — there were three, astride huge white horses — his heart began to stumble. Varra’s voice remained even. “You say nothing, understood? And you *do* nothing. No matter what. Calline?”

“I’m fine,” she said.

The riders overtook them on both sides. They came at a walk, two to

Bryn's right. His eyes fixed on the wheel, turning slowly as the earth. He heard the hooves clopping closer, then felt a blast of hot air on his shoulder as one sniffed at him. The cart horses shifted in their traces. The nearest soldier commanded a halt. Bryn was transfixed. Each blade of stubble on the soldier's face was vivid. He had never seen anyone so clearly. Beside him, Varra clicked at their horses and pulled up on the reins. The soldier held his naked sword against the wheel's spokes. The clacking slowed, then stopped.

"Greetings," the soldier said. Varra's orders coincided with Bryn's instincts: he said nothing.

"A good day to you," the soldier to the left replied. Disconcerted at the closeness of this answering voice, Bryn tore his eyes from the soldier and discovered a fat bearded man sitting beside him, holding the reins. Before he could yelp, the fat man glanced at him: his eyes were light green, with jade rims.

"Sorry to delay you," the first soldier said. He wore the insignia of a third-rank, indicating an ability to break stones with his hands. "We've had reports of rebels along this road. Smuggling and the like."

"I see," the fat man said.

"We'll check the back, if you don't mind."

"If you must — but be quick, would you? I'm in a hurry."

The third-rank headed his horse towards the back. "And where are you hurrying to?"

"Lanum," Calline supplied.

"Is that so?" The horse pawed at the road, and the soldier looked over the arrayed barrels. "And what are you porting to Lanum?"

The fat man called over his shoulder, "Cider, mostly. There's to be a wedding."

The soldier nodded and smoothly moved from the stirrups to the cart without touching the ground. The cart squeaked under his weight. "Excuse me, dear," he said to Calline. Bryn was seeing everything at once: the two other soldiers still in the saddle, hands on pommels; Calline's round face, pinched with fear; and Ippoleus, not nearly concealed amid the casks.

"I'll need to check these casks," the soldier said.

“You’ll ruin the taste if you open it now,” the fat man said.

“No, I won’t.” Leaning down, the soldier snatched a cask and tossed it lightly up. He caught it and shook it by his ears, as easily as though it were empty. Hearing only sloshing, the soldier set it down and repeated the process with another. He began to move carelessly through the bed, tapping at casks with the toes of his boots. As he neared Ippoleus, Bryn’s thighs started twitching, but he could think of nothing to do. He had no weapon or talent. He could only play dead.

Something caught the soldier’s attention. He stepped around the largest cask and pulled away the sacking which concealed Ippoleus. There was the prince, blinking violently. The soldier stared down at him. He did not react, and after a moment Bryn noticed some difficulty with his eyes. The pupils had contracted to pinholes and began jittering independently of each other. Bryn heard the third-rank breathing shallowly. Finally he replaced the sackcloth and turned away.

“Nothing,” he said to his comrades. The soldier brushed his gloved fingers against Calline’s cheek and smiled before bounding back on his horse. The patrol cantered off. Calline scowled, Bryn trembled, and the fat man watched them go. When they vanished around a bend, the fat man did too, leaving Varra slim and pensive, with the reins gathered in one hand.

“You did well,” Varra said to them.

Bryn’s voice shook. “How did you do that?”

“Surely you’ve heard of glamors?”

“Talents can sniff glamors. That was a third, he was staring right at Ippoleus. Marius himself could not have concealed all of his aura.”

“No. Marius could not.” Varra shrugged and turned to Calline. “Is it very far?”

“No, my lady, not much farther.”

“Then we’ll ride on. Keep watching — the king has more than one patrol in these parts, I think.”

Calline’s village of Lanum had an abandoned mill at its far end. After the

original miller had been imprisoned for withholding tax, a flour explosion had destroyed one of the walls and the next tenant, who knew nothing about milling and was mourned only briefly. No effort had been made at reconstruction, leaving a blast radius littered with loose stone blocks that the horses grazed among while Calline explained the history.

As they regarded the mill, a disheveled man with a rusted polearm came lurching from the door. “Back! Back!” he cried. “This is mine!” The cart horses shook their heads at the orange point of the brandished polearm. Varra dismounted and raised her hands.

“Lay down the weapon,” she said. “You are in no danger.”

In reply, the man jabbed at her shoulder. Varra twisted herself slightly and snatched the haft with one hand. Giving a sharp yank, she wrested the polearm away from the man, who held it with two. She snapped the polearm over her knee while he watched, dismayed. “I was taught that if you have a poor weapon, you do not seek fights.”

A belated recognition swept across the man’s face. “You’re her?”

Varra did not speak or nod, and he took this for confirmation.

“Forgive me, my lady,” and he sank to his knees. “I thought you were the crown’s men, or Citadel.”

“You do not need to ask forgiveness of me. I have a task for you, however.”

“Name it.”

“Leave this mill, and find some other place to dwell.” She took coins from a pouch. “Tell no one that our paths crossed.”

“I do not need gold, I will obey gladly, gladly.”

“It is not payment. It is so you may buy yourself food. You look hungry.”

“Thank you, my lady.” He did not look in her eyes as he accepted the coins, and did not put them in his pocket as he staggered off.

Skeptical, Bryn watched him leave. “Why not use a glamor? You’ll trust that drunk to not brag of having met you?”

Calline laughed. “Of course she does. She asked him not to.”

The water wheel, its axle snapped, spun fruitlessly. Rich afternoon light from the perforated walls glinted on the inch of the rainwater that

had seeped in. It sloshed around Varra's boots as she crossed to the gearing which turned the heavy millstone above. "These seem fine," she said, running her hands over the mechanisms.

"And that?" Bryn gestured to the corner where the ceiling had collapsed.

"Less so. But at least the millstone hasn't fallen through." She rubbed at her forehead with the heels of her palms. "Can he help?"

"If you showed him, maybe. He does like things orderly."

"Try, please."

"Ip? Ippoleus? Come here."

Ippoleus rarely heeded his name. He was crouched, drawing eerie glyphs in the water with his fingertip. When he withdrew it, they cohered and vibrated before dissolving into ripples. Bryn wagged his fingers in Ippoleus's field of vision. Once he had the prince's attention, he leaped and landed with both feet in the water. He capered about, stomping his feet, sending up gouts of water which sparkled as they passed into shafts of light. Varra frowned as she watched, so he kicked an arc of water at her. She gasped, and Ippoleus laughed.

"Go on, show him what you want. Make it look like fun."

Varra swiped the water from her sleeve, sighed, then began juggling three stones. Ippoleus cooed as they circled in intricate patterns. His fascination drew him forward. The shock of stepping into the water did not register on his face. As he came nearer, Varra made the stones dance faster. When he reached out to touch them, she brought the stones together with a resounding clack. Mortared with talent, the fused stones slotted neatly into a gap in the wall. Ippoleus was delighted by the fit. Varra repeated the process twice more, and when she began weaving a lattice of crossbeams, Ippoleus apprehended the game. He windmilled his arms, and every loose stone in the cellar levitated. When he clasped his hands, they drifted towards him and began swirling, like stirred soup. Bryn was arrested by the beauty of the swirling stones, and then knocked senseless by one crashing into the back of his skull.

THE MILL

WHEN HE REGAINED CONSCIOUSNESS, Varra was kneeling over him. Ippoleus chewed his fingers behind her. The ceiling above them was perfect. He tried to point to a spot on it, and his finger pointed at another. “Was I under that long?”

“No — he’s very fast. He didn’t realize what he had done,” she said.

“I expect not. I’m fine, Ippoleus.” He touched his scalp and felt a seep of blood. “I’m fine.”

Ippoleus saw the red on his fingers and began to cry. He walked three tight circles with his jaw clenched, the rest of his face distorted by inner pressure. When Ippoleus sobbed, it was like a wounded animal. The pain even ebbed in Bryn’s skull; he could not think of his injury, only frantically devise some solution to the prince’s distress.

The weeping continued until Varra attempted to restrain him. Ippoleus slapped away her hands and hunkered down beside Bryn, to gingerly palpate his scalp. As he did, his quivering chin became ugly and mottled with blood. When his fingers discovered the gash, Ippoleus moaned.

“I’m fine, prince, don’t cry.”

Ippoleus did stop, and his mouth set in a line; he resembled his father. When the prince laid his palm atop the wound, Bryn felt a bizarre lacing

sensation shiver over his flesh. Ippoleus withdrew his gory hand and smiled while Bryn haltingly confirmed his restoration. Awe made Varra placid and beautiful — her jaw was temporarily slack.

Despite the superficial recovery, Bryn was still woozy when Calline returned with a basket of food, and even later, when Inogen and Lenos appeared. As the older sister, Inogen asserted seniority through teasing solicitude. Her first act upon arriving was to reach for Calline's messy braid. While Calline yanked her head away and batted at her sister's hands, Lenos laughed and rummaged through the basket of food. He selected an apple, took a bite. "Brought your horse," he said to Bryn, chewing. "No common animal, that."

"I stole it from the king's stables," Bryn replied.

"I'd wager that!" Lenos laughed and slapped his knee. Bryn winced. He had been practicing stillness since the afternoon, when he propped himself against the wall and observed the remainder of the cleaning up. Varra had chased the water through a hole in the wall, then plugged it. Calline had brought bedding after the food, and discarded the drunk's nest of rags.

Both women inhabited themselves serenely. Calline stretched on tip-toes to hang an oil lamp from the ceiling. Her sleeve slipped back and bunched at the elbow, exposing her round forearm. Varra had gathered up pieces of scrap timber and was fashioning a bed for Ippoleus. With her knife and talent she carved perfect mortise and tenon joints, and fit them together into a sturdy frame. Compared to the women's purposeful motions, Ippoleus's movements were restless avian tics.

"Aren't you tired?" Bryn asked Varra.

"I lived on a farm. Tired wasn't ever reason to stop. But I could, if you don't mind sleeping on stone."

Bryn held up his hands. "Then I said nothing."

Varra smiled and drew her knife evenly through a branch like it was a cheese. "It won't be comfortable for another few days. But I'll send someone to help with the rest, and fortify what we can."

When Lenos finished the apple, he flicked aside the core and began helping Varra. "This one doesn't work?" he said, nodding at Bryn.

“Rock to the head,” Calline said, before Bryn could defend himself.

“That so?” Lenos peered at him. “Doesn’t look it.”

The day’s excitement overwhelmed Ippoleus before the bed was finished, and the prince settled into a doze. Later, when Varra and Lenos rattled the frame and nodded to each other, Bryn scooped up the prince and deposited him on the thin mattress that smelled of fresh straw and rustled when he turned in his troubled sleep. Bryn dragged his bedroll beside the prince and lay down to sleep. Bryn’s persistent wooziness and the late hour, combined with the others’ whispering, gave him the sense that phenomenon and perception had gently uncoupled, and his experience of the world lagged two seconds behind it. Mouths emitted voices in a disorder; Bryn listened intently for ownership, but at such volumes men and women sounded alike.

“He’s comfortable.”

“We’ll need to arrange for a stable.”

“I’ll go with?”

“No, better you’re here. This one’s hardly awake himself.”

“And you?”

“More miles, I think. I must speak with Boral.”

“You’ll be back?”

“Perhaps, perhaps not, but I’ll send the cousins. Until the next meeting.”

Bryn frowned, unable to make sense of it. He was exhausted. Outside, while the others made hushed good nights and quiet exits, the river ran endlessly, and the wheel creaked and spun.

The scraping of a wooden spoon woke him. In the morning light, the gear room looked different, smaller and more prosaic. Lenos sat on a low stool, Ippoleus knelt on his bed, and Calline stood stirring the pot.

“Good morning,” she said. “How is your head?”

Bryn considered the question and felt only a single grogginess, one common to the morning. “Better,” he said. “What’s that?”

“Nothing much, just porridge.”

“Eat enough of this and you’ll be full through winter,” Lenos said.

“If only the prince here could understand as much,” Calline said. She came at the prince with the spoon, and Bryn noticed the mess on Ippoleus’s chin. He resisted feeding by turning his head and hiding his lips.

“I never saw anybody so intent on starving himself,” Lenos said.

“Isn’t it so?” Calline said, crouching down to make another attempt.

“Careful,” Bryn said. “He looks angry.”

“When doesn’t he?”

Bryn got to his feet, took the bowl and spoon from Calline, and sat beside Ippoleus. “Have you any fruit? He likes berries, or grapes. Are there any raisins?”

“We have some apples.”

“Won’t do, I’m afraid. Ippoleus.” He nudged the prince’s knee with his own. Ippoleus looked at him curiously. Using a singsong patter honed over a decade, Bryn fed the prince. The first spoonful was tense, and Bryn sensed his fury gaining a shape, but he trusted that Ippoleus would not hurt him. As his stomach filled, Ippoleus became placid, and soon commandeered the spoon. Lenos’s lips bowed. “And they’d told me you were talentless, but look at you with a spoon.”

Bryn ignored him. “Calline? What are we to do now?”

“Nothing. The cousins will take some time to get here, so we’ll have to wait for them before we build anything more. Varra said you are not to leave the mill.”

“Does that mean I am a prisoner?”

“Don’t be foolish,” Calline said.

Bryn had never encountered such slow time. Even at the inn, his boredom had been mitigated by its indefinite outlines. He had done nothing for no particular amount of time. In the mill they waited for the cousins, who were due in five days but did not appear then.

The days were half-filled with Ippoleus’s tantrums, the endless flicking of cards in Lenos and Calline’s games, and the groaning of the broken water wheel. Bryn distracted himself by tending to Ippoleus and asking

Lenos questions about the rebellion. He began with Varra.

“Where did she come from?”

“They say the Citadel. But who knows? She just appeared. As it’s told, a man was hunting deer in the kingswood, two summers ago. The gamekeepers catch him, walk him through the city tied to a pole. She steps out of the crowd, cuts down the gamekeepers and everyone else who raises a sword, frees the poacher, and tells the onlookers that the smallfolk are no longer the king’s prey.” Lenos shrugged. “I agree, it probably stretched in the telling.”

“And no one knows where she was before that?”

“Tomos, maybe, but you might as well ask a stone.”

Lenos could tell him little of Varra, but knew the other leaders well. Tomos had watched one of the legion gut her father in a dispute over her mother’s honor. Corl had been raised in the wildwood, and had been outlaw long before the rebellion began; Varra had given his robbing some purpose. There had been gold in Albeire’s family, until her grandfather had drunkenly mocked the old king, provoking a string of catastrophes that resulted in his disgrace, his family’s ruin, and an outraged granddaughter.

Lenos was particularly fascinated by the cousins. They were the kings of the wildwood, and had been first to follow Varra. There were the brothers, Barabo and Quintus. They were described as capable, which assumed menacing connotations in Lenos’s pronunciation. Quintus was the swordsman, while Barabo had never learned any weapon longer than a knife. Malo and Hektor were mistaken for brothers, because they were the two biggest men in the kingdom and so some relation was presumed. In fact, they were kindred only in stature and aggression. Together with Quintus and Barabo, they had accounted for twenty-six dead soldiers of the crown.

“And that’s from the first hangings,” Lenos said. “But the count might be higher now — I’ve been trapped with the prince, and haven’t heard anything.”

Their only news came from Inogen, who would leave without notice and return late at night with small cuts on her face and hands, covered in dirt and smelling of sweat. She would provide indifferent synopses of successful raids and running skirmishes, then yield to Lenos’s pestering.

They would climb upstairs, and Bryn and Calline would make sure not to meet eyes when they heard noises. Calline found something else to do, usually in the kitchen that adjoined the millstone room.

In quiet moments, when Calline's eyes were turned, Bryn glanced at her. He soon memorized the curve of her cheek from a number of obtuse angles. When she smiled, mostly at Ippoleus, her dimples appeared. She never noticed Bryn's attention, but Lenos often did, and leered at him over his hand of cards.

During the profound boredom of the seventh day, Bryn contrived to touch her in passing. They were all cooking under Ippoleus's blithe inattention. The sisters tended to the pots, Lenos diced onions with alarming precision and haste, and Bryn peeled vegetables as directed. He risked fingertips to look at the curve in Calline's lower back. Their small cask of cider sat across the room. He set down his potato and knife, took up his cup, and edged past her. His hand touched lightly on her side, just above the hip. She responded wordlessly to the pressure, like a well-trained horse, and moved for him. Her long hair brushed against his upper arm. Bryn filled his cup and sipped. He wished she was one of the brothel girls: all he would need to know was her price.

They were eating when Tomos arrived. The big woman leaned against the wall and pulled the corner of her eyelids towards her temples. "A meeting tonight," she said, through a yawn.

"You found him?" Lenos asked.

"Somehow. It was a fox and not a dog that whelped him, seems. He kept us tripping through the woods all night." She clapped her hand to her mouth. "But come along. Your presence has been requested."

"All of us?" Calline asked.

Tomos's smile did not show teeth as she bobbed her head towards Calline. "No, girl — you're better here. Him and him."

Lenos tapped the butt of his knife on the table and smiled.

"We can finish eating?" Bryn asked.

"If you like. Something like this, I don't recommend too full a

stomach.”

“No,” Lenos said, “we won’t waste the time. Come on, Bryn.”

As they rode, Bryn asked Tomos about Varra’s past. She took a long time in not answering him.

“Come now,” Bryn wheedled. “At the palace they say she died in the Citadel. Killed in a training skirmish.”

Tomos’s cheeks distended as she ran her tongue over her teeth. “I’ve never been to the Citadel.”

“She never told you anything about it? You two are close, aren’t you?”

Tomos warned him with a stare. “Can’t say what I don’t know. And what I do know is none of your concern.”

Lenos chuckled.

The willows’ fingers brushed at the fire’s reflection on the black water. Reeds shivered on the pond’s banks, and night birds sadly bickered out in the darkness. Under the trees the rebels gathered about their flickering torches and the condemned man, who stared at them with his unswollen eye.

From the first rank of the assemblage, where he had been placed by Tomos, Bryn studied Boral. If there was any fear or defiance in him, weariness had overwhelmed it. Bryn had never seen anyone so exhausted. To compensate for Boral’s stoicism, Bryn provided his own anxiety. The rebels were eager.

Varra paced the perimeter of their circle, and spoke to her muddy boots:

“In this rebellion, we hold each other’s lives in our hands. To survive, we must trust that those who hold our lives will hold them tightly. Boral cast mine aside to grasp the king’s gold.” The ground squelched as she stopped and pivoted to face him. “Accept the king’s gold, and you are his creature, to be judged as such.” Varra lifted her eyes to her followers. “But we will give him a chance. We will bargain for his life, as Boral did for mine.”

"This is the price that was fixed for me." She hoisted a bag of gold. "But I think I was sold too cheaply. Here is the bargain. There is a horse saddled on the far side of the pond." Bryn and the others peered through the willow's skirts to see a piebald, shifting foot to foot. "If Boral can swim to the far side, his crimes are forgiven. The horse will be his, and this bag of gold. Do you understand, Boral?"

Boral's tongue dragged across his dry upper lip. He measured the pond's breadth with his eyes. A suppressed smile began to tremble at the corners of his mouth. "I do, Varra."

"Good. But before you begin, we must outfit you. We rebels are not thieves, and we will not deny you what you have already earned. Give him his coat, Tomos."

Copper pieces had been stitched to its front and back like scales of armor. More had been sewn into its lining and pockets. When Tomos put the coat on him, Boral's shoulders slumped under its weight. Tomos cinched a rope under his armpits and another around his waist, tying them with complicated knots. Boral watched passively, and even lifted his arms to assist Tomos, an old reflexive response to the tender process of being dressed by another, the coat's implication being too surreal to grasp. Bryn was nauseous.

"Are you ready?" Varra asked.

"Please," Boral said. "I don't want it. You can have all of it, I'll give everything I have to the rebellion."

"If you land on any bank but that, you will be stabbed. Begin."

Boral's eyebrows pitched like roofs over his sad eyes. He stepped carefully among the reeds to the pond's bank. Testing the motion of his arms, he clinked softly. Then he waded in to his thighs. He looked at the other banks, where rebels stood with naked swords, and then once back at Varra and the others gathered behind him. With a sobbing laugh, he plunged into the water.

Bryn could see that he was not a strong swimmer, even unencumbered. His feet splashed up ineffective plumes of foam, and like a dog he strove to keep his chin dry. At the center of the pond his strength gave out. Three times he called out for help, loudly, as though he were addressing a

distant savior and not the watching rebels. When his head slipped under, Bryn turned away. He realized that Varra had watched none of it: her back was to the pond, and she looked into the woods.

The next morning, on Bryn and Lenos's return, Calline met them at the door. "He is not well, and Inogen's already left." The prince had contracted one of his sourceless illnesses, and could be heard retching behind her. They spent the day tending to him. In the afternoon, Lenos, disgusted by a rivulet of vomit that flopped from Ippoleus's mouth onto his boots, left the mill to hunt. He returned proudly with a rabbit. Calline roasted it while Bryn peeled potatoes. After they ate, Bryn made futile attempts to feed the prince. The prince ate nothing, and stared past him.

When Ippoleus fell asleep, his guardians sat and talked by firelight. The hearth's room was intact, but the missing wall of the adjoining room — which was to be Bryn's, if the cousins ever arrived — invited a persistent chill that could only be ignored in one of the chairs set close to the fire. Bryn drowsed in one, his left cheek swollen and tight with the heat. Across from him, Lenos worried at his thumbnail. Calline sat beneath the window, where the warped glass mixed fire and darkness in mutant reflections.

"I'm going to drink something," she said.

Lenos grimaced. "More of that awful cider?"

"And I thought Bryn was the lordling." She tapped his shoulder as she descended the stairs to the kitchen. Bryn looked into the fire and felt the warmth of her touch.

"It's not that," Lenos said. "I like a cider — but ours, not the piss you brew out here."

They heard cups tapping in the kitchen below.

"I don't know," Bryn said. "Should any of us be getting drunk?"

"Trust that if the king finds us, and sends someone to knock on our door in the middle of the night, it won't matter how drunk we are. Come to think of it, they won't even knock," Lenos said.

Bryn considered this. "Maybe I will have a cup," he said, but Calline had already appeared with three, and was pressing one into his hand.

They settled back and began drinking. The cider was cool, clouded, tangy. “We aren’t really here to protect the prince, are we?” Bryn asked, after some time.

Lenos shrugged. “From what we can. Curious folks, anyone reckless. And I can handle a few Citadel talents.”

Calline rolled her eyes as she drank.

“Varra should have given us more guards,” Bryn said.

“You’re lucky he is even alive. When the king rejected her offer, all her counselors told her to cut his throat.”

“Oh? And how do you know that?” Calline said.

“I heard it from those who heard it.” Lenos glowered and drank. “Anyway, they were right. The king spurns us, and we tend his whelp?”

“She has a sense of justice,” Calline said. “Do not punish the son for his father’s mistakes.”

Bryn smiled, remembering the king’s intuition about Varra’s intentions for the prince. “Is she so even-handed? You saw what she did to Boral. If that was justice, it was cruel.”

“Justice is justice, cruel or otherwise,” Lenos said. “I hear in your palace they beat serving boys to teach the royals a lesson, but out here we own our crimes.”

“I took my own beatings,” Bryn said.

“And did that teach you?”

“Just that I didn’t like beatings. What’s Boral supposed to learn?”

“Maybe how to swim,” Calline muttered.

Lenos’s sideways glance lingered on her, then returned to Bryn. “No teaching traitors and no reforming them. Lesson’s for the rest of us. Must be why she brought you to see it. It makes me uneasy, that you so sympathize with a traitor.”

“I was banished for protesting an execution. I hoped I wouldn’t see more among the rebels.”

“Then that’s your mistake, because that’s how rebellion works. It only ends when there is no one left to hang.”

“You sound so sure.”

“I know the history. Three times the peasants rose. Three times the

necks were stretched.”

“It doesn’t seem worth it.”

Calline drained her cup. “That’s what the elders say. ‘Life’s hard enough under a king’s boot. Why add the gauntlet?’”

“They tell anyone who will listen,” Lenos said.

Calline said, “They’ve lived so long without seeing a change that they forget it’s possible.”

“That’s the truth,” Lenos said. “But we remember. You think she had those five years ago?” He pointed at Calline’s chest.

She snorted. “I’ve had these since I was ten.” She stood up and took their cups without asking.

While she refilled them from the cask, Lenos gazed into the fire. He muttered, “Of course, killing a king is harder than growing a pair of tits.”

Bryn asked, “Do you think we’ll win?” He did not know why he said ‘we.’

Lenos stared into the fire as if he had found its eyes. Minute flames undulated within his pupils. “I think we’ll grow old watching the prince soil himself while the rebellion goes on outside.” He stood up and snatched his cup from the returning Calline, then went to his room and closed the door firmly.

Calline shrugged and handed Bryn another cup. He smiled at her and drank; the cider was good, and the fire made him thirsty. “Do you want us to win?” she said, settling into Lenos’s abandoned seat.

“I do.”

“But why? You do not pay his taxes, or have children to be taken. You’ve never been hungry. And you can’t hate him like a peasant hates a lord.”

“He took me from my true family and then threw me out of his house. Shouldn’t I hate him like any peasant?”

She smiled. “No, I don’t believe that,” she said. “You love him, even still.”

“I wasn’t the prince, but I was taught like one. So I was told what it is to be a good king. I think the good king is gone. I had seen him angry before, but never afraid. And then to leave the prince to the—”

“Savages?” Calline supplied, smiling slightly.

“No. Though you did steal a simple boy from his bedroom.”

“That wasn’t me. I drink my cider and go to bed early.” Her steady stare forced Bryn’s eyes back to the fire. The cider had reached his skull, which was now heavy and slow-acting.

“The king should have brought Ippoleus home,” he said. “Varra’s price was nothing.”

Calline nodded. “Then why did he say no?”

“He said that his subjects are his subjects: even the traitors.”

“Then that explains it. It’s impossible to let something go until you remember that you never owned it to begin with.”

“And what if you have to let something go that *does* belong to you?”

“What belongs to us?”

“Doesn’t a peasant own his cow?”

“A peasant doesn’t own anything. We have whatever your father allows us to have.”

“Then doesn’t the king own the cow?”

“The cow owns the cow. That’s all. The rest of it — rebellions and taxes and the choosing — is what happens when we forget who owns what.”

“Which is nothing.”

“No, the cow owns the cow, remember.”

“Does the peasant own the peasant?”

“If he’s lucky.”

“How old are you?” Bryn asked.

“Nineteen years. How old are you?”

“I’m twenty-two.”

“Well,” she said.

“Do you think I am a fool?”

“No, not a fool. You’re looking after the prince, and he needs it.”

“Why did you join the rebellion?”

“Not much choice. Our father died of a sickness last year, and our mother had her head kicked in by a horse. My sister and I needed food, and Varra was offering.” When Bryn started to speak, she shook her head.

“Don’t say it.”

After a silence, he announced: “I’m drunk.”

“Yes,” Calline said. She scratched at the inside of her ankle with the big toe of her other foot.

Bryn was trying to determine if this was a statement of her drunkenness or an observation of his own. His eyes slipped up the sharp bone of her shin and over her round bright knees, past her shadowed front and to her face. He could not tell.

“I have another reason to want this rebellion,” he said. “It’s different from yours.”

“Oh?”

“How much do you know of the outside?”

“Little,” she said.

“If you put all their kingdoms together, how would ours compare?”

“I do not know. Perhaps a tenth the size?”

Bryn pulled a stick from the fire. With its charred tip he began scratching a shape on the floorboards. “I saw a map of the outside once, and I memorized all the kingdoms.” Calline lowered herself to the floor to watch him draw. When he finished the charcoal shape resembled a browsing cow. “They call this land Europa. And here we are.” He pricked a freckle on the cow’s leg. “All the kingdom is contained in that dot.”

Calline frowned at the drawing, then him.

“And Europa is not the only land.” He sketched in other shapes, these rougher. To preserve the scale he had to crawl about, until the map stretched longer than Calline, who looked on from her side, head propped on her fist. When he finished he pronounced the strange names of the outer kingdoms. “I’ll visit them, someday,” he said.

“What is this one?” She tapped the space between Europa and Nordamerica.

“No one lives there. It is water, called an ocean. Like a very large pond.”

“I see.” Calline smiled. “I am going to bed.”

“Why?”

“I drink my cider and go to bed early, like I said. Now it is late and

my cider is finished, and you are trying to tease a peasant girl.”

“I’m not.”

“Then this map is wrong. Good night, Bryn.”

As she walked away he had the urge to call her back, but could not think of anything to say. A horse had crushed her mother’s skull. Bryn drained his cup and lay on his back, his head in the ocean. He wanted Calline’s mattress beneath him instead. The fire popped and crackled. He thought of Thetia, and the lessons a king’s tutors did not teach. Certain questions were passwords to the inner lives of others, but he did not know them. He wanted to ask Calline why the horse had kicked her mother, if she had been cleaning its hoof. He was tired, and his shoulders hurt. Bryn pushed himself upright and went to his bedroll, beside the millstone. He left the empty cup on the floor.

A noise. Bryn lay breathing through his nose, his thumbs hooked under his eyebrows. At the fifth moan, he rose and stumbled towards Ippoleus. Calline came moments later in bare feet to find him standing over the bed. The sweating prince squirmed in the blankets.

“I don’t know if I’ll ever grow used to waking up like that,” Calline said. “Is he well?” Her face was puffy from sleep, flattened by the orange dim of the single candle. She tugged at a shift which clung to her body in some places, and draped in others.

“I’m not sure yet.” Bryn lowered himself to sit at the edge of the bed.

The prince began to thrash. His limbs struck out in vague pantomime: much of it looked like fighting. The groans were growing louder. Bryn had to jerk his head back to avoid a wildly swung fist.

“I’m going to wake him,” he said. “Will you catch his ankles if he starts kicking?”

Calline nodded and sat at the foot of the bed. Bryn took hold of the prince’s shoulder and shook him. Ippoleus twisted about unconsciously.

“Prince. Prince, wake up.”

He shook more firmly, and the prince’s head swayed.

“Prince.” He no longer whispered. Ippoleus uttered a swallowed-

tongue groan. Bryn tapped his cheek, and then again more firmly.

“Is it a good idea to hit him?” Calline asked.

“When he sleeps he’s most dangerous. He doesn’t know he’s helpless.”

Bryn grabbed him by both shoulders and rattled him. “Prince, wake up!”

The prince whipped upright, his legs kicking out at the same time, knocking them both backwards. His mouth and eyes opened, and there was a flash of light and a snapping sound, like thunder.

From the floor Bryn rubbed at his eyes, trying to erase the magenta haze that floated in the air. “Calline?”

“I’m fine,” she said. He helped her to her feet. The prince had fallen back against the pillow. Crumbs of stone covered his chest. Bryn looked up and saw in the ceiling a perfectly round hole the size of a fist.

“What happened?” Calline asked.

“I do not know,” Bryn said. “But it’s done for now.” The prince’s eyelids fluttered. His tongue moved sluggishly against his lips.

“Does he need anything?”

Bryn took up the waterskin and held the prince’s sweaty head as he drank. “A wet cloth, maybe.”

Calline nodded and fetched one. “I used to have nightmares,” she said, as she applied the cloth to his forehead. “Never anything like that.” When she leaned over, the shift hung away from her chest.

“It is startling,” he agreed.

She noticed his staring. She did not change her posture. “I don’t know if I’ll be able to go back to sleep after that,” she said. Bryn shrugged. “Come on then,” she said. She led him upstairs by the hand. When he lay down in her bed, she straddled and unlaced him.

“Calline — I don’t want to give you a child.”

She tipped her head back and laughed, holding the drawstrings in her hands. “Do you think we peasant girls are so stupid?” She looked at his face and reconsidered. “Or do you just know nothing about women? It’s fine,” she said. She stooped to kiss him. “It won’t mean anything. It’s just that I can’t sleep.” Calline hitched up her shift, and when Bryn saw the tensed tendon there at the top of her thigh, and the hollows on either side, he forgot his questions.

THE COUSINS

BRYN WOKE UP TO THE SOUND OF POTS CLANKING IN THE KITCHEN. Alone in Calline's bed, he put his face to the blanket and inhaled. Straw and hair. He did not exhale until he descended the stairs and saw it was Calline, not Lenos.

"Good morning," he said, and she echoed him, cheerfully neutral, as usual in the mornings. Before he could ask any more questions, Lenos emerged from upstairs.

"Difficult night?" he said.

"What do you mean?" Bryn asked.

"I heard it from my bed. And that hole in the ceiling, that nonsense on the floor... what happened?"

Bryn glanced at Calline, and she did not look at him. "If you were concerned," she said, "you could have checked last night."

"I didn't because it was not my night to watch. And you would have asked me for help if you had needed."

"He had a nightmare. We managed to calm him down."

"Good. There will be some food, soon?"

"As soon as you make it. Watchers don't cook."

Grumbling, Lenos set about breakfast. Calline smiled as he jabbed

the fire and flung about the cookware. Bryn wanted to speak with her, but she looked comfortable in her chair. He decided he could not sit in the mill, waiting for a moment when Lenos was out of earshot to whisper some pathetic and hopeful inquiry. He announced, "I'd like to take Ippoleus outside."

Lenos frowned. "No. We're hiding the prince, not marching him about for all to see."

"Last night will become every night if we keep him inside much longer. He might knock down the walls just to get a breath of fresh air. At the palace he spent part of every day outside. It soothes him." Storms relaxed him most. While the palace dogs crept under the beds, Ippoleus would press his chest to the window and laugh whenever the thunder rattled the glass. Once Bryn had taken the prince onto the terrace, Ippoleus had conversed with the lightning, swatted at the rain and danced as the gusts directed him. Bryn had not seen any of that joy during his confinement. "We'll take him into the woods, and keep him under his cloak until we're out of sight."

"And if something happens to him, what do you think will happen to you?" Lenos asked.

"I don't understand."

"She's playing a game against the king with rabble at her back and one real piece — the prince. If something happens to him, what do you think Varra will do to you?"

"I don't know what she'd do. Nothing, I think."

"Maybe Boral had the same thought."

"Then you won't allow us to leave?"

Lenos clapped his hands. "Not at all. I'm growing old in this hovel. I just want it clear before we go."

Calline came along. After eating, the three fastened their cloaks, and then Bryn fastened Ippoleus's. Bryn noticed Ippoleus's fingers trailing disappointedly up and down its edges: borrowed roughspun, with no fur trimming. The prince's breathing clicked sometimes at the back of his throat when he was agitated. Hearing this, Bryn squeezed his shoulder lightly, lifted his hood, and guided him towards the door.

Outside, the autumn's coldest day yet awaited them. Bryn tugged on his gulix-lined gloves and was glad to have them. Calline nodded at them. "Those look warm."

The moment would have passed, but something in Lenos's sudden attention alerted Bryn. "If you think your hands will be cold, you're welcome to them."

Calline demurred and Bryn insisted. "No, wear them. These were done by the king's own glover, you know. I'm sure he'd be delighted they got some real use."

"Royal gloves, eh? My hands might be too rough for the likes of those." She held out her hands and smiled.

"Nonsense," Bryn said. When she pulled on the gloves, Bryn watched proudly, with cold knuckles.

"Everyone's hands settled?" Lenos drawled. "Then if we might hurry?" He ushered Ippoleus along with a hand on the small of his back, peered over both shoulders for watchers. Bryn, remembering there was some danger here, paid attention. He had seen little of Calline's village since arriving. The scattering of houses downslope had shriveled in the frosty air. At the far end of the village, wisps of steam rose from the bent heads of woodworkers manipulating a great saw.

Ippoleus's excitement sent him racing ahead with ungainly strides, and then back. Bryn's smile faltered. The current order of things was unsustainable. Kings kept or lost their thrones; rebels died or won glory. Events would resolve, but he could not see how. He focused on Ippoleus, who dashed in a tight circle about a tree and ran onward.

When they reached the tree line, Lenos relaxed, and Bryn, emboldened by the lingering ache in his groin, bragged to Calline:

"Would you like to see something from the outside?" Bryn asked.

Calline's eyebrows lifted. "Sure."

"Let me show you," Bryn said. The silver pocket watch glinted dully in the blanched light. Calline received it carefully. Even Lenos leaned his head over her shoulder to stare. "It tells the time. It runs on the same kind of machinery as a water wheel."

"But it's so small."

"The outsiders have created wonders."

"Have you been there?" Calline said.

Bryn laughed. "No, only one man is let in and out. But I know him well, and I've seen through the Door."

"Ah, the proud footman," Lenos said. "Taking responsibility for his master's house."

"What's it look like?" Calline pressed.

"Not so different from these woods, actually. It's their cities — you've seen the palace? They have buildings in the outside a hundred times the height."

"I never have seen the palace. But the king came here for the choosing years ago, when I was a girl. I wonder how the bloodguard got their armor so red. Is it paint?"

"And a powder they mix into the steel," Bryn said.

"One of the guards looked hardly older than me. Do you know him? Curly hair, dark?"

"Osmos," Bryn answered.

Calline echoed him thoughtfully, and Bryn knew it had been the cider. "Where's the prince?" she asked.

Bryn could not find Ippoleus's thin figure among the trees. He dashed forward and found the prince squatted by a stream, lifting and dropping rocks, watching the ripples. Only when its reason had gone did his alarm overtake him. He wanted to scold the prince, but it would mean nothing. Noticing his agitation, Calline suggested a rest. Instead he bounded to the other side of the stream, the stepping stones tilting under his feet.

"Don't wander," Lenos called after him. "I only chase a prince or better."

Bryn clambered up a bluff, his feet slipping in the mats of dead leaves. At the crest, the others' words blurred together with the running water. He looked down and could see a long way through the avenues of evenly-spaced trees. A finch dipped from a high branch to a low, travelling a slack rope trajectory. After a few peaceful minutes, he heard the sounds of climbing behind him. He kept his eyes forward and nearly smiled, but it was Lenos who came to lean on the tree beside him.

“Leave her be, Bryn.”

“What?”

“I’ve seen a few choosings. You palace folk take enough of our people.”

“If I was one of those palace folk, wouldn’t I be in a *palace* instead of these woods?”

“You don’t get to decide. You learned everything in the gold halls. It’s in you now, wherever you go. Except they couldn’t give you enough. Don’t be angry with me. Calline doesn’t need me to be unimpressed.”

“I was with Osmos when they came for the king. I watched him cut his own throat.”

“I wouldn’t tell her that — noble sacrifices only make them swoon.”

Calline shrieked happily behind them. They turned to see Ippoleus, kneeling among the roots of a tree, at the center of a confusion. Calline stood beside him, grinning and flinging leaves in the air. Instead of falling, they flew greening to their branches to settle and wave as though it were summer.

Bryn sighed. He took a long step and went down the bluff half-running, half-sliding. Crossing the stream, he entered into the slow storm of leaves. They brushed against him as they floated up, regressing from a red death to green. The forest floor was bare, and now blades of grass unsheathed from the dirt. Then honey mixed into the light, and it could have been the late afternoon of a different season. Ippoleus was serene. His magic completed and held. Bryn fell to his knees and took him by the elbows. The contact did not startle the prince, but drew his attention.

“What more could he have asked for?” Bryn said. It was the central question of both their lives.

But his words were mild weather to Ippoleus. After considering his work, the prince laughed and clapped. Everything reverted: the leaves dropped brown and dead from the boughs, the grass withdrew, and the light bleached.

When they returned to the mill, the cousins were there. Lenos cursed

under his breath. Bryn wiped at his mouth. The cousins sat on the larger blocks smoking pipes and jousting with their smoke, shaped with talent into warriors or dragons. Inogen was with them. She held one of the cumbersome pipes with two hands and contributed wobbly rings. Amid the smoke, their five laughing faces were indistinct. When they drew closer, the smallest man stood up.

Lenos nodded. “Varra isn’t—”

“Oh, she is. Inside. Why we’re outside.” As the small man’s lips pursed around the stem of his pipe, Bryn recognized him: he had sprung out of the granary with the cosh, brained Osmos, and lunged at the king with a knife. He was too stunned to restrain his staring, which attracted the small man’s curiosity. He exhaled his nauseating smoke and considered Bryn.

“Let’s get the prince inside,” Bryn mumbled to Lenos. Taking Ippoleus by the arm, he hurried to the door. Varra awaited them. She sat straight-backed on the edge of a chair. The room was dark save for the windowlight, which illuminated her face like the moon. Shadow pooled in her right eye socket, and light failed abruptly on her cheek. With her face angled away, Bryn could see the depth of her corneas. She broke from reverie and regarded them.

“Put him upstairs, Lenos. Make him sleep.”

“I don’t think he’ll want to, my lady — he usually rests later in the day.”

“I do not care. I will speak with Bryn and hear nothing from you.”

“Yes,” Lenos said. He hustled the prince so quickly that for a moment both of Ippoleus’s feet left the ground. When they were upstairs, Varra drew her feet under her. The soles of her boots dragged against the stone. “You’ve been reckless, Bryn.”

“What is he doing here?”

“Who?”

“The small one. The one who attacked the king. What is he doing here?”

“He is here because his family supports our cause.”

“You lied — you said you weren’t allied with the assassins.”

“I never said anything like it.”

“Did you plan the attack? Why are you working with them?”

“That is your last question. They are here because they are useful and because of a reality which seems to have escaped you, namely that people will die during this rebellion. And I say it has escaped you because you took the prince of the kingdom *out*, against my orders, where anyone might see him, because... why? The boy was stifled? You think you have his best interests at heart, and probably think that you’re the only one who does. But understand that you nearly killed your prince today.”

“Lenos was with us, and we were careful. No one saw us.”

“Lenos could not protect the prince from me. If he’s even at risk of being recaptured, they will only take back his body. Everyone but you understands that.”

“Forgive my confusion. I did not believe you would work with assassins, or cut the throats of innocents.”

“What moral clarity! Was it the king’s tutors who taught you such ethics? There are no innocents, especially not that boy. He was conceived monstrously, in hopes of oppressing us more effectively. Had he been born with a sound mind, he would be learning his father’s tricks even now. Remember there was a time for diplomacy. The king had our offer, and he sent back a beardless youth to spit on us.”

“Am I free to leave? Or will my throat be cut, too?”

She rose from the chair. “You misunderstand me, Bryn. Of course you are free. You always have been. But you aren’t in your tower anymore. The king kept you there, living a life without consequences — a life of no consequence. That time is done. If you’ll live in the world, you can’t avoid its dirt. You want to protect the prince, yes? Then *protect him*. Do not pamper him. And if you want to wash your hands of this, of us, and let everyone else decide the way of things, then all I require is your oath that you will not run back to the king. Give me that, and you have my word that you will never come to harm by my hand.”

“How can I trust your word? I do not know you. From what it sounds like, neither do these people fighting for you. You stepped out of the mist with a banner and asked them to follow. At least I know where the king comes from, and what he’s trying to protect.”

“You want a story. You want me to unbutton this jacket and show you all my scars. Then — then you will decide what I am. Then you’ll know for sure. But you never will, Bryn. All I am is my word, and that is all I can ever give you. But I will, if you ask. Do you want my word, Bryn?”

“I don’t know.”

She stepped forward and gently put her hands on the sides of his neck, just below the jaw. He could feel his pulse thumping against her palms. “I want the freedom to choose my life. That’s what I’m fighting for, for myself and for others. I believe we deserve that. And if you believe like me, then I’ll die for you.” She removed her hands. “Stay, if it’s enough. And if you think I’m using you as the king once did, then go. Make your first real choice.”

Her hands were so much colder than he had imagined.

“Think on what I’ve said. And send Lenos down.”

He nodded and climbed the stairs. Lenos was pacing just inside the door of his room, worrying at his thumbnail. “She wants to speak with you,” Bryn said.

Lenos shook his arms and nodded. He took the steps two at a time. Bryn closed the door after him and sat beside the prince. He put his arm around his shoulders. Ippoleus pressed his face into his chest and murmured nonsense into his collarbone. While Ippoleus slipped into a daze, Bryn listened to Varra’s muffled words below, and wondered what she might be saying.

By the next morning, Varra was gone and the cousins began their labor. Before doing anything else, they hacked apart the water wheel. Lenos, who constantly offered the cousins his services, was impressed. “Mills draw attention from the crown,” he said to Bryn, after they declined his help once again. With the lumber of the water wheel piled up and the loose stones collected, the work could begin.

First, the missing wall was replaced, and then they took the sag out of the roof in a remarkable display of coordinated talent. They set new panes of glass in the windows that had been broken, fitted a stout door in

the upstairs room that would thereafter contain the prince, and built Bryn a proper bed. They guzzled cider and insulted each other during their rare periods of rest. Bryn avoided them as much as possible. He was busy pacifying the prince, who disliked the sounds of hammers.

When one of the villagers came to ask who the cousins were, and what they were doing in the mill that had once belonged to his friend, Bryn crept down the stairs and listened by the window.

"We're kin to Inogen and Calline," Barabo told the villager, "You know them, don't you, old man?"

"Them and their parents, too, before they passed into the herd. And Calline came and talked to me, saying she and her sister were back. But I've known those girls since they were no bigger than this, and I never once laid my eyes on you 'kinsmen.' What is your relation?"

Bryn peeked through the window. The wide shoulders of Malo and Hektor framed the villager, a bearded man with a nose shaped like a berry, and as red. His eyes tracked Barabo's pacing, and when Barabo flipped his hammer into the air, they followed that.

"All of us are Deivo's children," Barabo said, "so aren't we all kinsmen?"

"I'll speak with Calline. Tell her to come out here."

"No, we won't do that." He flipped the hammer once more. "I'll tell you who we are. We're the cousins."

"The girls don't have any."

"And still I say what I say."

"That's not good for the village," the man said. The new glass dampened his voice, but Bryn could hear it quaver. "Not safe."

"Why not? You don't like our handiwork?"

"It's not that. Not me, I mean. But there's others."

"Don't worry about anybody else. You're the only one who's come to visit us, so far. Which makes you a good neighbor, but we cousins are private people, you understand. We'd prefer to be left alone, so that we can work with our hammers, and saws, and axes. But we can be good neighbors, too. Tell me, friend, is there something in your house that needs fixing? We would be happy to pay you a visit."

“That is not necessary.”

“Shall I fetch Calline? Or is that not necessary, either?”

The man shook his head.

“But I’ll tell her you came to wish her well?”

“Of course,” the man said. He turned and hurried away, elbows pumping. The cousins watched him go; Barabo tossed and caught the hammer. When he turned and saw Bryn in the window, he grinned.

Ippoleus was unhappy. He disliked the cousins, Lenos, Inogen, and Calline. He was even losing patience with Bryn. He wanted to go outside, and peered out the window until someone shooed him away. Bryn was grateful that Ippoleus had not chosen to defy him, but the prince had an unnatural stamina for grief, and his sobbing jags would persist for hours. When one appeared to be concluding, Ippoleus would startle himself with the sound of his own crying and begin afresh.

The eight of them lounged about the millstone, waiting for mulled cider. It was noon. The air smelled of apple and spice. Warmed by the new hearth, smiling at one of Calline’s fanciful stories in spite of himself, Bryn felt safe, and realized he had not since the day the griffin had been killed. When Ippoleus could be heard whimpering, Barabo glanced darkly towards the stairs.

“I would not mind stoppering him,” he said.

“Why are you still here?” Bryn said. “Your work is finished.”

“Oh, some of it is. But there’s always more to be done,” Barabo replied. “We’ll find out shortly.”

Barabo was right. It did not take long to hear the clopping of hooves, and the jingle of reins. There was a knock on the door. A quiet voice came from the other side: “Deiton.”

Lenos opened the door, and Varra stood in the threshold. With her hands in her pockets, her elbows stuck out. Her lips had paled in the chill, but she did not acknowledge it. The cousins rose as one and greeted her with nods and miladies. She returned their nods and greeted the others. But her green eyes did not find Bryn.

“You’ll have some cider?” Inogen asked.

Varra undid her jacket’s buttons with three fingers of one hand. “Of course. Should make that ride worthwhile.”

“Encounters along the way?” Barabo asked.

“A few, but none who could see through the fat man.”

“He’ll start sending better talents on patrol.”

“He will, but he hasn’t yet.”

Inogen handed her a cup. Varra took it in two hands and sat beside Bryn. While the cousins resumed an argument, she said to him, “You’re still here.”

“Yes,” Bryn said.

“I am glad.”

He did not know how to respond without sounding foolish.

“I want you to come with us. You need to see what we’re doing.”

“Where would we go?”

“To ambush a grain wagon.”

“Will it be dangerous?” Bryn cared little about the answer. The confinement had worn on all of them, not just the prince.

“Yes, but not for you.”

Ippoleus would be safe, he told himself. Even if the worst happened, what could he do? “Very well. I’ll go.”

“Excellent.” Varra raised her voice. “Cousins? We have business.” The sudden intensity of their attention leaned their bodies closer. “Inogen, Calline, Lenos?”

The women went upstairs. Lenos did not rise. “I’ll come, too.”

“You will not,” Varra said. Her tone suggested the gratuitous observation of an unremarkable fact.

Bitterness crumpled his face. “Why am I being punished?”

“Because just one week ago you exposed our prize for no reason.”

“And he goes? It was his idea, and he’s talentless!”

Varra folded her arms. “There are other kinds of talent.”

“And only one that matters.”

“You told me you would serve our cause, Lenos.”

“I did — so why won’t you let me? I’ll go mad if I have to spend

another night with the idiot.”

“It is an essential task.”

“You’re lying. If it was, you’d have a better talent than me doing it.”

Hektor clapped his shoulder. “Not necessarily, lad. Maybe the better talents refused to play wet nurse.”

“Enough,” Varra snapped. “A week ago you did not protect the prince. Tonight you will. That is the extent and duration of your punishment. We will discuss your other grievances at the next meeting.”

Lenos leaped from his seat and jogged upstairs.

“The costs of filling a rebellion with boys,” Barabo said. The cousins laughed.

“Better him than these fathers too terrified to act for fear of their families.” She drank the rest of the cider. “We should hurry. And bring the saws.”

Bryn’s horse had lost some weight in the stable, but was anxious as he to run. When Varra spurred her horse, his needed no urging; they rushed down the paths and back ways of the country, a cold wind in their faces. And when Varra led them from the paths and into the forest, Bryn followed joyously; clearing a rill with a sure leap, wending through the trees and dodging pitfalls, he drew notice.

“Where did this one learn to ride?” Barabo called to Varra.

Bryn answered for himself. “The king’s stables,” he said.

Barabo drew abreast of Bryn and squinted at him. Then he crowed. “That’s it! You were there. But why is he here, Varra? Don’t you know this is one of the king’s?”

“I do,” she called over her shoulder. “And his reasons for being here are not your concern.”

“I suppose there is a bounty of reasons to loathe that king, sure enough. Tell me something, my lord: how did our handiwork look up close?”

“You failed, remember?”

“There are degrees. We got the old man, didn’t we? And that blood-

guard — tell me, did he ever recover?” He chuckled. “I wonder if the king still has nightmares about my knife.” Barabo drew it without seeming to. His hand was at his belt, and then a knife was in his hand. It was short, hooked, and black: the claw of a griffin. He flicked it up and caught it by the point. Another toss and catch, then his hand swept to his waist and came back empty. “I don’t imagine I’ll miss again.”

“Enough goading,” Quintus said. “The boy might put a blade into your ribs.”

“Maybe he thinks he could. Well, Bryn? You could avenge your king’s scratched neck right here. Do you think you’d like to try?”

“No,” Bryn said.

“A good rider and clever, too. Varra, my lady! I’m bored with grain. When will you give us something more challenging?”

“The grain is what matters. If we can’t even offer bread, how can we expect the people to fight for us?”

“Damn the gifts, our work is the duty of every free man and woman. Besides, we’ll never starve the royals out. We need to beat them.”

“The Citadel, again?”

“Yes, again! The Citadel is not so well-protected as they think.”

Hektor spoke up. “It would be glorious. Surprising the legion in their beds? Tearing down the tower? We do that, and the peasants will know things have changed, that it’s safe to throw in with us.”

“Our goal is the Wall. Nothing else matters.”

“Marius is the king’s creature,” Barabo said. “Without him, the king has nothing, just a few frightened nobles who have never lifted a sword.”

“We can win this war without ever fighting the Citadel.”

“Marius needs dealing with, Varra. We can’t be afraid of him.”

Varra turned in the saddle. “I am not.”

“Sure enough,” Hektor said. “Forgive him.”

“You know I meant nothing by it,” Barabo added. “It’s just we can’t keep nibbling. We need something decisive.”

“I agree. When the time is right.”

“When will that be?”

“We will know.”

"If the Wall is all that matters, let's kill the prince and be done with it." Bryn tensed as Barabo continued. "There's no profit in waiting, and the mortar will weaken with his blood spilled."

"Even once it is weakened, we will need a Tibryn to open it. He is the most talented."

"Which means his death will sap it most."

"And which of the Tibryns will open it for you?"

"Any of them. Artum, the queen, the princesses."

"Have you got one of them bound up in a cellar that I don't know about?"

"They can take orders, at least. You've no guarantee the prince will do what you need him to do."

"But I can guarantee that none of them is talented enough to open the Wall."

"What about all of them together?"

"Now we are capturing a half dozen royals and coercing them into betraying Deivo's command?"

"I find that anybody will do anything to keep a knife away from their neck. But you're right, capturing is foolish. We should wipe out the whole line, and see what happens. I wager no Tibryns, no Wall."

"Maybe it does fall without them. Maybe it does not. It's certain that no one without the blood of Deivo can open the Wall. If we kill them, and the Wall still stands, what then?"

"This kingdom would not be so bad without a king in it."

"Have you heard of the law of least blood, Barabo?"

"I counsel action and receive lectures. No," he sighed, "I have not."

"I know it," Bryn said. It was the central tenet of the Citadel's manual of warfare. Bryn had read it as a boy, at the age when violence was still abstract and glorious.

"Go on," Varra said.

"I don't remember the phrasing, but the idea is simple. If you draw the least amount of blood that will secure a victory, then you will lose the least amount of blood while doing it."

"You have it right," Varra said. "He knows riding and strategy, you

see. If the prince can be our key once the king is dead, then that will cost us the least blood. And if not, then we'll kill as many more of the royals as we need to."

Barabo grumbled but did not object further. Bryn was uneasy.

The hiss of white water built to a dull roar when they reached the precipice of the gorge. Far below, the river gushed and seethed in its cramped channel. Walls of jagged black stone, bearded with moss, rose from the white water, and were linked by a sturdy bridge wide enough to permit a wagon; its oaken boards were riveted together with black spikes.

Varra dismounted. "Let's begin," she said. "Bryn? Tie the horses up, out of sight. I want no one to see them from the road, but I want to be able to leave quickly, yes?"

He led the horses to a stand of pines some distance from the road and hitched them to the trees. While he did his work, the cousins unlimbered the same tools they had used to rebuild the mill and set about delicately sapping the bridge. With their talent they moved like spiders across its underbelly, sawing, hammering, and cutting from within improvised rope harnesses. The cousins chattered with Varra about the mathematics at play in this undermining, but also joked obscurely, unbothered that they dangled hundreds of feet over stone-choked waters.

With his task finished, Bryn sat at the precipice eating cured ham and the coarse bread Calline baked. He watched the crumbs fall between his dangling feet. While he ate, Varra sat beside him and peered over the brink.

"It all begins up here," Varra said. She gestured to the water below. "A few miles downstream and that is the Siedon. Doesn't look capable of it, but there are other streams that join it. The river demands its tribute, just like the crown. The children, the wealth, the food: it all trickles down to the palace, and we think this is how it must be. The channels are deep, the river has run and will run this way forever. It is not true, of course. One day these hills will wear down, and the water will flow some other place. Or we'll build dams. We'll stop the water at every little source, and the

great Siedon will dry up.”

He wanted to ask her if she could have chosen a task more impossible than stopping water from rolling downhill — but he heard something.

“Someone’s coming,” he said.

Varra listened briefly, and scrambled to her feet.

“It’s too early for the wagon. Hektor! Someone’s coming! Is it passable?”

“It’s held up by no more than a twig past the half.”

“But can you hold it together?”

His pale, mud-streaked face poked out from the bridge’s struts. “If it’s a fairly light child, maybe. Otherwise, I’m climbing out.”

“Stay there, all of you. You hold the bridge together.” Her eyes narrowed. “There’s a talent with them. A strong one, he’ll sniff the cousins. I’ll need to conceal us. Bryn, you have to try and turn them about.”

“And what am I supposed to say?” Bryn asked.

“Do what they do at the palace: talk.” Varra swung over the edge and crouched out of sight on a shelf of rock.

Bryn looked to Hektor: his eyebrows lifted and he pulled himself back under the bridge. The clapping hooves approached steadily. Bryn cast about for something to help, some tool he could use, but there was only a crust of bread and a little pork. Bryn interlaced his fingers at his waist and inhaled deeply, as the king did before addressing the people. The air was cool, and carried the reassuring scent of wet rock. He turned to meet the travelers.

It was a patrol of three headed by a second-rank. They came into sight on massive legion chargers, horses selected for their strength just like their masters. Even at a plod, their hooves, big as serving plates, thudded impressively. Their legs were thick and sinewy, and their bellies bulged with hard muscle. Bryn would reach only their shoulders.

He stepped into the road and waved his arms. “Good day!”

The patrol reined up before him. The great horses flared their nostrils and sniffed at him explosively. The leader, clad in the elaborately detailed breastplate of her rank, looked down on Bryn.

“Clear the road.”

“I will, my lady, I will. Only I have something to tell you.”

The second-rank became suspicious. Bryn had forgotten to wipe the palace from his accent. She glanced about, then examined Bryn’s face more closely. Second-ranks were not strangers to the palace. It was possible this one had seen him before. “What is it?” she said.

“The bridge. I wouldn’t trust it. I just now came over and it was wobbling like an old mule, my lady. You should go another way.”

The talent sneered. “‘Another way’ is an hour’s ride out of ours. And that bridge was built by the king’s finest engineers. Clear the road.”

“I beg of you, one at a time at the least! I’m a loyal man to the crown, I couldn’t bear to see good soldiers wasted because I couldn’t convince them.”

“Loyal.” The second-rank shook her head. “I’ve been in these uplands long enough to know just how far your people’s loyalty goes. Clear the road, peasant.”

Bryn did, bowing choppily. She motioned to the other two and proceeded onto the bridge alone. The planks thumped and creaked. The horse’s head bobbed up and down. Halfway across, the horse froze, and its rider twisted her head. She frowned, as though she had forgotten something. Bryn saw tremors in the horse’s flanks as it stabilized on wood that seemed to shiver in the wind. A creak stretched itself over the bass background of the river.

The second-rank spurred the horse, and it passed on. The next two followed and the bridge held steady. The riders disappeared into the trees.

The cousins emerged from under the bridge, drenched with sweat. They shuffled and flopped exhausted onto the ground. Leaned against tree trunks, they swiped at their faces.

Hektor said to Malo, “That horse was almost as big as you.”

“Get ready,” Varra said. “Those must have been outriders. The rest will be coming.”

“They better be,” Barabo said. “That nearly killed me.”

They hid themselves under blankets of leaves, just off the road. First came six soldiers on horseback, and another ten on foot. Trundling behind them was the wagon, with another four men roosting on its sides.

Six swordsmen composed the rearguard. Barabo counted gleefully under his breath.

“Isn’t that too many for five?” Bryn hissed.

“What do you mean, five?” Hektor said. “You aren’t coming?” He smirked at Bryn’s horror. “Don’t worry — the talents are up front. And all you have to do is lie on your belly.”

Varra whispered to Barabo, “You know how it’s going to fall, yes?”

“Roughly.”

“Make sure the grain doesn’t go with the rest.”

The vanguard passed, their mundane gestures turning tragic. They were distracted, bored by the travelling. One yawned into his fist; another winced as he ran a sore shoulder through its range of motion. One laughed politely at another’s joke. Their horses were nearly on the bridge. Below, the river waited. The riders pierced an invisible membrane and passed into a zone of ultimates: last images, last words, last thoughts. It would happen, now, without their suspecting. They had surely envisioned other deaths for themselves. Not a crack, a lurch, the scream of a horse, and a strange wind blowing up from below. Bryn almost called out.

The lead horse’s hoof struck the bridge. The other guards, riding two and three abreast, clunked on shortly after it. The hoofbeats rang out on the crisp air like a discordance of hammers. Squealing, the wagon rolled onto the bridge. Bryn felt Varra’s body tense beside him. The riders were halfway across the bridge.

It did not happen at once. Something minor gave way, and the horses stumbled. Bryn saw one of the riders turning in his saddle, perhaps to shout back a warning.

“Now,” Barabo said, and at his word the bridge collapsed.

The riders were taken in an instant, tumbling in a shower of splintered wood. Half the footman went too, one concluding a step on a sudden nothingness, and thrashing his arms as he fell. The wagon team reared and scrambled back on stiff legs, nearly carried over by the wagon’s momentum. Varra and the cousins broke from cover.

Bryn had never seen the talented in combat with the common. In contrast to the extravagant and lethargic motions of the soldiers, theirs was

a swift and brutal choreography. Each encounter ended in seconds. Malo bulled into a crowd, toppling two over the brink. Varra hacked men down with formalistic techniques. Quintus fought beautifully, threading multiple soldiers into fluid sequences, his sword trailing ribbons of blood. Barabo was a stabbing, pouncing efficiency, committing alley murder in daylight.

The battle was decided quickly, leaving the crown's three survivors to attempt to save their own lives. Trapped between the cousins and the brink, they flung down their swords like the hilts were branding hot.

When they yielded, Barabo laughed at them and stepped forward. But Varra caught his knife arm. He looked down at her restraining fingers around his elbow, then searched, uncomprehendingly, her blank face.

Bryn was too far away to hear what Varra said. He rose from his hiding place and came forward, close enough to hear Barabo's angry reply.

"You think you'd get the same treatment, other way around? Think what they'd do to you. All our daughters and sisters—"

"They yielded. You can't kill everyone," Varra said.

Barabo pulled his arm away. "No. But we'll kill these. 'Blood from here on,' you said."

Varra calculated, and then raised her hands. "Give them a chance, at least." She turned her back and began looting the corpses, gathering the discarded weapons and tossing them into the wagon. Bryn helped her, but kept one eye on the cousins.

Barabo nodded and spoke to the soldiers. "The lady said to give you a chance. Lucky for you."

The cousins conferred by look among themselves, smiling slightly.

Quintus offered his idea: "Here is your chance. You either try one of us, or the river." The others liked that.

"Yes," Barabo grinned. "That is fair."

"Please, mercy," one of the soldiers said.

"We'll join you," another said. "We'll tell you anything you want to know."

The third soldier said nothing. Older than the rest, he had a thick neck and a deeply lined brow.

"No talking," Barabo said. "You either fight out or jump out."

The first two soldiers pleaded with pitiful grimaces. The third soldier said, "I'll fight."

Barabo clapped his hands. "Courage! Which one of us do you prefer?"

"You," the soldier said.

Barabo bowed. "I am honored. But I warn you: you have made a mistake."

The soldier shrugged. "You're small and you talk. Rarely indicates skill at arms."

"Pick up the sword, then, and we'll see if you are right."

The soldier came forward and bent to pick up the sword. As soon as his hand touched the hilt, Barabo rushed him. The soldier lifted and swiped in one movement, warding him off. Barabo paused, let the blade whistle past his face, and lunged under the soldier's guard. The soldier cut again, off-balance. With his free hand Barabo grabbed the soldier's wrist and checked the cut; with his knife hand Barabo put his blade through the soldier's eye. He yanked it free with a squelch.

One of the soldier's eyes stared, white, and the other made a bloody wink. The soldier said, "Cooking place back a-a-ankle," and fell. He continued gibbering until Barabo knelt and stabbed somewhere else. Bryn did not see where — he had turned his head. When he looked back, the soldier was dead, and Barabo said to his cousins, "He should have picked Hektor." Still kneeling, he looked at the remaining two soldiers. "Have you decided?"

The men swore, turned, and jumped. Hektor, Malo, and Quintus rushed to the edge and looked over. They pointed and chattered excitedly. "There he is! Is he moving?"

"Did they make it?" Barabo asked. He wiped his dagger clean on the dead soldier's jacket. After a moment Quintus looked back and shook his head, disappointed.

"This could have been kinder, my lady," Barabo called to Varra. "Death is more tolerable when you don't have to select it."

Varra, jaw set, commanded the cousins to back the wagon off the bridge. They sheathed their weapons and swaggered around the wagon, choosing handholds. Once they had decided, Barabo barked a three count,

and they pulled. The muscles jumped into relief on Malo's massive back and shoulders. The wagon's horses, alarmed by the brink before them, were relieved to be pulled away, and they walked backwards. Once the cousins had pulled far enough, Barabo pointed at Bryn. "Get these horses turned around," he said.

Shaken, Bryn complied. He patted the horses' foreheads as he coaxed them. Their glassy black eyes gazed with some concern at the ground. They were careful not to step on the bodies, which the cousins dragged clear of the wheels.

Once the wagon had been righted, Varra climbed on and grabbed the reins. "Quickly, now," she said.

The village was pitiful. The buildings sprouted on a flat stretch of land like grubby mushrooms. The children outside shuffled about, tentative and silent. At the appearance of the wagon two of them made a furtive escape, pushing their distended bellies before them. A raw-boned woman standing in a window frowned at the wagon until she marked its new passengers. She smiled wanly and turned to speak to someone else inside.

The villagers came to recollect their crops, and accept the weapons. Bryn helped the cousins unload. "Hide this well," Hektor would admonish. The villagers nodded and wandered off, their thin shoulders sagging with the weight.

"What happened to these people?" Bryn asked.

"King does not know when to stop milking a cow," Quintus said.

After abandoning the wagon, the cousins trotted back to the wildwood, and Varra led Bryn to the mill. She took him along the back ways, on trails used by goats and thieves. In the strong moonlight the horses moved easily, and in that bitter cold the stars wheeled. Caution took time: whenever Varra sensed some threat, even if Bryn heard nothing, she led them off the road. He spent much of the night hunched beside her, waiting for the signal to breathe. At last they reached a crossroads outside Lanum, and Bryn knew the way on. They stopped their horses.

“And now you’ve seen what this is,” Varra said.

“Bloody. The cousins are beasts.”

“Their elders died when they were boys. They raised themselves... you see what can happen.”

“I’m not useful in that way.”

“I need soldiers, true. But I also need men who will feed the people. There’s a way you can help us, Bryn. We’re meeting in three days under Gevio’s Field. You’ll come?”

His mind boiled with the day and its excitements. He told himself he was horrified, but that had burned away, along with the scrim of banality over the world, leaving only the magnitude of events and the cold raw stars, glowing. “I will.”

“Good.”

She headed her horse down one road, and Bryn took the other at a walk. His bed would be warm. Ippoleus would already be asleep. Perhaps Calline would be awake and he could drink a cup of something with her. He stabled his horse and patted her neck. She bowed into the trough with a snort.

Bryn knocked at the door and softly announced himself. Footsteps clunked nearer, and the door swung open. Lenos stood there with a spoiled smile. “How was it?”

“Ask someone else,” Bryn said.

“Of course.” There was a disturbing eagerness in his tone.

“Ippoleus is asleep?”

“I don’t think, no. He’s upstairs.”

Bryn undid his coat and laid it on the chair. Lenos followed him closely up the stairs.

The door creaked open. The lantern had been turned low. Faint shadows shivered on the walls. Ippoleus lay on the bed, facing the wall. Bryn could hear his breathing — snuffling, obstructed — from across the room. He crossed to the bed and stooped down to touch Ippoleus’s shoulder. Ippoleus flinched and huddled closer to the wall. His back trembled.

“Prince, it’s me.”

At the sound of his voice, Ippoleus turned his face to him. His left eye

was black and swollen shut. Mucus had crusted in the unshaved hairs of his upper lip. His good right eye rolled and blinked. Bryn was suddenly aware of Lenos standing behind him. He listened carefully for any movement. Finally he asked, "What happened?"

Lenos did not speak. Then: "He fell on the stairs."

Bryn's jaw clenched. He had seen men die today — he knew how easily it could happen. Taking a cloth from the nearby table, he wetted it and gently cleaned Ippoleus's face. "I suppose we'll have to be more careful with him in the future."

"Yes, I suppose so," Lenos said. There was deep satisfaction in his voice. "Good night, Bryn. Good night, prince."

Lenos left, and Bryn settled in beside Ippoleus. He was no longer tired.

THE SNARE

THE NEXT DAY BRYN QUESTIONED CALLINE ABOUT THE PRINCE'S EYE. She echoed Lenos, but added she had not been in the mill at the time. He offered her gold to never leave the prince alone with Lenos. She agreed, but spurned the gold. "As long as I'm here, he won't touch him."

The swelling in Ippoleus's eye abated over the next three days. By the afternoon of the meeting, he had stopped prodding at it and was in good spirits, which were only improved by Lenos's excitement. Lenos had been invited to the meeting. Using a coin, he performed sleight of hand for the delighted prince, while Bryn watched him carefully.

When Inogen returned to assist Calline, Lenos bounded up. He flipped the coin into the prince's lap, tousled his hair, and preceded Bryn out to the stable, where he mounted a scraggly horse. When they paced out to the road, he inclined his head towards Bryn. "Good to stretch the legs, isn't it?"

"You will not speak to me," Bryn said. He tried to deaden his voice, as the king did when suppressing a fury he wanted felt.

"Oh? And why not?"

"Because if you do, you might get lost on the road somewhere between here and the field."

Lenos doubled over his saddle horn, laughing. There were still tears in his eyes when he spurred his horse. Bryn fell a bowshot behind, and as he rode, he aimed an imagined arrow at the place between Lenos's shoulder blades.

The chamber beneath Gevio's Field was noisy and crowded. Varra and Tomos stood at its center, amid a knot of rebels. Lenos shouldered his way to the circle's inner rank. "My lady," he said, bobbing his head. Varra was in conversation with another man. She concluded her remark and smiled before turning to greet Lenos neutrally.

"My lady," he repeated.

"Bryn is with you?"

Bryn raised his hand from behind three rows of rebels.

"Come forward, Bryn."

The tight-packed cluster parted for him, and Bryn stepped beside Lenos.

"I'm glad you've come," Varra said.

"Yes, it was not a hard ride," Lenos said. "My lady, the last time we met, you spoke about reconsidering my duties."

Exhaustion flitted over her face. "Yes," she said. "I would speak to Lenos privately," she told those surrounding her. Once they had moved to the far side of the chamber, further crowding each other to give her privacy, she told Lenos: "Convince me."

Lenos began haltingly. "As I said, I feel like my abilities are not being best used. I can help the rebellion, but not as I am now. Add to that the fact I've been watching that blithering prince for months without relief."

"Your abilities. Which are those?"

"Not nest watching," Lenos said. "I know these woods, I'm quick and clever and more talented than most."

"And you propose?"

"That you let me fight."

"Is that all?"

"May I speak?" Bryn said. Varra nodded, while Lenos scowled. "I

agree with Lenos. You should remove the prince from his charge.”

“Tell me why.”

“He’s not capable of protecting him. The prince is important to the effort — you’ve said as much — and should anyone come knocking at the door, he will not be fit to defend him.”

“I can protect the idiot,” Lenos interrupted. “I only shouldn’t have to.”

“Send him away, Varra. I’ll tend to the prince, just give me some real talents to do so.”

“Bryn, you have no gift. How can you speak about talent? You underestimate Lenos. But you,” she turned to Lenos, “overestimate your abilities. I gave you the prince to teach you patience and restraint. You’ve taken both lessons for punishment — I don’t believe you have the wisdom to help as you wish to.”

Lenos’s eyes bulged.

Varra continued. “I appreciate your concern, Bryn, but your prince’s best defense is camouflage. Bigger teeth don’t protect a mouse from an owl. If the king discovers Ippoleus’s location, all of us together won’t be able to fight off the talent he’ll send.”

“My lady, please reconsider,” Lenos said.

“I have. Enough.” She nodded at the rebels waiting across the chamber, and they surrounded her again.

Lenos began to say something more, but Varra looked elsewhere. “Suetus!” she called. “Come here.”

A tired man with raw eyes stepped forward. The bristles on his cheeks grew in random directions. Varra took his forearm in both her hands and squeezed. “The baby?”

“She’s come,” he said.

Varra did not smile yet. “And Osca?”

“She’s well.”

“Ah!” Varra laughed and shook his hand; the other rebels slapped him on the shoulders and back. “That’s wonderful. Any talent?”

“Just as you predicted. A prodigy. I’ve never seen anything like her.”

Tomos, smiling broadly, tapped Suetus in the ribs. “Every father says that.”

Suetus's smile made his eyes look even more tired. "I'm sorry to say the king will share my opinion. You'll come and see her? We're going to the wildwood. Too risky in a village."

"I understand," Varra said. "We'll celebrate your little girl. Three nights from now, what do you say? We will bring the wine."

"That would be good," Suetus said. "Osca has wanted to see you."

"And I'm sorry I haven't seen her. We've been busy."

"Varra!" Barabo came scrambling through the tunnel. "I have news."

Varra smiled ruefully. "You see?" she said to Suetus. "What is it, Barabo?"

"The king is having the harvest festival, as usual."

Her smile faded. "With what harvest? We've waylaid nearly every shipment bound for the city."

He shrugged. "What does it matter? He'll be exposed before the crowds. We have our chance. The king will be dead in a week."

A murmur of excitement passed through the assembled rebels. Varra folded her arms. "No," she said.

Barabo squinted and said, "What does that mean?"

"It's not the time. Besides that, it's a trap."

"A snare I can see does not frighten me. He will not come out from behind his walls for a long time, I guarantee it."

"This festival is a truce day, and we must honor it. If we try and fail to cut his throat while he is feeding the poor and granting boons? We will lose the respect of the peasants we're hoping to enlist."

"If we fail. If we do not, he is dead!"

"He expects you, do you understand? He is not vulnerable. This would be a sound attack if it were the first. But it is not. It is the second, because you botched the first."

"That was a perfect opportunity, and we would have had him if you'd been there."

"It was premature — we still could have negotiated. I told you to wait, and you told me we wouldn't get another chance like this. And now here we are, with another chance like this, and you telling me we will not get another chance like this."

“The kidnapping was foolish. You were in the chicken coop and you grabbed an egg instead of the bird.”

“We had good cause. The king might have accepted our terms.”

“Then it was foolish because it did not work.”

“It could have prevented this war,” Varra thundered, “saved us these dead, and you want to walk into the city and lay more of ours on the pile? Our victory is diminished with every one of our people who does not live to see it.”

“Then you must have another plan, a better one than mine. Or do you only know what you’re not willing to do?”

“I forbid you and your cousins from entering the city. I won’t lose you to your own recklessness. That goes for every man and woman in this rebellion,” she added, raising her voice. “Tell the others this.” Most of the rebels nodded quickly.

Barabo sucked his teeth. “Forbidden? Sure enough, then. But remember that there are other ways to lose a soldier.”

When Barabo left, and the remainder began loudly reenacting the argument, Tomos said to Varra, “He’ll be a problem.”

“Seems so,” Varra replied. “Not yet, though.” She looked over her followers. Most argued as she did, but not all. “Will you make sure they understand the city is proscribed?”

Tomos nodded, and stepped away.

Varra turned to Bryn. Lenos was nearby, so she whispered. “Looks like two feasts for you and I. Are you ready to go home?”

DANCING

IN MINUTES, IT WOULD BE NIGHT. Wood smoke and roast pig scented the air of the village, this more prosperous than the last Bryn had set foot in. Healthy children hunted each other through the shifting forest of legs. A little girl stepped on Bryn's toes as she dodged away from her yelping pursuer.

They moved into the thick of the crowd. Bryn had not wanted to come, but Varra had coaxed him. "The cellar has driven all three of you mad," she had said. While Bryn hesitated, Lenos instantly agreed. Tomos had volunteered to mind the prince, declaring herself unsuited for revelry. Then Calline had announced she would go. Now he had a skin of wine and Calline walking beside him.

"You're in luck," she said. "You'll get to see every peasant ceremony all at once. New baby, a warding, and an absconding."

He swished wine in his cheeks, then swallowed. "And the baby will be Varra's ward?"

"Oh, no. She's just here to give her blessing. You wouldn't choose a guardian so like to die."

"You think she'll die?"

"I don't know." Calline looked over the crowd. The lutist twanged a

string and bent his head towards his instrument to hear the shape of the note. The drummer smoothed his hands over the drumhead. The boy who held the tambourine shivered it against his thigh, and stared at the girls, who stared back. The elders pestered their grandchildren and the mothers and fathers spoke in circles. Varra stood at the center of a large group, near the bonfire. They spoke with her, sometimes reached reflexively for her arms. The children leaned against their parents' legs and stared up at her. "We love her, but weather will be, you understand."

"I do not," Bryn said. "But if I can fill this," waggling the nearly empty wineskin, "I'll agree to anything you say." He pointed to the couple. "He said they were going to take her into the woods. She's a prodigy."

"Yes," Calline said.

"It's exile, then."

"Something like it. Must that be sad? They'll be together."

The musicians began to play, and the peasants began to dance. Bryn watched them whirling in rings, laughing faces and spread arms, linking and spinning within one another, wine blurry. "I suppose not," he said, and dropped the skin. "Now how do I join?"

"You follow me," she said. "And don't step on anyone's feet."

When a gap broke between shoulders they darted in together. At the hub of a wheel, with nothing static around him, Bryn set about learning the peasant's dance. At the palace they spun about with rigid torsos, as though they had broomsticks for spines. In the country, they danced like they wanted to break earth, like they were threshing or scything but had forgotten the implements. The musicians played songs familiar to everyone but Bryn, and his self-consciousness goaded him to dance better, as it had during the dancing lessons, when the noble girls — focused on the young men with prospects clearer than his — laid their hands in his like dead things.

They danced a long time. The songs changed. Bryn sweated. A wineskin moved from dancer to dancer like an indecisive maiden, and was greeted at each turn as eagerly. Bryn gulped and passed the skin along.

"You dance well," Calline criticized, and Bryn smiled at her.

"Does a man have to be clumsy? Should I have spent more time

hunting boar?”

“I said you dance well,” Calline clarified, when the music pulled them close. “But you’re still clumsy.”

Bryn wanted to kiss her or trip her, and felt the confusion only proved her right. Tetny had taught him that a parry should always be less forceful than the attack, so he laughed and turned away when the music allowed. She partnered with a tall young man; Bryn extricated himself from the dancing.

He found Varra sitting on an overturned cask beyond the edge of the bonfire’s light, almost at the edge of the torchlight, temporarily unmobbed by her admirers. He approached her as straightly as he could, and tried not to wobble as he lowered himself to the ground and put his back against the barrel. She said nothing, and so he listened to the music for some time.

“Do you dance?” he asked.

“No, and make no offers.”

“But I could teach you. I had good teachers.”

Varra laughed. “A dancing class?”

“Yes.”

“And at the palace, do they tutor you in walking, or laughing?”

“Spoken like someone who has never danced. I would spring to my feet, but—”

“You don’t look in much condition.”

“I understand the drinking, and the spinning, but not together,” he said. He lay his head against the barrel’s curve, and it felt good to relieve his neck.

“Tell me Bryn: what do you think of us? Now that you’ve come out of your palace and seen how we truly are?”

“Is that why I am here? Getting the king drunk won’t solve your problems, Varra. He does not oppose you out of malice. Only to keep the world as it is.”

“I hear that they have rid themselves of kings, outside.”

“I have heard the same. But that just means the powerful wear something other than crowns. The poor still wear rags.”

“You do not inspire me.”

"That is not my task. We powerless people leave that to kings and rebel generals."

"I am not a general."

"Not much for celebrations, either."

"When the Wall has fallen and the outside is before me: that is the day I will celebrate. And that day is coming. This is for those of us who do not see so far as I do."

Bryn put his head back and drifted his eyes across the vast constellations. "Now it is essential that you dance with me," he said.

Varra rebuffed him with a laugh. Suetus, emerging from the crowd, clapped his hands. "I have found you! Come, please. We need you a moment."

Varra dipped her head. She rubbed her knees, one clockwise, the other counter. "Try Calline," she advised, then hoisted herself up.

"That I have," Bryn mumbled, when Varra was two steps out of earshot.

The dancing was halted and the musicians gratefully lowered their instruments. They flapped their hands at their sides and tugged at their cramping fingers. In an empty cart bed Varra stood with Suetus, Osca, and their daughter. Suetus waited for total silence before initiating the ritual with some formal language, peppered with an older dialect spoken during the war of the dynasties. Bryn, at the margins of the crowd, on sore tiptoes, followed loosely until Suetus made his point clear.

"And so: will you give her your name?" Suetus asked Varra.

Varra looked at the child in her hands like an old friend, and regarded Suetus as though he were the new and strange being. "My name? Please, no."

Suetus's smile wavered. Varra handed the child back to its mother, and there were groans from the crowd. "I wasn't born Varra. That is the name they gave me. And I keep it only so that the crown knows me when I break it. So that there is no confusion. Do not give such a beautiful daughter a slave's name."

“Will you name her something else, then?” Suetus asked.

“No,” Varra said, “that is too great an honor.”

“Please, give her a name,” Osca said.

Varra refused once more. And when asked once more, by the couple and a few of the drunkest revelers, she held up her hands. “My own name is too poor... but what about Celia?”

A cheer went up. “Celia!” Varra spotted Bryn in the crowd, and smiled at his raised eyebrows.

Varra raised her hands for quiet. “Welcome to our kingdom, Celia. And let us hope that when you are older, you have no memory of war.”

Suetus and Osca smiled and nodded, and another cheer went up, this one loud enough that Osca cupped her hands over Celia’s small new ears. The dancing resumed.

THE HARVEST FESTIVAL

THRONGS CHOKED THE CITY'S INGRESSES. On a tongue of cobbles that led to the gullet of the Eastern Gate, Bryn stood in a shuffling mass of peasants, warmed by the vapors of their breathing. Varra stood beside him. She had made herself ugly: her face was now lopsided and pocked, the color leached from her hair. Twice since entering the crush he had turned to his side and thought himself alone, only to remember her disguise. She had kept her eyes green so that he might recognize her.

They shuffled forward when compelled by the pressure at their backs. With occasional glances, they silently commiserated on the confinement and delay. After a long time, they entered the shadow of the gate, then the gate itself. The crowd's hubbub multiplied and reverberated in the stone tunnel until it became an echoing babble, reassuring with its meaningless presence.

The kingdom's history had been folded to fit the archway, then carved in high relief. At the zenith was a huge sun, containing images of the Wall's creation: beautiful herders protected by the Wall from menacing spear-wielders; griffins swooping down from their mirror kingdom in the clouds; the giant Deivo clasping hands with a woman, representing the miscegenation which spawned the dynasty and the other great families.

The dynasty's generations were arrayed on the northern wall as in life — the living closest to the sun. Though the king's image was invisible from the cobblestones, Bryn had once been raised by ladder to see how a face could be ennobled by stone. Beneath the king's minutely observed feet — the sculptor had suggested toes straining the thin fabric of the slippers — were his ancestors, and at the arch's bottom were the massive faces of the gods, reduced by many rubbing hands to anonymity, featureless except for broad straight noses and deeply set eyes. Bryn had asked the king what would happen when the sculptors ran into the sun. The king had laughed, and told him that was a problem for another king and another sculptor.

On the wall opposite the figures were the triumphs of their reigns, and all the sovereigns had made sure no portion of their strip of wall went uncarved, even if this required the embellishment of minor acts. Commemorated alongside the sham triumphs were all of the kingdom's great deeds: the audacious sorties into the outside which had won them the secrets of the water wheel and printing press, the countless wars against the Plecus, and the many defenses of the crown from villainous usurpers. Varra stared at the carvings, disgusted.

Guards stationed throughout the passageway surveyed the crowd for weapons or the disloyal. One guard's lingering eyes alarmed Bryn, but he and Varra passed without incident. "He can't see you," she reassured him.

Beyond the gate, the congestion eased only slightly. He motioned to Varra and led her into the alleys, a snarled maze of disturbed perspectives created by competing definitions of plumb. They were filled with refuse and skulking cats, but not people — Bryn and Varra reached Deiton's Plaza quickly.

"When does a lordling like you learn the alleys?" Varra asked.

The sight of the royal square prevented Bryn's equivocation. His breath caught; all was how he remembered. Wreaths and chains of leaves festooned the statues of the kingdom's vanquished foes. The sculptors had twice humiliated these kings and pretenders by tainting their postures with their fates. Once proud figures slouched, knelt, or prostrated themselves before the approving eye of the kingdom. At the center of the square knelt Arathen, the dynasty's great nemesis, whose talent had made him invinci-

ble, until King Aelius's mythic ancestor had impaled him with the house's legendary blade. Hunched around that sword, Arathen had turned to stone there on the battlefield and been dragged back as a trophy. Later that day the actors would take the stage and depict the legend in a silent farce.

Most of the city's children knew Arathen only as the Apple King, for great heaps were set on his plinth during the festival. When the children finished the apples, they pelted him with the cores. Bryn recalled the king rearing back and hurling an apple from the dais at the far side of the square. It had sailed across a vivid blue sky, contour perfect, and splattered on Arathen's bowed head. The crowd had roared approval.

They cheered again as the king and his entourage mounted the dais. The bloodguard came first, bearing their oblong shields. The princesses flanked the king and queen. Edgar loitered on the steps, studying the crowd.

Varra gave Bryn his orders. "Find out just how much this festival is costing him. If he is emptying the granaries, this would be helpful to know. But do not question him too directly," she advised. "Better to come away with nothing than be discovered."

"Understood."

A fanfare quieted the crowd, and the king stepped forth. "Loyal subjects to the crown! I welcome you. We stand here today a united people, marking another successful harvest. You have labored hard hours in your fields, cultivating those crops that feed our kingdom. You have endured another cruel growing season, and still you have brought your goods to market.

"For your toil, I celebrate you. Some of you have given your precious children over to the care of the crown. For your sacrifice, I honor you. You have done these things, and one thing more. You have spurned the false promises and treacheries that have lately blighted our great kingdom. You have rejected the tainted ideologies and cracked visions of the power-hungry and pretenders. You have kept the griffin's promise close to your heart. For your fidelity, I feast you!"

The crowd cheered and applauded. Bryn had always been the king's first audience. A laboriously composed draft was followed by a first read-

ing, performed in a conversational tone. Flashing phrases that would the next day draw the crowd's thunder were first tried and capped with a musing, "How did that sound, Bryn?" When he was young, he had always approved, and when he was older he had begun to make suggestions, though never too many.

Now at the back of a mob, he was unimpressed. At this distance the king was nearly inaudible; the peasants cheered for their bread. "Get closer," Varra said. "I will meet you here when you are done."

"What will you do?"

"I have business in the city," she said. "Certain people to speak to." She left.

The king began a new topic, and Bryn began wending through the crowd, most of whom were talking and not listening. Bryn heard a sentence or two before shouldering past a new conversation. Taken together, these formed a demotic nothing like the royal speech. These people cared about different things and in different words. The king would never know this. Only ten steps separated the dais from the ground, but even if he could descend them, he would do so as king, and no one could forget this. So he would blather on while the peasants murmured and eyed the food which would soon be theirs. The royal bakers had filled carts with loaves long as a forearm and paler than peasant bread. Bryn's mouth watered.

"I am of the griffin's house," the king was saying, "and you are too. Remember this: our noble standard is crossed of two powerful animals. We are the same. My head might bear the crown, but I draw my strength from your great strength, and together, we are stronger!"

Nearer the dais, the crowd's backs formed an impassable palisade. Soon the king would retire from the platform, and the celebration would begin in earnest. Bryn needed to be seen. His eye fell on Arathen's slumped form. Bryn pushed his way to the statue and hauled himself onto the plinth. Every drunk boy had, under moonlight, tried to pull the sword free from Arathen's belly. Using the warrior's wrist for a foothold, Bryn climbed up, balanced atop the statue's shoulders, and waited. His arms were at his sides. His open hands faced out.

Edgar noticed him first. He whispered into the ear of a guard with a

crossbow, whose eyes then lifted and fixed on Bryn, who suddenly feared a bolt in his chest. The weapon remained at rest. The guard jogged to the edge of the dais and came down the steps. He forged through the viscous crowd, which parted reluctantly and reformed in his wake.

Then the king noticed Bryn, and his speech paused as he stared, his features shimmering with the temporary strangeness that came with the resumption of an interrupted intimacy. The guard reached the base of the statue.

“Bryn! Come with me.”

Before clambering down, Bryn looked once more at the dais. The king’s surprise had passed, and he smiled.

The guard led him through the crowd, past the dais, and to the royal carriage. At rest it seemed immovable, with its massive construction and solid gold ornamentation. A cordon of guards surrounded it, and admitted Bryn to approach. He ignored their whispers behind him and climbed the two steps to pull open the door. Its glossy black paint had begun to blister.

Inside, Bryn sat down and rubbed his thumbs over his kneecaps, believing that he was five years younger and nothing had yet happened. Plush velvet cushions further deadened the cabin’s silence. One of the princesses had left a long suede glove on the seat beside him. He marveled at the unforgiving design, which would fit only the slenderest hand with the most underdeveloped thumb. The waiting made him uneasy: he knew that the king’s smile could be ambiguous. He pulled his pocket watch to check the time and saw that it had stopped. Winding it did not move its hands. He held it to his ear and heard no ticking.

As he wondered when it had broken, the door opened and Edgar entered. He shut the door quickly and did not sit.

“I need a meeting,” he said.

“What?”

“With her.”

“Who?”

“Bryn, if you wish to pretend ignorance, only keep doing it a little longer so that the king will be here and I can explain to him how you’ve been assisting the rebels — at least when you’re not hiding in a mill with

the prince.”

“How did you—”

A flash of pique sharpened Edgar’s nondescript voice. “Why is anyone surprised that I am skilled at my duties? I need a meeting, and remember that I am the only reason that the king will be amused upon seeing you, not murderous.”

“I’m not sure she’ll trust it.”

“A neutral site, the two of you only. But I can’t say when. I’ll need to acquire some things, first. Every morning, check the meeting tree at Gevio’s. When you see the king’s sigil carved in the wood — you meet me at the grove that night. Tell her it will be worthwhile. Be convincing.” The spy bobbed his head and backed out of the carriage.

An exhaustion which had been accreting in Bryn over the course of weeks now announced itself. Sore in his joints and eyes, he laid his head back. The cushions were the softest things he had felt since leaving the palace. He could rest, for a moment...

The world rocked to the side, upsetting Bryn’s dozing. The king entered the carriage, then turned and waved back Tetny. “It is Bryn,” he explained.

Bryn rubbed his face sharply, unaware of how long he had been unconscious. The king sat across from him. His eyes moved in a practiced circuit, diagnosing him by signs others did not notice. “You’re tired,” the king said. “Too many straw mattresses?”

“Perhaps, sir.”

“And those clothes you’re in. How have you kept? I’ve heard nothing of you.”

“Well enough, thank you. Your generous parting gift has served me well in the country.”

“Nonsense, Bryn. You’re haggard. It’s no wonder you’ve come back.”

Bryn pressed the heel of his hand into his eye socket. “I’ve not come back. You made it clear I was not to come back. Do you not remember?”

“No bitterness — this is a joyful occasion.”

“I told you I have not come back.”

“Then why are you here?”

“To receive my gift of grain from the crown, like the other peasants. We are very hungry.”

“Don’t be willful. I was angry, but I am angry no longer. This is where you belong, and you’re welcome.”

Bryn’s exhaustion ossified into rage. He discarded Varra’s orders, and began to speak. “Am I so desperate? To tolerate your whims and thank you for the chance to do so? I do not want it — I am a free man.”

“I am still your king.”

“Are you trying to remind me of this? Or convince me?”

The king slumped in his seat. “I admit that I had forgotten your willfulness while you were gone. I do not understand this. You’ve returned to tell me you will not return? What is your purpose? To shame me? Why are you here, Bryn?”

Bryn had come for evidence of a weakness like this. But he shrugged. “I came to see if you would end the fighting.”

“It is out of my hands, now.”

“You could open the Wall.”

“Could I? I have been wondering something,” the king said. “Why should I receive blame or credit for the happenstance of my birth? I chose none of this. Should we not be judged by our deeds?”

The king’s musings and rhetorical questions were often intended to teach Bryn some lesson. Bryn kept silent, determined not to participate.

“But: every decision that a man makes is presented to him by fate. Then what sort of choice is that? And what if all these decisions that fate hands him no longer afford the opportunity for greatness? What does he do then?”

“I do not know, sir. It sounds like a philosopher’s knife, good for cutting yourself out of any dilemma.”

“Get out, Bryn. You have made your point. I am impressed by your independence. Perhaps you will come back, truly, when fate gives you a less appealing array of choices. And be careful: these rebels are dangerous only by accident, but still.”

Varra found him in the crowd. He walked past her, and only stopped to talk when they were safely in the alleys. He told her of Edgar's demand.

"And the king?"

Bryn shook his head. "Older than I have ever seen him. But I heard nothing of value."

"I have, as it turns out. Artum's returned from the pygmies' land. Ready to make war, it seems."

"What does that mean for you?"

"Nothing good. One more Tibryn to contend with."

On their way back to the Eastern Gate, they glimpsed the last moments of a murder. Framed within the alley's narrow walls were the stabbed man — legs trembling, hands flexing — and his killers, one fastidiously cleaning his blade, the other lifting his face to the light coming from the angular strip of sky. The man's savage exultance so transfixed Bryn that he nearly overlooked the king's uniform he wore. Varra grabbed his wrist and yanked him forward, out of sight of the king's men.

"That was one of ours," she said, and Bryn suggested they run.

During their flight from the city Bryn learned that the stabbed man's name had been Apunos, and at the next night's meeting another five were absent. Varra raged at the twenty present, including Tomos and the cousins.

"The fools," she spat.

"Those were good men," Hektor said.

"They were fools. And now they are dead or nearly dead in one of the king's cells."

"We don't know about the other five," Quintus said. "They might be drunk, or sleeping somewhere."

"I doubt it, brother," Barabo said. "They probably were in the plaza yesterday. And we should have been there with them. I could have been fitting the king's head for a spike right now."

"It was forbidden. That was made clear," Varra said.

"And you were wrong to forbid it. How many opportunities will you

throw away?"

"I said it was a trap and it was. We will be undone by this insubordination."

"We will be undone by inaction. We will be undone by cowardice. We will be undone by your 'patience.'"

"This is a war, not one of your pig hunts. It requires some strategy."

Barabo smacked his hands. "Isn't it? There's an old boar staggering about out there, his tusks broke. And you won't let us go and spear him."

"Enough," Varra said.

"No! Why do you lead us still? They had you too long, my lady. They taught you to fight and now you're afraid to beat them. Or maybe it simply is not in your womanly nature."

A stillness came over Varra. "Do not speak of my nature, Barabo. I lead because I am strongest, and if you doubt me stop fondling that little knife of yours and pull it. Let me teach you how to fight."

Agitation had Barabo's thumb caressing the pommel of his knife. An ugly scowl broadened his nostrils, and a flush blackened his pitted cheeks. His kinsmen stepped to his sides, hands hovering about their belts. "And will you teach all four of us?" Barabo asked.

Varra's answer to his challenge went unheard as the ceiling collapsed. Earth dropped towards their heads, quickly enough for Bryn to perceive the descending blackness and nothing else. He fell to his knees, arms around his neck, and when the weight did not fall on him he opened his eyes and saw Varra holding the ceiling on her shoulders. "Help her," Bryn shouted.

The rebels, on hands and knees, dirt pressing against their backs, called for each other.

"Gaius! Gaius! He's buried!"

"You must escape," Tomos said to Varra. Her voice shook with strain. "We'll go up — you run."

Varra grunted. She looked to the cousins. "Go kill something. Bryn, follow me."

Barabo smiled with grit teeth. "Ready?"

"Now," said Tomos. The roof exploded to reveal the night sky and

the Citadel troops, roaring battle cries as black clods of earth thumped down on their armored heads. The talented rebels leapt up to attack them, so easily and lightly it seemed they were falling.

Metal on metal, clangs and shrieks. Thin resonant blades rang weirdly; breastplates crumpled with explosive crunches. While the talented began the fight, the other rebels clambered out of the pit they were standing in. Using a thick root, Bryn hauled himself up the crumbling dirt. As he threw his knee over the pit's lip, a man jabbed a spear at his face. He jerked his head backwards, too far; the spear point stuck in the ground and Bryn was falling. He grabbed the root blindly and it held long enough for Bryn to see Varra appear behind the spearman and impale him. The root snapped and Bryn started another fall, but this time he was stopped by Varra's hard grip on his upper arm. Bryn could feel something give in his shoulder as she pulled him up to stand beside her. She pressed her bloody sword into his hands, and shouted, "we fight out."

A woman screamed nearby, and this made Varra pluck the spear from the dirt and charge off. He thought about following her, but saw empty trees to his right and ran for them. That escape was blocked when a three-person tangle collapsed in front of him. After a brief struggle on the ground, and the red gleams of metal sliding in and out, two men from the palace got to their feet and faced Bryn.

The man who attacked him did not use the particular cut that Tetny had taught Bryn to defend against. The cut that Bryn hoped for was launched from the shoulder, and travelled across the body and down. This man swung at him two-handed, aiming for his hip. Flat-footed, Bryn twisted at the waist and blocked. His angle was wrong: his attacker's sword screeched up the length of his blade, shedding sparks, and slammed into the cross-guard. Bryn's sword dropped from his hands. The second man was already rushing him.

Before the first of the king's men could swing again, Quintus had spitted him. He seemed more surprised by Quintus's face than he was by the sword nestled between his lungs. He grimaced as the blade was pulled from him, and then collapsed forward.

With a shove, Quintus redirected the corpse so that it shielded him

from the charging second man. As he stumbled over his comrade, Quintus hacked off his sword arm at the elbow. The soldier dropped to his knees as though his legs had been stumped too; Quintus drew his sword back for a finishing cut. But new attackers interrupted, and he pirouetted to face them, exasperated. At first he flounced through his unfair duel against the three soldiers, but when the fourth arrived he engaged fully. He danced among them, exploring the possibilities of asymmetry, conducting their aggression into ineffective channels. It was the fifth man that killed Quintus.

Bryn, battle-shocked, did not immediately notice the downed man pry his sword from his severed hand. When he did see, and screamed a warning, the sword had already stabbed the back of Quintus's thigh.

Quintus's body flexed like a bow, his pelvis jutting as he tried to bend away from the wound. That slowed his parry of a frontal attack, and as a flurry launched and landed, his blocks rang later. Finally one of the king's men cut at him, and with his sword engaged at his right side, Quintus blocked with his forearm. It sounded like a log being knocked apart. The next sword slid under his guard and into his belly. Two bashing attacks — defended perfectly, pointlessly — drove him backwards, and his weight went over his heels. Quintus fell. One of the king's men stepped forward and put a sword through his neck. He twisted it with one hand on the hilt, and the other palm flat upon the pommel.

As Quintus was dying, Bryn had managed to pick up a sword. He was saved from using it by Varra, who reappeared and dragged him away. A Citadel talent stepped out from behind a tree and swung an axe at Varra, who killed her with an elegant cut. Blood spatters formed a demented camouflage on Varra's gray jacket. Bryn kept these dark spots in sight as he ran after her. They needed mounts.

Whenever his elbow was above his shoulder he felt a knife wriggling in the joint. To experience this pain and to distract himself with it, Bryn kept lifting his arm as he explained to Calline and Lenos what had happened.

He and Varra had run through the woods and secured their horses,

both flighty from their scent of blood. Her plan for escape was an anxious one: instead of galloping away on the minor roads, they had walked through the dense woods. They saw no one, but Bryn expected to with every step, and in some ways this was worse. Occasionally they heard shouts, sounds of chase or death made thin and eerie by distance. When they had gotten clear of the woods, they had ridden fast for the mill, and looped around it before approaching from the north, to avoid any watchers. Varra had taken his horse, saying she might need two for what she planned next, and Bryn had tramped through the underbrush and knocked at the door in the agreed-upon way.

He finished his explanation and began testing the angles of his arm that felt tolerable. Lenos stood, came forward, and grabbed his elbow, then pinned it against his side. “But what about Inogen?” he asked.

“She was not at the meeting,” Bryn said.

Lenos nodded, and frowned. Inogen had said she would return at noon, and had not. Calline held her worry like a gut pain. At times, looking out the window, she would wince.

Bryn said to her, “Inogen is fine, I’m sure of it,” and Calline’s smile endured only for an instant before her thoughts returned to her sister. Pacing incessantly, Lenos sneered at him. “You aren’t sure of anything.” Bryn shrugged and went to check on the prince. He had comforted both of them as best he could.

It was terrible, waking to a knock at the door. Bryn lay in bed and was reminded that while he slept — cold, breathing, still — things were happening in the dark. Bryn did not move until Lenos answered the door. He thought of what he would have to do, but he was muzzy and could not think of anything. When he heard Inogen’s voice he dressed and went downstairs, to see Calline clinging to her battered sister while Lenos checked for wounds as best he could.

“Calline, would you? I didn’t escape all that to be strangled by my sister.” Her head, seemingly decapitated, winked at Bryn from atop Calline’s shoulder. Bryn rubbed his wool-lined eyelids and smiled back. With

Calline detached and Lenos placated — “I’m fine, truly. Can I have a drink?” — Inogen hobbled to the nearest chair and dropped into it.

“Have you had any trouble here?” she asked.

“None,” Calline said.

“Good — I was worried. The king got everything there was to get from the handful he captured. Seems like everywhere we were more than two, he found us.”

“What happened to you?” Bryn asked.

“Marius. Anyone says we should assault the Citadel is a fool. He is an animal. Do you remember Iulia? Took her by the head with both hands, and he put fire to her bones.”

“What does that mean?” Calline said. Lenos put a cup of cider into Inogen’s hand. Before drinking she smelled it, and its sharp scent confirmed her.

“I saw her skull glowing beneath her hair. This terrible orange glow... We all ran, every direction, and I heard Marius go laughing after someone else and I thought perhaps I’d live. I don’t know what we were thinking, to go to war against something like that.”

“We should leave,” Calline said. “This isn’t worth it — if something had happened to you...”

“How would we survive? Go farm in the snow, and hope the war just never comes to us?”

Calline knelt before her sister and took her hand. “We’re the only ones left. We can’t lose each other.”

Inogen combed Calline’s hair with her fingers, and tugged at her braid like she was testing a knot. “Little sister. When the war’s over we are going to find husbands and build a new house, and we’re going to fill that house with children, and they will never know what it is to have a king.”

“I don’t want a husband, or children. I want both of us to see the summer.”

“We will. Because we’ll be careful.”

Embarrassed, throat aching, Bryn looked at his hands. “I am going back to sleep,” he said.

Lenos stole Inogen’s cup and took a swallow. “Careful,” he muttered.

The next night there was another knock at the door. “Deiton,” someone said from the other side. Lenos pulled his sword and waved Inogen to the window. “Varra and Tomos,” she reported.

Lenos frowned. He put his head to the door. “Who is that?” he called.

“Varra and Tomos,” a voice answered.

“We gave the damn password,” another woman said, in a voice deeper than the first.

“Glamors,” Lenos whispered to Inogen. Raising his voice, he asked, “Password does not mean much, considering what’s happened. I need some other proof that you are you.”

“Would you be convinced if I kicked this door down and tore your head off? It’s cold, you fool.”

Bryn was satisfied this was Tomos, but Lenos hesitated until Varra spoke. “I was with you when you killed your first man,” she said. “Tavern dispute. You cursed the king, and an older man took offense. When you punched him in the head he never got up. I remember you tried to stand him up. You kept telling him that it was not funny, and then the soldiers came and we ran.”

Lenos opened the door. Varra and Tomos stood in the doorway. The women pushed their cowls down as they stepped into the mill.

“Clearly we will need a new password,” Varra said.

They had come to discuss strategy.

“Make sure everyone stays clear of Gevio’s for now,” Varra said to Tomos. “We will have to change the signals.”

“Are any of the meeting places safe?” Inogen asked.

“Besides this one, we have no idea,” Tomos said. “No way to tell which they know about, so we have to assume they know them all.”

“How many did we lose, exactly?” Calline asked.

“I do not know,” Varra said. “Many.”

“The cousins lived?” Calline asked.

“Bryn did not tell you?”

“I suppose we haven’t talked,” she said, looking at Bryn.

“Quintus died. The others survived,” Varra said, “but they’re in mourning.”

“Same as being dead, really,” Tomos said. “Nothing will pull them out of their woods until they’re done.”

“And when they are?” Bryn asked.

“I would not want to be nearby,” Tomos said.

“At the market I heard that Artum has returned,” Lenos said.

“And?” Varra said.

“Had you heard?”

“Speak your mind — you know I knew this already.”

“I was wondering if you’ll ally. I think he would help.”

“You base this on what?”

“They say he’s a potent talent. He was to be king, after all. He might even hate Aelius as much as you.”

“Plenty of chatter, at this market,” she said. “Bryn? Give us your assessment of Artum.”

“Stronger than everyone but the king and Marius.”

“There you have it,” Lenos said. “Are we in a position to turn away the third most powerful man in the kingdom?”

“Fourth,” Varra said.

“Fourth, yes, of course. My point is that we are losing, my lady. You won’t let me help, and I accept that. I can only do so much. But will you refuse all help? The glory will be yours. No one will forget what you’ve done.”

Varra replied as if Bryn had addressed her. “And what will his price be? Tell him, Bryn. Why would Artum ally himself with the rabble?”

“He needs numbers.”

“Fodder.”

“And he’ll want the crown for himself. You will be permitted to leave the kingdom, assuming he’s capable of opening the Door once the king is dead. If he is not, maybe he will let you establish a kingdom of your own, in the less choice territories.”

"This is why Artum will not join us," Varra said.

Lenos shook his head. "Use him, then kill him. Let him think whatever he likes, so long as he is on our side."

"A brilliant ploy," Tomos put in. "No Tibryn has ever even contemplated treachery."

"The king wins some victories now," Varra shrugged. "But we will survive. And we will win."

"Not everyone agrees, anymore."

"It sound like you spend too much time in the market. Or is this the tavern? You should concern yourself with your duties here."

Varra and Tomos continued to appear at the mill after sundown. Each time Bryn had the sense that they had suspended another conversation they had been having, one that was significant but occasionally amusing. Then Tomos stopped accompanying her, and Varra came alone. At first Bryn believed that Varra came to discuss strategy, test his loyalty, or extract from him some secrets of the palace. But as it grew later, and Bryn yawned, Varra would stop speaking of the rebellion and talk of other things. He realized that she came for conversation.

Her desire for the world outside belied her knowledge of it. She knew only as much as the villages did, and the folk wisdom was centuries out of date, forged during the reigns of Queen Stela and King Terkos, believers in an open door. Bryn was not an expert, but he knew of outsider wars she had never heard of, and had sampled the delicacies that Edgar imported. She asked him questions, many of them unusual. Bryn was attempting to explain the flavor of jenever when the prince shrieked in the next room. Varra stood by as Bryn soothed the thrashing prince. He hummed a lullaby he had composed years ago, and first used on himself.

"You love him," Varra said, once the prince had been eased back to sleep. As pronounced it was description, but Bryn sensed that she was asking yet another question. He did not know how to answer that, so he satisfied himself with nodding.

"I do," he said.

“Have you made any progress?” Varra asked. “With the Wall?”

“No. I have tried to practice with him, but he forgets he’s talented until he’s agitated.”

“So agitate him. See what he is capable of.”

“He is not violent. You saw what he did with my cut head. He has healer’s instincts.”

“I need a stonebreaker, not a healer. This kingdom is past saving.”

“Maybe for him, nothing is.”

“Bryn, I am not even convinced he knows his own name.”

“We should move him again. If they can find us at our meeting places, they can find us here.” Bryn had been worrying about this for some time.

Varra nodded. “I’ve thought about it. But keeping him here is a risk only if someone knows something. The men that were tortured weren’t privy to this place. Moving him — anywhere — is dangerous.”

“We did it before.”

“With certain knowledge we would soon be discovered.”

“It is a matter of time until someone finds us here.”

“That’s true anywhere.”

“If this was the best place to hide him, you would have hidden him here first.”

“Yes, I thought the woods were safer. And still Boral betrayed us.”

“Do you believe in Deivo, Bryn?”

When their talk veered from the pragmatic, Bryn relaxed. His tutors had habituated him to conundrums without proper answers, right or wrong, but Varra’s concerns could not be idly speculated at. Even her victories had their cost of bodies.

“I suppose I must. You don’t? It’s his blood that gives you your talent, if you believe the histories.”

“Yes, I suppose. And there’s the Wall.”

“And the Wall.”

“But what if it was something else that trapped us here, and made us as we are?”

“What would that be?”

“I don’t know. I cannot even imagine it. I’d like to have the choice to believe something else, though.”

When Varra left, Calline came downstairs. “What were you talking about?”

“She asked me if I believed in Deivo.”

Calline laughed, and said, “She must think you’re fascinating, to ask a question like that.”

“Why?”

“Because it only has tedious answers.”

TACTICS

“WE ARE LOSING,” TOMOS SAID.

The mill was full that night, and the prince calm. The fire snapped as the gathered rebels recovered from the surprise of Tomos’s speaking. Her habit was to listen more than talk, and when engaged in the latter she gave the task her full concentration. Because of this Bryn believed her wise, even though she could read only a little, and had learned only to indulge Varra.

“More join the cause every day,” Inogen said.

“And we arm them with pitchforks,” Tomos said. “What good is a soldier without a weapon?”

“The armory?” Varra asked.

“It was worth delaying for the gambit with the prince. But once the cousins squandered their ambush, it’s been open war.”

“The king must kill all of us, but we only have to kill him. So the only sensible strategy is assassination.”

“I do not deny it. But unless you’ll kill him tonight, we must be able to defend our own. The king’s soldiers are searching, even now.”

“Yes, of course.” Varra leaned back in her chair, stretching her legs and neck. “An armory, though — there are frogs and there are turtles.”

“We walked in the hallways of the palace, Var.”

Bryn had never heard this name used, and Tomos seemed relieved when Varra answered.

“Spiriting away an eighty pound man child is an easier thing than carting off a ton of steel. We cannot sneak through this. It will take a breach.”

“I will manage it,” Tomos said.

Varra smiled at her. “I know you will. Bryn, can you advise us? We need as many weapons and as little danger as possible.”

“What would he know about it?” Lenos asked.

He had sat at every council meeting since he had been old enough to do so silently. Even an adolescent boy did not have the stamina to be distracted for hours, and statecraft had appealed to him in recent years. He offered Varra the names and locations of the three garrisons with the largest stockpiles, speculated on their fortifications and manpower, then indicated his preference with some smugness.

Varra nodded and tapped Tomos’s knee with the back of her hand. “As I told you,” she said. Inogen offered what she knew of the surrounding terrain, and Varra speculated on tactics. By then it was very late, and Calline had gone to sleep. Lenos had watch over the prince that night, and a yelp from above had drawn him upstairs. Varra and Tomos shrugged on their coats. Tomos walked out of the door, and Varra turned back to speak with Bryn.

“We’ll meet to discuss this, soon. The others will accuse you of bringing the king down on us.”

“That’s ridiculous.”

“If you’re going to convince them, I’d suggest you prepare more than scoffing.”

“But it is ridiculous. You believe me, don’t you? If you even thought me capable, you never would have allowed me to speak with the king.”

Varra said nothing. Her hand was still on the door, and her nails tapped the wood. “Good night,” she said.

At the next meeting, Bryn was accused, as Varra predicted. It was Corl

who suggested it. “Two score of ours dead, and he’s still here.”

Only their eyes shifted towards him, but to Bryn it felt like the rebels had taken a large step closer. He fidgeted. Varra stood quietly at his side.

“I was in the fight, same as any of you,” he said. “A spear came this close to my face.”

“Easy to say. In that chaos, you could claim anything.”

“I was there. I saw it.” Varra spoke of him as though he had been brave. “Bryn did not betray us. We know who did. Those five who were captured at the harvest festival.”

“Sure enough, they could have betrayed us. But just because they did, doesn’t mean he didn’t also.”

“Bryn.” Varra faced him. “Do you give us your word that you did not betray us to the king?”

Corl dropped his hands against his thighs. “My lady, please. What good is an oath? If he’s what I think he is, one more lie — to save his own skin — will not mean anything. You can’t trap a liar by asking him to tell the truth.”

Varra spoke to Bryn. “Do you give your word? And if you cannot, I swear that I will conduct you from here safely.”

“That is not necessary. I give my word,” Bryn said.

She stared at him a long time, and under her appraisal he suddenly and absurdly doubted himself. A blink of panic came over him: had he just told a lie? But his confusion passed, and finally she nodded.

“I believe him,” she said. “Since I do,” she said, now addressing the crowd, “you can only gainsay the both of us. And I will answer any who choose to.”

No one spoke as she gazed out at them. Bryn could think of no place to put his eyes. The ground would signify guilt, the crowd defiance. To look at Varra would be fawning. Still he looked at her. At that angle he could see the rim of her ear, and the minor swell of her cheekbone.

Bryn could feel the other rebels’ anger and mistrust. Yet no one spoke. When the time for challenge passed, the rebels returned to their plots. It was unusual scheming; rather than dictate a particular course of action, as the king might, Varra told her followers that they would attack

an armory, and then listened as they made their suggestions. Some she approved, and others were rejected, but were then vociferously defended, and then approved. Watching their bickering, collaborative conspiracy, Bryn was reminded of the palace children improvising complex games of make-believe. As with the children, it seemed to be more discussion than action, and with as many as a dozen rebels advocating or attacking any given plan, the strategizing turned into a snaking babble. With the close air and noise, Bryn sprouted a headache. He pinched his temples, which did nothing to blunt the thorns in his head.

The clamor collapsed when a small man appeared at the tunnel mouth and shouted, “Artum, the duke!” A barrel-chested man came crawling out of the tunnel. The closeness of the resemblance always astonished Bryn. In the dim light it was easy to think the king had come to collect him personally.

Artum stood and rubbed the dirt from his hands, musing as though to himself: “Do we not have doors in the hinterland? Or stairs?” When he looked about, it did not take long for him to identify Bryn.

“Why, Bryn, I didn’t think such mischief would suit you.” Artum smiled.

Bryn bowed as he had been taught. “My lord — you’ve returned from the north.”

“Yes. It was a curious trip among the pygmies, and as you can see, I’ve brought one back. But now I’ve returned and I am prepared to deal with other matters. I have heard of some small victories won against the crown. Which of you is responsible?”

Varra drew her sword. Artum tilted his head towards the blade and smiled. “My lady, I have not yet offered any criticism.”

“You trespass. Why are you here?”

“Because there are others concerned about the fate of your war. I was invited by one such, and I come only to help. Will you put up your sword, and talk with me? I’m sure you will want to hear what I have to say.” Artum glanced confidentially towards the other rebels. “I have some ideas about breaking the crown.”

“We are finished here,” Varra said. “Return to your homes and wait

for the next message.”

The rebels obeyed her instantly, but gaped openly at Artum and his serving pygmy. Artum folded his arms and frowned. “I would address everyone.”

Varra reversed her sword and dropped it into its sheath. “You come here unwanted. The terms of this discussion are mine to set.” When Bryn, Tomos, and Corl remained, Varra nodded. “Talk.”

“I hope you have more than that at your call,” Artum said.

“We do,” Varra said.

“How many more?”

Tomos said, “We’ve no reason to show you the rolls.”

“Is my value not obvious? You aim to kill a king, yes? You must replace like for like.”

“You won’t find many who feel that way.”

“I suppose there always has been an abundance of fools. What is your name?”

“Tomos.”

“And what is your background in statecraft, Tomos?”

Tomos’s lower lip protruded in a scowl.

“At least tell me what your father grew.”

“Potatoes.”

“Why so sullen, Tomos? There’s no shame in potatoes. When the crops came, your father wouldn’t let the field lie fallow too long, would he? Whatever you think of the king, if the choice is between a king and nothing, choose a crown. It’s bloody living otherwise. Believe me — I just spent months among the pygmies. The rulers spend more time fighting for the crown than wearing it.”

“We don’t need a king,” Corl said.

“Of course you do. Think of your history. In all the years of the kingdom, has there ever not been a king? One generation after Deivo vanished, a man was crowned. We desire to be ruled. We want kings. But we want good kings.”

“And you’d be better than your brother?” Varra asked.

“If you put me in my throne, the first thing I will do is open the

Door. That's what you desire, is it not? And those that stay will be protected. Because I have vision. My brother sees nothing there in his palace. Something is brewing in the north. The pygmies... they're restless. Ready for a war."

"We have more urgent concerns than pygmy raids," Tomos said.

"Yes. Your rebellion. You've done well — until these recent setbacks. You've inspired the people, you're building an army. Now you need someone at the head. I've led men into battle, and I can do it again. And my brother can't beat me."

"I've already heard enough speeches for one night," Corl said. "What would you have us do?"

"Attack. Time does not favor you. Your uprising might not survive the winter. While the king drinks mulled wine by the fire, you'll starve. His dearest hope is that you won't realize he's a puffed up tomcat."

"And the legion? Are they nothing?"

"Near enough. Marius is overconfident in his talent and has fought only pretend wars. Yes, he quelled a few overly ambitious pygmies, but even Bryn has the tactical sense to manage as much. Marius knows nothing about commanding forces against another general. So I'll lure him out and smash him. That done, my brother is helpless."

"I've been saying as much," Corl said.

"Then you're wise. And the rest of your fighters?"

"I've been speaking with them. They're ready for a war. But she's been cautioning us."

Varra shrugged. "I'm one voice of many, and I am not a king. Put it to the people. If they wish to fight, then they will do so. It is their lives at stake."

THE KNIGHT AND THE GRIFFIN

INOGEN PACED, HER BOOT HEELS KNOCKING. Bryn, who created with his hand a dragon for Ippoleus's toy knight to battle, paused in his unvoiced roars and screeches. "Could you stand still? You're distracting the prince."

"Oh, anything distracts the boy," she snapped. She inhaled with eyes closed, then swept a deep bow. "My humblest apologies, my lord," she said to the back of Ippoleus's head.

Ippoleus jabbed at the dragon's throat, which was the underside of Bryn's middle finger. Closing his throat to emit a low death knell, Bryn let his four fingers — the dragon's legs — buckle. Ippoleus watched, delighted, as the dragon staggered, its long neck raising one last time before a final collapse.

"Well done," Bryn told Ippoleus. "I am sorry, Inogen. I may have been speaking for myself. It will go fine, you know. Varra will be alongside you."

"You don't have to go, either," Lenos said. "If you have any doubts, stay here."

"I always have doubts before a fight," Inogen responded.

There was a *thock*, and Bryn felt a sharp pinch. Gasping, he drew back his hand and saw blood on his finger; the prince had landed a final blow on the vanquished dragon. The knight's toy sword, made of something weaker than metal, had embedded in the floorboard.

"Ippoleus! No!" Bryn shouted, wagging his uninjured finger while sucking blood from the other. Ippoleus did not understand, and looked at him with hurt eyes. As Calline took Bryn's hand to examine the cut, Lenos laughed. "Imagine what he could do with a real sword, if he had any wits."

Bryn stanchd the blood with his shirtfront and shepherded Ippoleus into his room. He did so cheerily, since he was not willing to risk a tantrum. Faced with his bed, a sudden exhaustion overcame the prince, and he fell into a deep sleep.

"Either quickly or not at all, eh," Bryn said, and patted the prince's forehead. His finger throbbed. The door opened, and Calline came inside. She sat beside Bryn on the prince's bed to wrap a bandage around his finger. While she worked, perched lightly at the edge of the mattress, looking only at his finger, she quietly asked: "Is the armory a trap?"

"What?"

"I don't care if it is, or what you told the king. I won't tell anybody but Inogen, just so she's safe."

"It's not."

"You have to tell me. She's my sister."

"It's not, Calline."

Calline cinched the bandage with a tidy knot. She stared at Bryn, intending threat, but managing only deep concern.

"If something happens to her — why would you do that to us? We've never done anything to you."

"Exactly. I wouldn't do anything like that," he said.

"Of course you would," she said. "You're here and not in the palace, aren't you?"

"Calline. You're insulting me."

"I know," she said.

She allowed him to take her hand. With the bandage, he could not

bend his middle finger. “Varra asked me about an armory after the king attacked. I told her truthfully the safest one to try. I have been in the mill, with you, since then. You haven’t seen me leave or talk to anyone, have you?”

“No.”

“Then do you believe me when I tell you that I have put your sister in no additional danger?”

Calline removed her hand from his. “I do.”

Downstairs, Inogen was pacing.

Mourning the absence of books in the countryside, Bryn passed the hours with the others, making terse conversation. When the knock came, all four rose. Inogen opened the door. Varra and Tomos stood without.

“Ready?” Varra asked. Inogen nodded. “Good. Lenos — find your sword. We need you tonight.”

Lenos was surprised, then pleased. He hurried to find his weapon, and while he did, Varra began to explain to Bryn the necessity of his coming. “I need every sword arm I can find,” she said, but Bryn waved his hands.

“Take him,” he said. It would be a relief, not to worry about leaving the prince alone with him. There had been small bruises, most with innocuous explanations.

Before the rebels left, Calline embraced her sister. She whispered something to her, and Inogen replied with a kiss to her cheek. Bryn came forward next, to wish her luck, and Inogen embraced him. He wished luck to the others — Varra smiled slightly and nodded, Tomos laughed — and even clasped Lenos’s hand when it was offered.

Then they left, and the door closed quietly. Calline and Bryn were alone.

“I will sit with the prince,” Bryn said.

“Yes, fine,” she said.

To pass the time, Bryn spun for Ippoleus a nonsense saga of a knight. They had done this for years, and Bryn knew his audience well. Ippoleus,

insensible to the meanings of words, tired quickly of exposition, and so Bryn would insert passages of rhymes, or improvised songs. Sense being gratuitous, they were easy to compose, though Bryn attempted coherence for his own satisfaction. He enacted the adventures by manipulating the knight, and Ippoleus watched his hands carefully.

The knight's latest quest involved a magic sword, but midway through his performance Calline interrupted.

"I heard you singing," she accused.

Bryn sheepishly explained the entertainment; Calline sat down and asked what the story was about. When he said it was about a knight in search of a sword, she denied him.

"That's a common story," he said.

"You cannot tell it today. Pick something else."

Bryn, shrugging, began a new saga. It was the story of a young man whose parents had been slaughtered. Lost in the wilderness, he discovered a foundling griffin, and the two matured together, until the young man rode his pet griffin into battle against the raiders who had murdered his parents.

Calline listened quietly for some time, then interjected. "How come you aren't singing anymore?"

The young man had just encountered the griffin under a deadfall, shivering under its downy wings. "I just do that for Ippoleus."

"Why not me? It would help if I told you that you sing well?"

"Please do not," Bryn said. He resumed the story, including songs, and pretended that Calline was not there. Before he finished, night came, and Ippoleus fell asleep. The young man, now a knight, was just about to attack the raiders' camp. Bryn trailed off, and gently rearranged Ippoleus's limbs on his bed.

"How does it end?" Calline asked.

"Can't you guess?"

"Maybe. But you can't start a story and not finish it."

"Of course. He swoops in and defeats them all. He saves the chief for last, and they duel. The knight slips, and just before the raider can kill him, the griffin tackles him and tears his heart out. That's how it ends."

“Is the knight happy?”

“Why wouldn’t he be? He avenged his mother and father.”

“And that makes people happy.”

“You asked me how it ended, and that’s how it ends. I don’t know anything after that.”

“It’s late,” Calline said. “I am going to sleep.”

It was not late, but Bryn said good night and watched her slip out the door. Then he sat by Ippoleus for a long time, bending the toy knight into different postures. A resolute expression had been painted onto its white face. Bryn wondered what, exactly, it was made of, to be hard as wood but flexible. He tried to imagine what would happen next, where the young man would go once he left the raiders’ camp. Nothing occurred to him. He snuffed the candle, set the toy knight down in reach of Ippoleus’s pillow, and stood.

The room was dark. He did not want to sleep. Creaks followed him into the hearth’s room. No moonlight penetrated the small windows. Bryn went to them and looked out, seeing nothing. The smell of smoke clung to everything, here. In the palace it smelled of nothing, except when the women passed, and then it was perfume. He put his hands on his hips. He tottered to Calline’s door and knocked twice. He got no answer, and opened it. Blind, he edged forward until his knees touched her bed.

“Can I lie down?” he asked the air in front of him.

Calline’s reply was muffled. “If you want to.”

He turned, sat down, and pulled off his boots. They clacked on the floor when he dropped them. Slowly, he lifted his feet and pivoted into bed. He lay back and waited, arms at his sides. First his eyes adjusted, and he could see the timbers floating above. Then he became drowsy, the darkness and his stillness overruling his running thoughts. Finally, Calline wriggled towards him and put her head on his chest. Bryn arranged his arm around her, and with his free hand touched her damp cheek.

“Should I say what happens next?” he asked.

He felt her head shake against his chest. Bryn pressed his lips to the crown of her head. Sometime after his arm went numb, she fell asleep.

When Lenos appeared at noon, he wore a suit of glittering chainmail and carried a new sword. Inogen stood behind him. Both were exhausted, but Lenos was smiling. He offered the sword to Bryn, saying, “We have plenty. Or maybe you’d rather have something more delicate, easier to swing?” Bryn ignored him, and was knocked aside as Calline flung herself at Inogen.

Inogen patted her shoulder as they hugged. “You should not worry about me so much.”

“I wasn’t worried,” Calline declared.

“All of you get inside,” Bryn said. “Someone will see you.”

Inogen and Lenos stayed awake only long enough to shuck their armor and lay down. “No questions,” Inogen said, “we won, and anything else can wait until I wake up.” The door closed behind them.

Bryn and Calline sat before the hearth, listening to their snores through the wall. He studied the ashes’ gray hills, unsure of what to say. Calline stood up and said, “They’ll want to eat — I should find some more food. You’ll wake them up if you need anything?”

“Yes,” he said.

“Last night...” she began. Her chin tucked into her neck as she fumbled with her cloak pin. “You are a gentle person,” she said, and laughed at herself. “I will be back soon.”

She left, and Bryn began to build a fire.

Inogen and Lenos were still sleeping when Calline returned at dusk. Bryn followed her into the kitchen, where they laid out the food and began to cook. It would be another stew, again with potatoes.

“You know, I used to eat other things,” he said, picking up his peeling knife. “Things that didn’t glop.”

Calline laughed as she hung a pot of water over the fire. “But you’ve become my best peeler.”

His reply was interrupted by a knock at the door. Bryn froze, a curl of potato skin on the edge of his knife. No password was spoken. “Go and wake them,” he said. He set down the potato and preceded Calline into

the millstone's room, knife against his thigh. As she set her foot on the first step, he tiptoed to the door and put his hand to the knob.

"Who is that?" he said, quietly.

There was a gentle thump, as if a forehead had been set upon the door. "It's me."

Bryn sighed; he waved off Calline and opened the door. Varra stood there with blood on her neck and gloves and jacket, looking at him with vague eyes.

"Do you have hot water?" she asked. "I need hot water."

"Of course, I will get you some hot water. Calline? Will you make sure the prince is resting?" After a lingering glance at the stains on Varra's clothes, Calline complied.

Varra's body — nerveless, slouched — had gone derelict. He could have pushed her over with one finger. Bryn took her by the elbow and brought her inside. When he ordered her upstairs, Varra blinked and obeyed at a trudge.

In the kitchen, he dipped his finger into the stew pot and found it lukewarm. He waited, testing at intervals, and when it was too hot for his finger he pulled it from the fire and brought it to her.

"Oh," she said, "the water. I asked you for water. Just there."

The empty basin had been set before the chair. On the table, burning candles dripped wax, steadily deforming themselves. Her gloves lay beside. Bryn crouched and poured out the pot while Varra watched. "Thank you," she said, twice.

On his knees, he asked her what had happened.

She looked at her feet. "They told us to take care of our boots. They said that was how soldiers died. Your feet would rot away and the talent wouldn't matter. And they were the only things we owned. One set of ragged clothes and one pair of good boots. You could be flogged for dirty boots. And so I do this." She lifted her foot and traced her fingers over the layers of dried mud, chipped some away with her nail. She pinched the flake, then dropped it. "That's foolish, I see. It's important to keep your boots clean."

"That is fine," Bryn said, "but will you change, first? You are covered

in blood.”

She looked down at her jacket front and her face contorted. Her lips stretched pale against her teeth, and her eyes squinched shut. After a moment her expression became calm and she said, “I do not have anything else to wear.”

They were in Calline’s room; Bryn took one of her shirts and handed it to her. “Wear this.”

She accepted it with a nod, stood, and turned her back to him. Uncertain, Bryn averted his eyes, but when he heard her jacket flop against the chair and the shirt rustle off her shoulders, he looked at her. She was strong: between her shoulder blades were muscles he had not felt on Calline as she hunched atop him. These muscles formed a terrain in the candlelight, and the scars were its rivers. Then the white shirt dropped. She faced him again and sat down to remove her boots.

Her hands undid clasps and buckles. Wincing, she pulled the boots free and set them down, then unwound her foot wraps. Dirt had worn into the ridges beneath the rounded nail of her big toes, which were shorter than the seconds. When she dipped her feet into the hot water of the basin, she hissed.

“She didn’t like you. Tomos didn’t.”

The water sloshed against the basin’s rim, and in it her feet were paler and larger, sheared away from the darker ankles by the surface. Her hands slipped into the water to rub at her toes. “She was jealous of you.”

“Why?”

“Because I came here and spoke with you.”

“But you loved her.”

“If I did, wouldn’t I be weeping?” She took up her boots and used her dagger to scrape away the caked mud. Her hands shook. Flakes and shavings fell between her shins. “We were soldiers together, companions. Even the best commanders lose troops. There is no perfect victory. That is what they taught us.”

“This is not a solution,” Bryn said.

She wetted a rag and wiped a glossy black streak across the toes of one boot.

“How long did you know her?” To Bryn this question felt like irritating a wound so that it could bleed cleanly. Sadness inhered in nothing; there were only events and the qualities ascribed to them by the people they touched. From a distance, death was only another occurrence. His concern was for Varra, and his fear was that she would not speak.

“It was after I left the Citadel. Everything I remembered of my home was useless. We had a black dog, with wavy fur... I asked everyone I met if they knew of a girl who had been chosen, years ago. But nobody did, and after long enough I realized that there was no one left to ask.” Varra removed her feet from the basin and set them on the floor. Dark blotches radiated through the rug. She flexed her toes.

“I went between the villages and worked in the fields. Sometimes I begged. Tomos’s family took me in, permanently. And most families would put me with the animals, but Tomos’s people figured work like mine deserved a bed. So they let me sleep in hers. I’d never shared a bed with anyone. She was so big, even then. Took up all the space, and she slept with her arms flung out.”

Varra was quiet for some time. Bryn offered to leave her the room.

“Don’t.” Her voice was urgent. “I only need to get the mud off of these.”

Bryn sat down again and listened to the rag scrubbing against the boots.

WILDWOOD

VARRA'S IMMACULATE BOOTS SETTLED IN MANURE. She and Bryn stood in a musty barn stall — the horse was gone, likely eaten — with straw still scattered on the packed earth. The low-burning lanterns could not reach them there: they watched each other in near darkness. He was beginning to discover her moods, and the quiet way she leaned against the slats of the wall alarmed him. She had ostensibly brought him as an advisor, but stared at her clean boots. While he thought of some advice, Artum appeared at the stall's entrance.

"This is what passes for your leadership?" he asked Bryn. Artum had requested a convocation of the rebellion's high command, and had received a barnful of farmers.

"I suppose."

"Is this all of them, at least?" he asked.

Bryn tapped his chin and surveyed the gathering. Corl was there, on a trough he had upended to use as a bench. Albeire, arms folded, stood by the door. Potro and some of the other young captains spoke quietly among themselves. "Nearly."

"Where are these cousins I have heard about?"

"Mourning in the wildwood. They lost one of their own when the

king attacked.”

“I was told these were your best, yet they refuse a call to counsel over a month-old death? We should begin. It is a miracle you have survived this long.”

Varra said nothing. She, like Bryn, was worried about what the cousins would do when their long mourning ended.

Artum stood before the splintered doors. The dilapidated barn seemed incapable of containing the duke, who was a big man and projected the same commanding aura as his siblings.

“If you do not know me, I am the duke,” he began.

“Of course we know you,” Corl said. “When this war started, we took two days arguing about whether to kill you.”

“Then it is your good fortune you did not. I have returned from the pygmies’ lands to tell you two truths, truths that Varra might be unwilling to face. Here is the first: the king has more food than you do. Ambush every grain wagon you like; beneath the palace there are great larders stocked ceiling-high with provisions of every kind. So if you hope to tighten the king’s belt, I am here to tell you that will not happen for many months — can you wait so long?

“This is the second truth: the king has the Citadel, and it must fall before he does. I am told Varra envisions a victory in which the legion remains intact. This is impossible. If Marius planned to abandon the king, he would have done so already. He has not, and so we must assume he will not. But if the king is killed and Marius still lives, believe me — he will take the throne. So he must be defeated. And I can do this. I have skills, certain resources that Varra lacks. And unlike Varra, I have never lost a battle to Marius. Ask her about it. Ask why she is so afraid to fight him. And if she won’t answer that, ask yourself if she is fit to lead.”

“Oh, very good,” Albeire said. “Your little brother would be proud to see you turn phrases.” She spread her arms and appealed to the other rebels. “But we have seen the leadership of the Tibryn men. When has the cure for poison ever been another swallow of that poison?”

Artum listened with his hands clasped behind his back, chest jutting out. “A reasonable concern. But I share with my brother nothing beyond a

mother and father: perhaps not even that much. My father, the good king who raised me, who led us to prosperity, was nothing like the madman who sired my brother. His mind — maybe even his seed — had spoiled. Should we blame Aelius for his grasping weakness? He never knew any other way.

“Let me relate to you a lesson my father gave me, one my brother never heard, or heeded: a king is nothing without farmers. Only Deivo could raise cattle and rule a kingdom at once. My brother has forgotten where his food comes from, and he has forgotten that kings are not griffins, but the lice who pester griffins. So let me kill the bastard, as a gift to you and for my own satisfaction.”

There was raucous assent among the rebels: they cursed agreeably, slapped their thighs, and stomped their feet. Bryn was not surprised by the reception, since the king and Artum had learned their rhetoric from the same tutor. Bryn had studied under him as well, though a cloudy senility had robbed him of most eloquence by the time he taught Bryn.

“Are you ready?” Bryn asked Varra. Her stare had flattened, and her eyes had drifted to different points of focus. When he spoke she looked surprised to see him. “Follow Albeire. Remind them he’s from the palace,” he suggested. “That he’s not one of you.”

“What does that matter? Neither are you.”

“And that’s why they mistrust me.”

“I don’t care what they mistrust, or what they hate.” Artum now leaned against the doorframe, satisfied. Varra stepped to the entrance of the stall and spoke from there. “Greetings, brothers and sisters.” The rebels swiveled to look at her. “I have no speech to make. But I will say this. First, we do not ambush the grain wagons to starve the king. We do this because we are starving and must eat. Second, I have not attacked the legion because anyone that does will die. That is not fear, but respect, and disrespect is the fool’s favorite mistake. If you do not believe me, then follow Artum, and aid him in his sibling rivalry. Someday I will walk beyond the Wall, and I do not care if anyone is at my back.”

She nodded shortly and left through the man-sized door next to the double doors. The rebels murmured among themselves, and Bryn,

attempting salvage, shouted to be heard above them.

"You can't afford to join Artum," he said. "It's foolish. It's heat and heat."

Corl laughed. "And? Excuse me, lordling, but you'll have to explain that to us. I am a peasant, only."

"Heat and heat. In the forge a blacksmith makes a blade, and he needs a white fire, yes, but also the quenching bucket. You want to attack and Artum wants to attack and you think this is good, this is how wars are won, but you will not be coming at the king with cold steel. You are a peasant, like you say, and there's no shame in that but I would not be proud, either, because you've come up with a peasant's solution to a rebellion, and forgive me, but the king is not much impressed with peasants' solutions. He has spent his whole life manipulating you, and I have heard him say it is an easy thing to do. So the fact that the king's brother impressed you doesn't surprise me. He knows just what you want to hear."

"Are you trying to insult us or persuade us?" Corl snorted.

"If you want to fight, follow Artum. But you'll lose. If you want to win, listen to her."

"We did listen to her. And the king is still alive, and now she seems to have lost her taste for command."

"She has led you well," Bryn said. "This rebellion's greatest defeat came only when she was disobeyed. Maybe she will not court your loyalty like Artum. But why should she have to? Has she not earned it?"

Bryn bobbed his head, and left them to think on his words. Outside, the cold filled his lungs like a fluid, a relief after the scratchy air of the barn. Varra strode through the woods.

"What are you doing?" he asked her, when he caught up. "Do you really mean to give up everything you've fought for?"

"Wrangling for power, that is his birthright. Who am I?"

"He was bickering with the pygmies last month. He's known of *your* rebellion for less than that, and already he thinks he owns it?"

Varra stopped and leaned against a tree, hugging herself. Shade and moonlight slashed her face into a puzzle. "It's not my rebellion. If the people want it, I can't stop them."

“And what if Artum sees them slaughtered because he’s too proud to realize that Marius is not some overmatched child?”

“The people must choose their own way.”

“And if they choose death?”

She said nothing.

“You can’t be serious.”

“I want to leave this place.” Away from her disciples, she permitted her exhaustion. She put her hand against the tree. “I love this land, and these woods. But I don’t want to fight my whole life to live. I just want to live. So if he wants the kingdom, he can have it — as long as I walk free.”

“I’ll follow you, Varra. I won’t follow him.”

“Good. That is good to know. And you’ll have the chance to, yet.”

“You brought me along as an advisor, yes? Will you take my advice?”

“I will.”

“You can forsake most of them. But you need the cousins. We must make sure we speak to them before Artum has the chance to.”

“You are right. Tomorrow, then — I’m too tired to grovel tonight. For now you should return to your prince.”

“Where is it that you go?”

The first snow fell spiraling through the trees, landing tentatively on the trunks and branches and in Varra’s hair. She lifted her face to the wind and smiled. “It doesn’t matter,” she said. “Protect the prince. I will find you tomorrow.”

Bryn struck off towards the barn. He was becoming comfortable navigating the woods. In the dark he felt himself reverting to one of the tribesmen who hunted in these lands before Deivo’s enclosure. Illiterate, uncivilized, so ancient that each thought may have been new. In the dark the world and Bryn became primeval. He was relieved of knowledge and could fully attend to the husbanding of his senses, which regained their prehistoric acuity.

A hand touched his waist and he started backwards with a yelp. The child which had appeared from the shadows waved its hands and said in a deep voice, “Sorry. Sorry. Sorry.”

The difference between voice and stature intensified Bryn’s alarm —

then he remembered Artum's pygmy.

"Come. Come," the pygmy said, tugging at Bryn's wrist with a strong hand. "He will talk to you." It was late, but he was curious about what Artum might say, and the pygmy spoke the language so haltingly it would be difficult to dismiss him.

They returned to the now empty barn, where Artum had enthroned himself on the upturned trough. His shadow was mobile; the lantern dangling overhead described smooth small circles. With Bryn delivered, the pygmy bowed and stepped outside the door.

"I've never seen one of those up close before," Bryn said. "How did you get him to take your orders? I thought the pygmies were independent little things."

"They recognize power. Will you not greet me properly?" Artum's eyes flicked to the ground.

"You aren't the king. And there's cow shit on the floor."

"And even if I were king, I suppose you would not kneel. I confess this has surprised me, Bryn. A breastless woman commanding grown men, *successfully* — this is bizarre, but not impossible. But you, here? Tell me, how did you manage to convince them you aren't my brother's servant?"

"I told the truth, and they believed me."

"Now tell it to me."

"I am not the king's man."

"Quite convincing."

"Why did you wish to speak with me?"

"Two reasons, and I should think both are obvious. Earlier, you impudently pleaded the woman's case. But I trust I can rely on you?"

"You may not."

"Bryn, I know you to be a sensible young man. And yet you just uttered some foolishness."

"Varra can win."

"Oh? Then why is she not doing so now? My brother throws a festival, sets down a daub of honey, and like ants her rebels swarm about it. How many captured? How many killed, just in the last weeks? If you will not pledge yourself to me, you might as well redeclare for the king. Better

him than her.”

“She warned them not to go.”

“And whose fault is it that her warnings were not credible?”

“Perhaps you should tell me the other reason you wanted to speak.”

Artum glowered and set his shoulders forward. Soon he would be an old man, but still a powerful one. “You will give me the prince.”

“I don’t have the prince to give you.”

“Do not waste my time. You have two possible uses for this rebellion, and since you are not spying on the king from within the palace, this means you are the prince’s caretaker. He is my nephew, and I will not have him kept captive by peasants.”

“He is well looked after.”

“He is *wasted*. The most potent talent living, and Varra, this supposed tactician, has him locked away in some cellar? That woman cannot manage such a weapon, and so you will, as your duty obliges you, deliver the prince to me.”

“This is not the palace. You are not the duke, and I am not a serving boy you can speak to as you like.”

“No,” Artum said, rising to his feet. “I suppose this isn’t the palace. And I suppose this means that, were I to instruct you about impertinence, the king would not be about to protect you.”

“The prince is Varra’s, and I am tired, so make your instruction quick.”

Artum sneered and half turned away. A surge of relief informed Bryn that he had been frightened, but then Artum turned again and struck him. It was a back-handed slap with enough force to send him to his knees. Running his tongue through his mouth and tasting blood, Bryn awaited another attack, but Artum had lost interest. Bryn left the barn hurriedly, and blundered through the woods, mostly certain that he only imagined the shadow following him from tree to tree.

The first snow did not survive sunrise, and Varra collected Bryn from the mill not long after. They nodded at each other, mounted their horses, and

rode across the raw earth, which had made itself austere in preparation for its journey through winter.

The cousins lived where the woods grew thickest, and it took all the morning and some of the afternoon to reach them. The leaves had fallen — one good storm would carry off the last resistance — but still the woods were a tangle. Nearly invisible game trails threaded through the skeletal brush.

“They say this is where Deivo hunted, you know,” Varra said.

“Who says that?”

“The people. It is well known in the villages.”

“I’ve never heard that.”

“Official histories,” she shrugged.

“True histories,” Bryn said.

“No history has ever been true. We remember the past as well as we walk backwards. But I believe Deivo did hunt here. Even the trees are talented.” She waited out his scoff. “Do you see how tall they grow?”

“Talent is in blood, not sap.”

“Is that so? And have you seen any talent in a drop of blood?”

“No — but it must be there. How else do you explain the difference between you and me?”

“There is hardly any.”

Bryn laughed.

“We are absolutists. For your twenty years you believed in the perfect goodness of the king, and I believed the reverse. And now you are between causes, waiting for something new to believe in absolutely. That is the difference between us.”

“That and your talent.”

“Talent is another kind of muscle. No more remarkable than the color of hair or height, and having as little to do with a thing’s essence.”

Bryn did not argue further. He did not like to talk of essences, or souls, and legends of this forest’s impenetrability had so impressed him that his focus was given over to the identification and memorization of landmarks. An anvil-shaped boulder pointed up a subtle rise, from which a downed tree could be seen, its roots like the bristles of an insane broom.

This tree, ridden under at a right angle, led in turn to a tree choked by a crimson lichen, and so on, until Bryn held in his mind a tremulous string of abnormal trees and rocks, which mischievously threatened to jumble their sequence whenever he spent too long watching Varra, or pondering her words. The complicated shadows of branches slipped easily down her back; sometimes she glanced over her shoulder to make sure he followed, and with nothing needing saying, she smiled. Was absolute belief as foolish as common sense dictated? Or was an absolute belief, properly grounded, the only correct form of belief? If Truth existed, would that not be the case? The king would have been willing to debate this with him for hours. Bryn saw a lightning-blasted tree, and added this to his mental map.

The cousin's house had a steep roof and no windows: a temporary construction. Barabo sat on a stump by the door, sharpening a blade. He smoothly slid it over a long whetstone, then drew it back, and pushed again. The scraping did not stop as he observed their approach with a disconcerting intensity.

"My lady," he called to Varra, "I am surprised the gulix didn't get you."

"Those little beasts do not concern me," she said.

"They should. Tell me something, my lady: why have you brought this royal to our home? Every beast that wanders in these woods does so with our blessing. Every wolf and deer permitted, you understand. We have never allowed royals here."

"He is not a royal," Varra said. "He comes from common folk."

"He is, he is," Barabo sighed, dragging his finger along the edge of the sword blade. Looking at his fingertip, he was not satisfied, and resumed sharpening. Other weapons leaned against the wall behind him, of various designs. At their cutting edges they reflected the sky. "Tell me why you are here, my lady."

"Are your cousins here?"

"Round and about," Barabo said. "Can you not sense them?"

"I need all four of you, and I would rather make my case just the once."

"To convince a man, do you speak to his hands and his feet? No —

you speak to the head. Tell me why you have come.”

“To confirm your allegiance,” Bryn said.

“Yes,” Varra said. “We did not part amicably.”

“And now you see the cousins are ready for their war and you are worried that Artum will give it to them, so you have come to pay homage and talk of our long alliance. Yes, Artum’s envoy found us, just this morning. A clever little pygmy — unusual in these woods. And a good tracker, to have found us.”

“You will fight for Artum?”

“No, we won’t. We sent the pygmy away, because we are in mourning still and will hear nothing of strategy and politicking.”

“You do not look like a man in mourning,” Varra observed. She nodded towards the arsenal.

“Do I not? Then I suppose my grieving is nearly at an end.” He looked thoughtful, then began another pass at the whetstone.

While the whetstone scraped, Varra glanced at Bryn. Her irritation was evident.

“Barabo — may I speak?” Bryn asked.

“Oh yes, little royal, if that is all you know how to do.”

“Then let me say I understand your grief. I saw Quintus fall. I do not know if you know this, but it was me he died protecting.” The scraping stopped. Barabo’s hand switched to a fighting grip on the pommel. Bryn spoke more quickly. “I don’t think that Quintus believed me trustworthy, either. But still he did not hesitate to save me, even though I am worth nothing. I understand the gift I was given, so we do not come asking you to hurry anything, or set anything aside. All we ask is some indication of your future plans, or perhaps a guess at when you might be ready to give such an indication. You having said that your grieving is nearly done.”

“Very well,” Barabo said. The sword’s edge finally pleased him; he stood up and placed it alongside the other weapons. “I will tell you our plans. Soon my family will go to war. And it will not be Artum’s war, but neither will it be yours, Varra. We are through following, done with causes. When we discard our mourning there will be no more talk or strategy. We will raise our own banner and cut throats.”

“I can say nothing to convince you?” Varra asked.

Barabo shook his head. “No.”

“Then I only ask that your war does not compromise mine.”

“Very well.”

“Will you swear by Quintus?”

“I swear nothing by Quintus except revenge.”

“Then something else.”

“On my own life, then. I swear we cousins will not forget that our common enemy is the king.”

“Thank you, Barabo.” Varra stepped forward and embraced him, one arm around his back, the other his neck. She was on tiptoe. “I am sorry about your brother,” she whispered.

Barabo’s eyes squeezed shut, and his nostrils flared.

WINTER

AT THE MILL, BRYN HEARD THINGS. Every time Inogen returned to gulp mulled cider and sleep under a roof, she was forced to answer Lenos's questions about the secret campaign Artum waged against his brother.

"His men are fighting like pygmies, and it's working. Not just the grain, anymore: they're nipping at every finger. Hunting tax collectors, putting the fear into those city burghers. They might win."

"And what of the Citadel?" Lenos would ask.

"Artum won't crack it in the winter. They say it will go when the snow does."

Bryn listened to these things, and watched Ippoleus, and watched the snow piling on the window sills.

As the crown and rebels clashed, the lost children bolstered their ranks. These orphans mimicked the political machines that had created them; they forged alliances and fiefdoms in the crannies of the war like spiders spinning webs. Most starved within a month. The few that survived did so as something other than children. These were hard-bitten creatures, shrunken simulacra of Varra or Barabo. The rebellion used them as runners.

It was one of these that knocked on the mill door. Bryn raced to answer, hoping to save the boy a beating at Lenos's hands.

"I saw the sigil. On the tree," the boy said.

Bryn pushed silver into his hands and told him to hurry off, his work was done.

The boy dropped the coins on Bryn's feet. "No silver. Food."

"You could buy a plow horse with that," Bryn said.

"Meat, if you have it."

Bryn gave him smoked fish and two potatoes. The boy accepted these and ran away.

"That whelp's one of your spies?" Lenos asked, incredulous. "I've seen him skulking about."

Bryn picked up the coins. "Just a messenger."

"Carrying what message?"

"A message intended for me only. Inogen!"

She made a vague response from upstairs.

Lenos glowered. "You can't keep secrets. My life's risked too, here."

Bryn ignored him and called to Inogen again. "I need to speak with Varra."

The wind had been baffled to nothing by ranks of conifers. Fat soft snowflakes fell about them like stunned moths, accumulating in boot-high drifts that reflected the moonlight so strongly that Bryn could see the needles' green. Varra paced. They were early, but Bryn could not know how early. Anyone with the art to fix his watch lived beyond the Wall. He laid his gloved hands on the stones and stared out on the winter desolation of the plain. Behind him, the snow popped sharply under Varra's boots.

"Is this wise?" she asked. "A king's whisperer is a slippery thing."

"He knows everything, and nothing has happened to us yet. I take that for good proof of his honesty."

"I suppose. Every new soldier is a chance to be betrayed."

"We could use help."

"Sadly. If I could do it alone... this wall is not even waist-high, and I

might never cross it.”

Bryn scooped some snow from between his feet and molded a snowball. He reared back and hurled it over the Wall, where it hung in the dark air for a moment before landing in the field beyond in a burst of powder.

“There,” he said. “I’ve crossed the Wall.” He made and threw another snowball. It landed farther than the first. “My longest journey yet.”

When Varra threw a snowball of her own, it flew too far to mark its landing. In the instant it took to pass out of sight, it was still rising. He flicked a handful of powder at her side. “Braggart,” he said.

She smiled slightly. “When I was young I wished I hadn’t been born like this.”

“Why?”

“The Citadel would never have taken me,” she said.

“And do you still wish you hadn’t been born like this?”

“Yes. I just don’t think about it as much.” She looked out on the plain. Silvery clouds floated over a comprehensive blankness, backlit by the hidden moon; it was as though space had continued without matter. “I think sometimes that there is no outside, or people there. It’s just a story our elders told us for hope.”

“There are. I’ve seen them. And Edgar has been in their cities.”

“What has he told you of them?”

“They have huge buildings, and have replaced fire with a different kind of light.”

“What about the people? And how they live?”

“He has said little of it to me.”

Varra straightened up and brushed the snow from her jacket. “He’s approaching,” she said.

“Alone?”

“Yes — or with a hundred untalented soldiers.”

A lone figure tramped into the clearing. It was massive, with glabrous, glossy, black skin interrupted by red markings. It came towards them unsteadily in the snow, a ring of fur around its shadowy face. Varra’s sword scraped out of its sheath.

“That’s unnecessary!” the figure called. When he neared, they saw

that it was Edgar in bizarre clothing. “Hail, Bryn! And thank you for meeting me,” he said to Varra. “I am Edgar.” He extended a mitten slashed by crimson like his coat. Varra sheathed her sword and squeezed the fingerless mass.

“What is this?” Bryn asked, waving at the swollen garment. “You look hardly human.”

“It’s one of my latest prizes,” he said. “This is what they wear, out there.”

“Why?” Varra asked.

“I can’t even feel the cold,” he said. “But you can, I see, so let us discuss the matter of our common interest.”

“Very well. You’re not the king’s man?”

Edgar shook his head. “No longer. Bryn is not the only one he’s driven away.”

“And your grievance?”

“Same as yours, I believe: he keeps me against my will. I have begged him for years to find some new sneak and let me and my family pass beyond. He will not consent. And now he keeps the Door closed even to me, so that I may devote all my time to this wearisome spying.

“This kingdom is dead, and has been for centuries. The lives we lead haven’t existed outside for a thousand years. Look at that sword, that ridiculous thing! Is this our best weapon against the royals? I wouldn’t cut bread with that.”

Varra tapped the pommel of her sword with a thumb. “Stale bread crusts, throats.” She shrugged. “It serves.”

“Ah, but not as well as this.” Edgar bit the tip of his mitten and pulled it from his hand. He reached inside the coat and withdrew a small device. “My newest import,” he said. It was all black iron, and fit his hand nicely. There was a grip topped by a block, and a curved metal piece at their join.

Bryn looked closely at it. “A crossbow trigger?”

“Yes, well spotted. This is called a ‘pistol.’ Something like this, I cannot say it exactly. But it fires a projectile, just like a crossbow.”

“It’s too small,” Varra said. “That can’t fit a bolt.”

“It doesn’t need to. It shoots just the arrowhead, so fast it cannot be

seen. Or turned aside by a talent.” He smiled at their skepticism. “I will demonstrate. That tree, there.” He leveled the pistol and squeezed the trigger. A blast, louder than anything Bryn had ever heard, resounded through the still grove. Bryn clapped his hands to his ears and stared at the weapon’s mouth as it exhaled smoke.

“I forgot to say it is noisy!” Edgar declared. “Come and look.”

A clear bead of sap bled from the tree trunk’s wound. With his small finger, Edgar demonstrated the depth and breadth of the hole. “And the king’s skull hasn’t any bark, either.”

Varra brushed at the splinters, repeating dully: “From that?” She said, “Why haven’t you killed him already?”

“A dead king only is no good to me. I need a dead king and an open door, and I must be alive to see my family through it. I shoot the king with this, and then I’ll have to shoot the bloodguard. A painful end for me. Now: you believe the prince will tear down the Wall?”

“We do.”

“Then this is yours.” He handed Varra the pistol. She weighed it in her palm.

“And you take none of the risk.”

“Caution is my privilege. If you’d prefer, I can mention that little mill you’ve been hiding the prince in.”

“Bold, to threaten a woman you just handed a weapon to.”

“I’m only here because I do not believe you are a fool. Because I believe you might succeed.”

“And if I fail, and they pull this machine from my dead hand? What will you do then?”

He shrugged. “I will be less cautious.”

“Very well. Show us how it works.”

As the days descended to winter’s dark and frigid midpoint, more reports of Artum’s successes came to the mill. They were difficult to credit. A squadron of talents had been defeated in open combat. A garrison had been razed. One report claimed that Artum’s warriors had crept into the

city and surprised some nobles at a feast. After their throats had been cut, they had been propped up in festive poses. Lenos listened eagerly. Bryn recognized many of the dead's names.

When the confinement or Lenos's surliness overwhelmed him, Bryn went walking with a hood up and his fist at the throat of his cloak. Once he saw two feet poking up from a snowdrift. The rebels said they were winning the war. "Then why does it not feel like it?" he asked Calline, who sat with her back to the fire.

"Who knows?" she said. Outside, a shrill wind frustrated itself on the mill's walls.

They had not touched each other since the night she had feared for Inogen's life. He took this to mean that she had no trouble sleeping.

It comforted Bryn to spend his nights standing at the thin window, watching the snow fall. Two lobes of condensation formed where he breathed on the glass, and winter breathed back — a liquid brush of cold, felt most on the sore underlids of his eyes. Bryn watched an endless procession of snowflakes spiral headlong to their ends.

Red glowed on the white field. Bryn peered at the far end of the village, just visible from his window. Two claws of flame tore at the sky before bursting into ephemeral scarves of light. He flinched from the window, imagining he could hear the whoosh and roar. Doll-like silhouettes stumbled before the strong light. One lifted its arm, and Bryn saw the black crescent of an axe head descending. His clattering on the stairwell woke Lenos, who had been napping in a chair.

"What is it?" Lenos asked.

"A fight, something. The window."

Lenos pushed himself from the chair and went to the stairs on sluggish feet. Bryn followed him up, then stepped into Ippoleus's sleeping chamber. The prince was abed but not asleep; he lay there in one of his trances that pleased Lenos but unnerved Bryn. Feeling settled now that he had seen Ippoleus for himself, Bryn quietly checked the rucksacks they had prepared. Each contained parcels of salted fish, dried berries, thick clothes, a waterskin, and a small weight of gold. He confirmed each item by touch. In the dark of the room he nodded and refastened the rucksack's

straps. Then he stepped outside, closing the door gently, to find Lenos buckling his sword belt.

“They’re coming,” Lenos pointed at three dark figures threshing through the snow. They were close enough to see the cold steel weapons they grasped, and to see that one of their party was massive.

“It’s the cousins,” Bryn said. “They won’t hurt us.”

Lenos cursed. “Won’t they? They aren’t Varra’s men anymore.” The trio was close. In another moment the false dark of winter would reveal their expressions. “And they’ll be followed.” Lenos nodded towards the village, where indistinct shapes milled. Bryn thought he could see a few detaching from the larger mass.

Bryn’s ‘no’, spread across the window as mist, was unheard by Lenos, who was running down the stairs. Bryn followed him. He needed a weapon, but Varra had kept the pistol. While Lenos stationed himself in the doorway, Bryn rushed to the kitchen. Calline was there, her eyes large and watchful. Bryn snatched up his peeling knife. In the moment before the pounding at the door began, he flicked the shreds of potato skin from the blade and tucked it into the straps of his boots. “We may have to run soon,” he said.

Three blows boomed against the door, so loud that Calline screamed. Bryn edged into the front room, and put himself before the staircase. Lenos drew his sword and flicked his weary eyes at Bryn.

“Open up, boy!”

When Lenos did, it was Barabo that slammed aside his sword arm, drove him to the ground, and cuffed him with the armored knuckles of his glove. “Loose that blade, or die,” Barabo said. His short knife appeared suddenly, and he positioned it over Lenos’s eye like an awl. Lenos’s hand opened. “Good lad.” Malo stepped inside to claim the sword. Hektor followed, limping. His hand was pressed to his belly. All three cousins were red-cheeked and panting. Their runny eyes twinkled. Snot had crusted in the bristles of their upper lips. Barabo looked up at Bryn.

“Still here, are you? We’re clever choosers, sure enough. You and you — grab supplies, and be quick.”

Bryn and Calline looked at each other.

“Do I need to be clearer? Did you not see this?” He gestured to the slim margin between the knife and Lenos, whose nose gushed blood.

“We don’t have any,” Calline said.

Barabo sneered. “Malo. Go help them look. Bring the axe, and check under the prince’s bed first.”

“We’ll get them,” Bryn shouted.

“Quickly, then,” Barabo said.

Bryn and Calline went upstairs and grabbed the rucksacks. The prince was sitting up in bed, moaning. Bryn touched his cheek and tried to smile. When they returned, Lenos had been let to his feet. He held the back of his wrist to his bleeding nose. “You’re dead men,” he was telling Barabo.

“That we aren’t,” he said. “The king’s men won’t chase our type into weather like this.”

Lenos laughed thickly and pointed to Hektor. “One, at least. He’s bleeding out. Either you’ll leave him, or the crown catches all of you together.”

Barabo looked at Hektor, who winced. He struck Lenos in the face. “You shut your mouth — no one’s catching us. They’ll forget all about us, because they’re going to find something better right here.” He grinned and raised his eyes to the ceiling.

Malo grabbed the rucksacks and rummaged through them. He nodded at Barabo.

“Why are you doing this?” Bryn said. “You swore an oath to Varra.”

“Oaths.” He spat. “Haven’t you noticed that everyone who stands behind her ends up dead? Keep following her and she’ll get you killed, too.” He accepted one of the packs from Malo and shouldered it. “Now move, unless you’d rather die now.” Barabo waved his cousins on. “We’ll try the river, break the ice behind us.”

When they had gone, Bryn allowed himself a shuddering sigh. Then he looked to Lenos and Calline. “We have to move quickly.”

Lenos shook his head. “No point.”

“The tracks lead right to us. They’ll search the house. We have to run.”

“No point, I said.”

Bryn pulled on his coat. He patted his pockets for his gloves. “Why not?”

“It’s a blizzard, Bryn.”

“Doesn’t matter. Calline? Help me with the prince’s clothes.” She followed him upstairs. The prince was alert, but not yet concerned. He fought them playfully as they tugged on his boots, coat, and gloves. Lenos came trailing up the stairs as Bryn struggled to cinch the straps of Ippoleus’s boots. His trembling hands seemed to belong to someone else.

Lenos droned at him from the doorway. “The cousins are woodsmen. They have a chance out there. A village girl, a courtier, and a brainless prince? With no supplies? The cousins want us to run, so we get chased instead of them.”

“He’s right,” Calline said. Bryn finally managed the boots; he dropped his head.

“What do we do, then?” he asked.

Lenos said, “You and I hide with the prince. Calline, wait downstairs. When the king’s men come, you tell them what happened. Get them out of here as quickly as you can.”

She nodded and went for the door. Lenos seized her arm as she passed. “Not too quickly, though, or they’ll think the cousins are here.” Calline nodded again and descended the stairs. Lenos remembered then that his nose was dripping blood. He groaned and rubbed the blackish blood between his fingers. Watching Lenos bleed, Ippoleus became agitated.

“Stanch that,” Bryn said.

Lenos dropped onto Bryn’s bed. “Long as you stanch that thing’s mouth,” he said, and pointed at Ippoleus. He tore a strip from the blanket and wadded it up his nose. He tore a larger strip and held it out to Bryn. “Gag him,” he said.

“He won’t like that.”

With a limp shrug, Lenos dropped the cloth. “You’re right. And what does it matter? It’s only dying.” He settled back against the wall and stared past Bryn. His eyes glazed over. He breathed through his mouth.

His lassitude unnerved Bryn. But Ippoleus was becoming steadily more upset. He did not like Lenos's swollen nose, or the scrap of green fabric that poked out of it. Bryn diverted him as best he could. He sang to him, quietly, and pulled faces. The prince paid little attention. When he wasn't glancing at Lenos, his gaze tracked across the floor. He began sniffing — soon he would cry.

At the foot of the stairs, Calline hissed, "They're here."

Bryn rose and quietly shut the door. He sat down again beside the prince. "Please, Ippoleus, don't. Prince? Prince, listen to me," Bryn said. He struggled to keep the desperation from his voice. He could hear men's voices downstairs, and Calline's muffled answers. He whispered bright things to Ippoleus, who was beginning to shiver.

Lenos dully observed Bryn's efforts. Finally he shushed him. "They'll hear," he mouthed, pointing down. He rose from the bed and came forward in a stoop. One of his hands was behind his back. "Let me help," he cooed. "Let me help."

"Lenos—"

"Let him go, Bryn. It won't hurt. He won't even know."

As Bryn formulated a response that would save Ippoleus, Lenos stepped towards him and took his hand from behind his back. Bryn drew the peeling knife from his boot and stabbed Lenos in the neck. After a brief and nauseating resistance, the point, dulled by tough potato skin, passed smoothly through Lenos's throat until it stuck in his spine. Lenos began to lean backward. Bryn seized his shirtfront before he toppled. Hot blood splattered his wrist as he lowered Lenos, gurgling, to the floor. All their months of waiting passed once more in the time it took Lenos to die, and the stoic lump at Bryn's core commended the other man for doing it so quietly, because boots were thumping up the stairs.

Ippoleus's whimper escalated as the blood puddle spread. Bryn clapped his clean hand on the prince's mouth. He pleaded eloquently for silence, but the prince was inconsolable. His eyes rolled between blood and blade. Bryn tossed the knife aside and held the prince tighter. Bryn thought he had muffled him enough. The prince became dazed by his own panic, and his warm breath slowed over Bryn's knuckles.

The stairs stopped creaking. Footsteps neared, then ceased. The silence thickened: Bryn saw himself stretched on a rack, the skin of his forearm peeled away like a glove by a torturer whose name he knew. A scream rattled in him, awaiting release.

Outside, one of the men asked a question. Calline made a last appeal — “don’t,” she said — and then the door opened.

Three armored men peered into the darkness at them. The one in red cocked his head. “Bryn?” Tetny said.

Ippoleus squawked and threw his arms around Bryn. It was suddenly cold.

THE ZEALOT

DAZED, BRYN LOOKED UP AT HIS MISTING BREATH and the tree branches and the night sky. Like waking from a dream, it amazed him: to be one place and then another. He propped himself up. Ippoleus curled in the snow beside him, changed. Wisps of blue plasma were rising from his skin, rippling like the garments of the drowned. His eyes were blinded from within by a sapphire light. Bryn witnessed the prince's true form, and understood that his idiocy was not a deficiency but the inhuman and inscrutable intelligence of the earth and the greater beings of the sky. His awe kept him quiet, staring into the prince's burning eyes. But the light faded, and the tendrils of plasma, until it was Ippoleus looking at him again.

"What did you do, prince?" Bryn asked, as he lifted Ippoleus's hood to protect his ears from the cold. "Where have you taken us?"

There was only the sound of the snow deepening.

Bryn hooked his elbow over the tree's lowest bough, kicking his feet as he hauled himself up. The displaced snow fell in a crystal dust on Ippoleus's upturned face. Maneuvering himself clumsily, Bryn stood and reached for the next branch. From there he could see nothing but the canopies of other trees. His breath came hard; he had to rise up on his toes to grasp

the next branch. When he straightened up on the third branch and turned to survey their surroundings, the brittle, snow-burdened wood snapped. Grabbing blindly, grasping nothing, he struck something hard, something soft, and then the snow. He gritted his teeth and writhed on the ground, hugging his ribs. Ippoleus, whom he had fallen on, brushed the snow from his face and laughed. Bryn thought he had cracked a rib, though he had never broken a bone before. He stood, found that tolerable, and hoped he was wrong.

When the thrill of falling ebbed, he reviewed what he had seen from the branch. Lights in the far distance. High and rocky places. He had recognized none of it, or the woods they were in. That might mean nothing: or that the prince had taken them much further afield. Before he could contemplate that possibility, Bryn took Ippoleus's hand and began to walk in the direction of the lights.

It was cold, even with their coats and gloves. The wind gnawed at their cheeks. They had no food.

Ippoleus was untroubled at first. He enjoyed being outside, and lifted his knees higher than necessary to tramp through the snow. He even stopped to point and giggle at a white hare hopping through the snow. When Bryn tugged his arm, the prince wrenched it away. Bryn overbalanced and fell into the snow. Ippoleus directed his giggling at Bryn as he struggled to his feet, and then returned it to the hare. Bryn, seething, brushed the powder from his cheeks and waited. As soon as the hare disappeared behind a tree trunk, the prince began to follow it.

"No! Ippoleus, we are walking this way."

The prince whined as Bryn gently turned him about, yet he followed. But he soon tired, and began to lag behind. Bryn looked back and cursed. He grabbed Ippoleus's wrist and began pulling him along, despite guttural protests.

"Are you tired, prince?" Bryn yanked him forward. "Do you miss your feather bed and your servants? They aren't here. It's just me." His breathing was becoming ragged. "My father wouldn't have even sold you. He would have brought you to these woods and left you for the wolves. Only a king could afford a son like you." Ippoleus stumbled into him; Bryn

marched on. When he pulled again, Ippoleus fell. Bryn spun with a hand already raised to strike. Ippoleus knelt there in the snow, weeping. He did not sob or whimper. The tears trickled down his cheeks like rain down a stone wall. Bryn dropped his hand, ashamed. He crouched down and brushed away the tears with his gloves. “We never should have been born, you and I.”

Bryn coaxed the prince onward, but the night was endless, and soon Ippoleus could walk no further. Bryn hauled him under the hem of a fir tree, where the wind was muted; using his bootheels, he scratched a hollow in the snow and settled the dazed prince amongst the now exposed roots. As Ippoleus huddled for warmth, Bryn caught his breath. He stared for some time at the gaps between the trees. Then he stood and began to walk.

Now back in the wind, he thought he heard a whimper behind him. He ignored it. It must have been his imagination. Bryn touched the trees as he passed, and thought of the lights at the horizon, where he would never have to tell the truth of this darkness. If he even could: his mind, like his blood, was freezing. Every ragged breath sent the wind’s claws down his lungs, to scrape him out. Perhaps he would not be able to remember what was at the wrenched black core of this night. And if he did...

Bryn pressed his hand against his sore ribs. He was not a bloodguard, bound by oath to die. If he could somehow survive this wind, this cold, and reach the light, alone, no one would ask why. Only what had happened. And that was simple, Bryn could tell it even with numb lips:

Ippoleus had somehow brought them into the woods. Already frail, the exertion weakened him badly, and though Bryn carried him — even past the limits of his own strength — the prince succumbed to the cold. He died peacefully, cradled in the roots of a fir tree, under a crescent moon. That was all.

The wind gusted, straightening him up, but Bryn narrowed his eyes against it. Nobody had told him they were brothers. He had decided that on his own.

The snow was a light powder through which his boots moved easily.

If he could stay upright, he could stay warm. He would have a chance. Ahead of him there was light, which meant there was a fire he could sit beside. He would rest and gather his strength. Where would he go from there? Not to Varra, she would have no use for him now. The palace, then. It would be hard, but the king might forgive him, might even seize upon such an easy opportunity to be magnanimous, particularly for Bryn, the wretched orphan he had taught to think. Never what to believe, though. Bryn had been forced to reach his own conclusions. What were those?

He could not remember. Things were beginning to slip. His ears, now a dusky red, were sending painful roots of ice into his skull, where they tangled with the weariness vining its way up his spine. Some of the trees bumped into him as they filed past. He shook his head and fought for clarity. Light, fire, palace. That was all he needed. Light, fire, palace. He chanted it to himself. Light to save him from darkness, fire from cold. The wind howled, and he groaned in pain. Why the palace? He tried to recapture the reasoning he had just done, but it would not come back. The palace was not his house. Even when he had been welcome there, most of its doors had been shut to him. Except for one, which had always been open. Bryn stopped and leaned against a tree, panting. He looked back. Would he close it now? Had he taken another oath, an orphan's oath, to die alone?

No, he was not a bloodguard; neither was he the creature that Tecles had spawned and left; nor a princeling cast in Aelius's image, capable only of reciting others' correctnesses. Bryn had decided that Ippoleus was his brother — on this night like any other.

Bryn turned and retraced his path. He thought he had walked a long time, but there were not many footprints until he was back at the prince's side. He went to one knee and held his cheek to the prince's mouth, to feel for breath. His cheek was numb. He removed his glove and held his palm under the prince's nose. His hand was numb, too. Assuming that the prince lived, Bryn hugged his body and fell asleep beside him, sitting up.

As his thoughts faded, a sluggish urgency came to him. Bryn knew that men did not wake from these cold sleeps, so he made an effort to have a last thought. He thought of the king, first, and then Tecles, but

these were men who sat in chairs behind tables, and nothing more. Bryn thought next of Varra lying in a bed, lifting the heavy blanket to reveal a stripe of her naked body from shoulder to knee, her skin golden and warm. In his mind Bryn entered that bed and embraced her, but he could not stay long. Finally he was in the cemetery on the hill, and he sat with his back to a headstone marked “Celia,” and what fell on his face so softly were yellow leaves. This felt like enough, and he yielded to the cold dark.

Bryn’s first sight on waking was a diamond of winter sun resting high on a tree trunk. Opening his eyes was difficult, for his eyelashes had frozen. Breathing pained his injured ribs. His lips had fissured and bled in the night. Beside him the prince huddled with his eyes wide open. He was alive. The snow had stopped falling.

The snow had drifted to their ankles, and below his knees Bryn felt nothing. Before he addressed this, he pinched some snow and eased it into his mouth. It was painful to hold there, but he waited until he swallowed some moisture. He offered Ippoleus the snow, and the prince swallowed it without complaint.

“Good,” Bryn said. “That’s good.” He looked at his legs, straight and stiff as firewood before him. He reminded himself that it required no courage to rise. Either he could or could not. If he could, then he would walk until that was impossible. If he could not, he would remain here and watch the patch of sun slide down the tree. That might be peaceful.

Bryn stood and leaned against the tree, waiting for the blood to ooze back into his calves. Stamping his feet brought tears to his eyes, but he was embarrassed to cry in front of the prince. When he was ready, he told the prince, “Come along,” and helped him up. The prince moved like an ancient, his back hunched. They struck out into the snow, following the tracks he had left the night before. Seeing them in the morning, Bryn was guilty, but they meant nothing to Ippoleus.

The sun’s return told Bryn how long they had been slogging, but sealed the snow over with ice like an egg’s shell. It was harder to traverse, and by Bryn’s reckoning, it was not yet noon when his legs gave out the

first time. He knelt in the snow, panting, and squinted at the sky. Flecks of ice swirled up there like the small fish in the garden pond. Ippoleus tugged at his collar, tentatively, and Bryn willed himself back to his feet. He wondered if he could teach the prince to break trail, so that he could rest. But the prince could only ever follow him, and wearily place his feet in the tracks he had left.

They went on. After his feet, hands, nose, ears, and ribs, Bryn's stomach concerned him. Time was now measured in steps, and he spent a hundred fantasizing about the last meal he had eaten — cheese and warm bread — before remembering that this was wrong. He had eaten something else. He tried to think of foods he might have eaten, but nothing occurred to him. Looking about the dead and frozen woods, he could only think of tree bark and twigs. That a kingdom could be built on such pitiless earth amazed him. He envied the royals at their feasts, tables laden with indefinite dishes. All he could see clearly was the steam rising off these foods, as it leaked from his mouth. Mulled wine would help, and suddenly Bryn remembered the trapper's flask. He patted his coat, planning to burn his gullet with liquor, but it was not there. He spat and kept shambling.

In the afternoon he saw something, a brownish shape moving between the distant tree trunks. Bryn ignored it as an apparition of his snowbound insanity, as insubstantial as the worms of light which hung before his eyes. When he saw it again, and Ippoleus suddenly moaned, Bryn paid attention. At first he thought it was the trapper who had given him these gloves, come to apologize for their uselessness. Bryn grew excited: he would know the way out. Then the shape came closer, and Bryn saw that it was not tall enough to be a man, and had too many legs.

It was smaller than those at the palace, yet the griffin wending its way through the trees stood as tall as Bryn's chest, and along with the bones that showed through its fur were powerful muscles. Its hooked yellow bill, glossy as fingernails, opened and exposed a wide, ribbed gullet. A keen screech emitted from the beast — a sign of curiosity. Its tail lashed as it began to circle them, staring with its pale and unlidded eyes.

"Get away from us," Bryn croaked. He reached back to make sure the prince was there. He swallowed and screamed, "Get away from us!" The

griffin's head tilted. The feathers began to bristle. Bryn kept the animal in front of him. When it hopped forward, great wings buffeting them with wind, he began to scream and wave his arms. The griffin hopped backward. Bryn had seen this behavior among the cats of the servant quarters. He screamed as loudly as he could, and his voice carried on the still air. The griffin slunk forward, its wings spreading. It looked past him, to the cowering prince. He bent down and scooped up a handful of snow. He flung it at the griffin, which flinched. Roaring, Bryn began to kick snow. The griffin backed up, and its claws were out. With another yell, Bryn hurled a snowball, striking the griffin in its face. It shrieked and wheeled, lunging halfway up a tree trunk and vaulting from there into the sky. Deafened by its cry, Bryn watched it go. The wing beats were heavy, muscular. It took only moments to vanish. Seeing this, Bryn rediscovered his oldest envy. The strong had an obligation to rescue or destroy the weak. To abandon them was an insult.

They walked on because Bryn believed they should rest after such an encounter, and he no longer trusted himself. The voice in his head argued their deaths in seductive language, suggesting respites in the cause of some greater good, but Bryn was not fooled: recognizing it was being pulled into its elemental components, his body had defected, and now cast its allegiance to the snow. It desired to slow and stop and lie. Bryn was convinced utterly, as he had been by the weak positions the king had made him take in his rhetoric training, so that he might strengthen his own. But his disintegration had separated out a zealot, too. This voice was less eloquent. It repeated a word endlessly: onward.

The prince weakened. Bryn monitored his collapse in glances over the shoulder. Even the king would have to admit the boy acquitted himself well. He was at the edge of starvation even in the warmth, and still he walked. The fall, when it came, was a gentle thump. Bryn turned wearily and hoisted him up. They went onward.

He could not carry him long. The light was failing as Bryn laid the prince down and began to drag him. The prince was unconscious, and during his labor Bryn wondered if he dragged a corpse. He did not care: the prince would go as far as he did. Each time Bryn placed his foot, the

snow held for a moment before swallowing his leg to the knee. In between steps he would drag the prince a little further. It was exhausting; the work was impossible.

When it was dark, Bryn stopped. His whispering snowself reminded him that in the dark he might wander, and he could not afford a wrong direction. Bryn did not stop for this reason, only that he was finished. He arranged the prince at the lee side of a tree where not as much snow had gathered. Last night he had thought he was dying. As he sank to his back and wrapped his arms around Ippoleus, Bryn might have laughed if that would not waste warm air. Before these woods he had known nothing of suffering. All the hardships of his life, like stones and dead trees, could be blanketed by this snow. Nothing compared. But Bryn now understood that there were always more and deeper levels of suffering, a new dungeon below. At bottom there might be a doorway which led out, but Bryn did not think he had reached it. He had spent the day obsessing over this, and so he went to sleep not caring if he woke.

When he did, he knew something had happened. It was warm. Bryn kept his eyes shut so he would not have to confront the meaning of this. The warmth was enough. A blue glow penetrated the darkness behind his eyelids. It pulsed and faded, then pulsed again. He opened his eyes. Ippoleus was illuminated from within. His bloodstream pulsed with the vivid blue he had seen two nights ago, strongly enough that it could be seen through the skin. At the thin places, like his neck, the arteries blazed like slow-fading lightning. Deeper in, his heart glowed like a cluster of fireflies. Bryn leaned forward and saw the prince was still unconscious, but breathing shallowly. Bryn turned his wonderment to the trees about them.

Once again, Ippoleus had fetched the summer. The extent of the circle was smaller — if he stretched his arms, his fingertips might pierce through to the winter which surrounded them — but inside the grass grew. Bryn laid his head back against the tree. He prodded at his damaged ribs, and found them whole. His fingers could feel, and felt no pain. He slid away from the sleeping prince and removed his boot and stocking. He

watched the black horror of his foot regenerate. Ippoleus's talent travelled through the veins, and pale white skin spread over the dead black skin like a river flooding its banks. The missing toenails reemerged as if daubed by the glazing brush of a potter. The nauseating bloat diminished until he could see tendons as he flexed his toes.

There was a dampness on his cheeks. Bryn brushed at it and realized it was sweat. Chortling, he unbuttoned his coat with hands that shook from hunger only. He sat with the coat in his lap and regarded the prince. Bryn was comforted to think that, had he not returned, Ippoleus might have lived on in charmed sleep. He drew on his blood-crusted stocking and relaced the boot. He stood and shrugged on his coat, then donned his gloves.

Bryn took a deep breath and began to scale the tree. The sphere of warmth ended just above his head, and he emerged into the winter's blast. He had already forgotten what that kind of cold felt like. He climbed quickly and carefully, levering himself up until he could peer through the gaps in the skeleton canopy. The sight of buildings nearly made him fall. They were close, close enough to reach in a day's walk. He looked at his feet, using Ippoleus's outstretched left leg as a compass needle. Having fixed in his mind the relationship of the prince's leg to their salvation, Bryn clambered down. He knelt by the prince, wedged one arm beneath his knees, the other behind his back, and gathered himself. The way was still long. He exhaled sharply through his nose, three times, and then lifted.

Bryn would never forget how the snow melted and ran about his feet, or how lichens burst into bloom on the trees they passed. They walked on a carpet of grass. At first Bryn took frequent rests, scooping up handfuls of the snowmelt to drink. Then he noticed the blue lights were fading. What coursed in Ippoleus was receding, and with it their circle of protection. Bryn could not face the winter. He carried the prince on alternate shoulders, then across both like a slain buck. No jostling would wake him.

By the time the trees had begun to thin, night had fallen once more. Ippoleus's veins were only a delicate tracery on his skin. The glow had dimmed considerably. Nothing more than a film separated their bodies from the winter wind, and Bryn could feel the cold encroaching. He

hurried as he could on his quavering legs. Still the snow melted before him, but it was slush, and treacherous.

Every step was an invitation to collapse. He feared he had deviated, and now they would emerge from the woods still miles from safety. He thought of laying the prince down and running ahead, but could not release him.

Then he saw the trees' end, and firelight after it. "Yes," he whispered, and lengthened his stride. Bryn staggered past the tree line and stared at the inn, which seemed false, a drawing torn from a book and made to stand in the dark. Pools of torchlight wobbled on the snow and revealed the unfamiliar plumb lines of human construction. Sobbing, Bryn rounded the corner and came to the door.

HOT STEW

HE KICKED AT THE DOOR UNTIL A GROGGY DRUNK OPENED IT. Bryn pushed past him, choosing the emptiest of the nearest tables to lay the prince down. He tenderly removed the prince's hat and laid it beneath his head for a pillow, then turned. The inn was like all others in the kingdom. The familiarity delighted him. The innkeep was stationed behind the counter, counting coins. A serving girl ambled between the dozen tables, a brace of empty tankards dangling from her fingers. The travelers varied in drunkenness, but all were tired. They stared at Bryn frankly, particularly the three whose dinner had been interrupted by the prince's limp body.

"Medicine?" Their stares made him wonder if he had forgotten how to speak. "Does anyone know medicine? He's not well."

One of the patrons ducked his head and studied the prince's wan face as if it were a rotten apple. "That's easy enough to see," he said. He looked to Bryn and smiled. "Sure, I think I know who can help." Glancing to his companions, who nodded, the man pushed back his chair and walked out the door. Bryn wished he would walk faster, but someone would help the prince, and this was enough.

"Some food and drink," he blared, only to find the innkeep had abandoned his counter and now stood at his elbow.

"I run a quiet inn, my lord, and this doesn't look like a quiet situation."

Bryn stared at him. "My lord? I'm not — I have some coin, I think. He patted at his pockets and fished up silver. "Charge what you like for the disturbance, and bring me the rest in stew and bread and beer."

The innkeep dangled the coins in his palm. "As you say. What happened to you two?"

"Lost in the woods," Bryn said.

The innkeep nodded and gestured at the serving girl.

The two remaining men yielded the table and Bryn thanked them sincerely. While he waited he stripped off his coat and touched the prince's neck. He felt the blood running there, sluggishly. The stew came and he burned himself spooning it down. He paused only long enough to stuff a plug of dark bread into his mouth before resuming. He ate desperately — after the first bowl his stomach still felt empty. He was halfway through the second when he felt a presence looming over him.

"You'd think Varra's pet would have a little more sense." The man standing over him wore a stained woolen jacket over roughspun. His dirty ear had a notch in it.

"What?"

The man dropped one of the king's bounties on the table. Bryn stared at the shapes, certain they meant something. After a moment the fog lifted and he saw his own face in woodcut, and the bounty attached. He read wearily, noting with some relief that the gold depended on his living.

"You're Artum's men," Bryn said.

The man tapped at the pommel of his sword. "Come along, and don't fight us."

"Just as soon as I've finished eating." Bryn dipped his spoon into his bowl. Before it reached his mouth, the man knocked it aside, then flipped the bowl. The stew splattered on the floor, and when Bryn turned his head to protest, the man's fist struck his jaw. He did not lose consciousness like he hoped. While the men beat him, the innkeep and serving girl shouted for someone to stop this, but no one did. It only ended when his assailants grew tired.

Bryn lay on his back, feeling his blood warmly explore the slopes of

his face like the land's first rivers. Rough hands lifted him and bore him away; Bryn lolled his head for a confused sight of the prince being taken. From his inverted perspective the prince appeared to be dropping into the arms of his captors. Bryn did not struggle to save Ippoleus, for he was being carried outside, and his fear of the cold outweighed all concern for the prince.

He was thrown into the back of a cart, bound at the ankles, and buried in furs. His resistance extended no further than a weak pawing at the furs on his face, to keep from smothering. Beyond that he did not care. With vision blurred by force, he stared up at the sky, and not all the lights he saw there were stars.

When they stopped he was placed before a fire and given food. He looked into the bowl and saw more stew. His stomach turned. "I can't eat," he said, and scratched at his cheek. Blood flaked away under his fingernails. One of the men — and he believed there were two, though sometimes he saw a shadowy third who never spoke — urged him to eat.

"You'll want your strength."

"Fuck yourself," Bryn said.

The man struck him in his empty stomach, and for that Bryn was thankful. His head was ringing too much already. When he stopped retching, he was bundled into the cart again, and they rode on. Bryn passed the night in upsetting dreams that were interrupted whenever the cartwheels jounced over a stone. His dreams and waking ran together so fluidly that he had a muzzy epiphany: there was no difference between the two. Carrying the prince through the frozen woods had been a dream, and this another, and the experiences would rush in on him and sleep could never dam them. His head ached; he lay quietly until the morning.

When the sky was as blue he had been waiting for, he asked for water. It was given to him in a skin. He struggled upright to drink it. When he had managed a few swallows, he asked about the prince. "Is he safe?" He splashed water on his hands and scrubbed at this bloodied face.

The man took the skin back. "Of course," he said. "Just spending

time with his beloved uncle.”

“Tell me your name.”

“Don’t say,” said the man who held the reins.

“It’s Nikos.”

“Nikos,” Bryn said, “why are you doing this to me?”

Nikos laughed. “That is easy. You saw the bounty. For that much gold, I’d truss my own mother.”

“And if I give you all that gold and one more piece, will you be mine to command?”

“My answer there is five breeds of ‘no.’”

“Tell me why that is.”

“Shut up, Nikos,” said the driver.

Nikos scowled at this. He said to Bryn, “To start, I don’t think you have that gold. King’ll pay us.”

“I suppose he is trustworthy. He only hung eight innocents because they were kin to the guilty. I wonder how he’ll feel when two of his traitorous brother’s lackeys come to his doorstep. Will he thank them for the prize, or will he have two more dungeon cells prepared?”

The driver turned back and laughed at Bryn. He said, “Seeing as we haven’t got ‘lackey’ branded on our cheeks, I’m not so worried.”

“If we pass the palace gate, you two will not leave alive.”

“Just another royal silver tongue,” the driver sneered. “Pay him no mind. He’s afraid to hang, is all.”

“The king raised me up from a boy. Who has a better chance of talking his way out of the noose?”

“Maybe we’ll cut that tongue out, you keep exercising it so.”

“You’re endangering yourself. This is all I want you to acknowledge. I’ve lived with the royals my whole life. You’ve come to serve one yourselves. I’m sure you realize they’re fickle.” Both were silent, and Bryn felt hope. “Realize you’re walking out in a thunderstorm. Maybe the lightning won’t strike you: but it might. Let me make my proposition, only once. And if you do not like it, I’ll say nothing more.”

“You swear it?” the driver said. Nikos watched Bryn curiously.

“I do.”

“Then talk.”

“Take me to Varra. She’s been robbing the king for a season, she has gold, and I’m worth it to her. You take me to her and I’ll forget about the beating, I’ll smile and swear you rescued me. You walk away richer, and the rebellion has a chance. Because either Varra wins, or we all hang. And Varra cannot succeed without me.”

The driver spat. “Varra is nothing. Just some woman. We’ve heard your proposition and reject it.”

“You’re not listening to me, she—”

The driver halted the horses. He climbed from the seat and uncoiled his whip, which hissed and slithered through the snow behind him. He reached for Bryn, who resolved not to beg. After tearing away Bryn’s coat, the driver hurled him into the slush of the road and began to lash him. Bryn imagined Varra saving him, then, not because he thought it likely but to keep the whip from working a deeper, unscarrable destruction. As the whip tattered his shirt and opened his back, Bryn looked to the other man watching from the cart. His name is Nikos, Bryn thought. He sought the essential connection between the face and its name: which particular features had earned that name, or how the name had shaped its bearer. Nikos observed his punishment with some pity. Pity was not for the whipper, nor for the whipped, but the witness. These thoughts did nothing to distract Bryn from his pain, and he had tired of extremity’s nasty enlightenments. He wanted to be whole and ignorant again, looking down on this world from the palace’s high towers.

The flogging ended and the driver thrust Bryn’s coat into his arms. He was shoved back into the cart. His leg was tied to a bolt screwed deep in the wood. “No more talking, eh?” the driver suggested, and went to tend to his horses. Bryn promised himself he would tally the lashes later, when he could; when he eased his coat back on, his back was an undifferentiated wound.

Pain cocooned him in something like sleep. His senses functioned, but poorly: though Nikos and the driver were only a few feet away, he heard their voices as whispers emanating from the far end of a tunnel.

“Maybe he’s right,” Nikos said. “What’s the king going to think when

we drag in his adopted son all pulped?”

“I wouldn’t worry about the king’s sympathy. You ever know a bounty to speak fondness?”

“We should bandage the wounds, at least.”

“Let the royal surgeons handle that. It’s only another three days’ ride.”

For the next two days Bryn watched increasingly familiar terrain pass at the rate of a walking horse. Having given up speaking, little happened. He was fed and watered on the horses’ schedule. He lay prone when he could, to keep weight off his back. The winter’s cold and his injuries’ warmth did not mingle but maintained like a fever the worst of both. Snow flurries absorbed him temporarily. Occasionally Nikos would cover Bryn with the furs, to hide him from the sight of passerby. Sometime these passerby were the king’s men, and Bryn had a mistaken impulse to call for help. Instead Bryn would lay quietly under his cover like a child chastised for not sleeping. He wanted no complications: he was in too much pain.

On the morning of the third day, a traveler was spotted ahead. Nikos nodded, and Bryn drew the furs over his head. He lay in the pleurably airless darkness and waited. While he listened to the horse and wood sounds of the wagon, he considered his reception at the palace. He knew he should prepare some gambit to redeem himself in the king’s eyes, but the possibility that he would fail made him unwilling to try. He heard a voice from outside the wagon, and abandoned these thoughts.

“Halt,” the voice commanded.

The driver replied. “No time, woman. Clear the way.”

Under his furs Bryn was rigid with the effort of listening. It was an unplaceable but familiar voice. He needed to see, but would not risk the whipping.

The woman spoke again. “If you hand him to me now, you will not be harmed.”

“Shit,” Nikos said, and then there was a struggle. Bryn flung aside his cover to see a woman wrench the blade from the driver’s hand and club

Nikos with its pommel. As he slumped, she swung her fist backhand and knocked the driver senseless. The green-eyed woman smiled at Bryn, and as he stared, her face resolved into Varra's.

"I found you," she said.

When Bryn had been untied and his captors bound with the same rope, he asked her how. She led him away from the road and the tied men.

"Artum has not taken all of my people. Once we saw the mill and found out you were gone, I knew where you were headed. We set up on the roads..." Her explanation withered as she noticed his hunched posture. "You're hurt."

"Some, yes."

"There's a new place. No one else can find it. We'll get you there and you can heal."

"I won't go there. I intend to see the king."

"Don't tell me I watched the roads for nothing, Bryn."

"They took him from me. I carried him all that way, and they took him. They didn't even let me finish the stew."

"How badly are you hurt?"

"You told me that if I wanted to protect the prince, I should do it. They took him. I'm ready, now."

"Walking into the palace doesn't help the prince."

"We've all tried to make a weapon out of that boy. No war, no weapon. Then everybody can ignore him again, like they did before."

"I think you should sit."

"Don't tell me to wait any longer. This is why you wanted me, this is the purpose you saw for me. You knew I wasn't sure but you also knew that if I waited long enough, something would happen — I would see. I understand that I wasn't ready to protect the prince. I am, now. So why are you staring at me?"

"Because I think you are bleeding and about to faint."

"They are not that deep."

"Then because you are angry, Bryn."

"Of course I am. How could I not be? And how does it matter? No one has joined your rebellion without anger. Not even you."

"You're being reckless, and you are not a reckless person."

"This is the purpose you wanted me for. Use me. Let's stop waiting."

"Then you'll go. First I'll do what I can for the wounds."

"If I take the coat off, I might not be able to put it back on."

"Don't, then. I'm not the prince — I can only numb you."

Varra held out her hands, and Bryn nodded. She stepped close to him and reached under his shirt. Her cold hands rested on his hips, then slowly moved to his back. As she worked, she would not look at him, but stared at something past his shoulder. A blissful empty sensation began to spread, trickling down his shoulder blades like tepid water. She gave him instructions, pausing when her fingers explored a new damage. He saw his injuries in the small wincing of her face. Still she did not look at him.

"If you can, meet me in Gevio's Field, three days from now. If not, send Edgar. Give him sealed instructions, but smudge your name so I know it is your letter. We'll keep in contact — we'll need a signal, too. If you are not followed, you—"

"I will throw a snowball."

"Good, yes. You'll need the pistol, too."

"Not yet," Bryn said. "It might not matter. He could kill me."

"He won't. He wants you alive. I saw the bounty."

"Perhaps he wants to ask me some questions, first. Perhaps he'll want to know where you are."

He felt nothing in his back. Varra removed her hands, covered with clotted black blood, and cleaned them in the snow. "If it will save your life, tell him everything. Nothing depends on you — there are other ways. Promise that you will not suffer or die for me."

He smiled. "I will betray everything."

"You are so easy to believe," she said.

He declined her offer of help with his captives. "I'll manage them," he said. "You've been too long exposed. You'll get word at Gevio's Field."

"Three days from now."

"Three days," he agreed. He embraced her. When she tensed in his

arms, he explained, “For saving me even though I lost the prince.”

Varra said nothing until he released her. “Inogen wants to know something of Lenos’s death. What should I tell her?”

Bryn had not thought of Lenos since he had killed him, and now saw his face clearly, the sweet and rotten smile he had given the prince as he leaned towards him. “That he died protecting me and the prince.”

“Did he have any last words? She has been fixated.”

Bryn grimaced. “No last words. But he died quickly — not much pain. You could tell her that.”

She nodded and made a vague gesture to the west. “Waste no time on the roads. Even if you don’t know it yet, you’re half-dead.”

“I’m sure you’re right,” he said. Varra ran lightly to her horse. When she kicked it and rode off, Bryn turned to the driver and Nikos. The driver was watchful and sullen.

“It’s time to move,” Bryn told them. “If you’re thinking to resist, remember that I need the one prize only, and I’m taking whoever is less trouble. I’m sure the horses would appreciate a lighter load.”

“If you only need one,” Nikos said, “you could let one of us go.”

“And I wonder which that one would be?” Bryn said. The hatred in the driver’s eyes and the hope in Nikos’s made Bryn feel like he held a weapon in his empty hand.

“He was the one that beat you,” Nikos said.

“That’s true.” Bryn crouched down and tested their bonds. “But I see so much of myself in you, Nikos.”

He oversaw the driver to the back of the cart, and he did not struggle. This relieved Bryn, who knew that he was too weak to haul him, or even flog him. All coercion would have come at the point of a knife. Nikos, when he was helped to his feet, whimpered.

“You don’t have to. I’m sorry, isn’t that plain? You can see I regret it.”

“I don’t have to do to you what you didn’t have to do to me? No, none of us has to do anything. Yet we act, don’t we? And we live with all of it. Get in the cart,” he said, and pushed him. Nikos went carefully, his restraints making him clumsy as a child. Bryn tied them to the cart and to each other with the leathern straps intended to secure barrels. The

driver spit at him, and Bryn cuffed him distractedly. When this did not make enough of an impression, he took the knife and put it partway into the meat of the man's thigh. As the man bucked and cursed, Bryn neatly removed the blade, sheathed it, then climbed onto the driver's board and urged the horses on. The snowflakes rushed at his face.

Bryn drove the horses relentlessly only because he knew that in the king's stables they ate better than peasants. The animals labored without complaint, jets of steam rising from their nostrils as they pulled the cart through the slush. It was twilight when they reached the guard post at the bridge. Bryn could see the palace in repose across the river. Patches of snow mottled its turquoise copper roofs. The spires superimposed their hard outlines over the low and indistinct clouds. Certain windows glowed with lamps and candles lit in anticipation of the night. Bryn was so entranced by the sight that he did not hear the guard's hail at first. When he repeated it — "Who passes?" — Bryn dropped the reins. He stood up and showed his hands.

"I've come to collect a bounty," he said.

PART THREE

RETURN

HOME

WHEN HE WAS IN THE CUSTODY OF THE CROWN, Bryn began to doubt his plan. He insisted on his identity to guards who seemed not to be listening. More guards were summoned until one, a captain, recognized him. Bryn addressed the captain exclusively, raising his voice to be heard over the protests of Nikos and the driver, and the guards' angry orders for them to be silent. "I need to see the king," Bryn said. "You have to take me. And these horses need stabling. And those men belong in the dungeons." He repeated this, in order, until the distracted captain heard him and barked out orders.

"Pius, run to the palace and inform the king that we have Bryn. You two, take any weapons he has and send him along. The rest of you escort these others to the barracks. We'll await the king's orders."

"And the horses," Bryn said.

"And someone do something about the damned horses."

Only when he was again inside the palace did Bryn revise his demand. "I might need to see the surgeons, first," he admitted, barely able to keep pace with the guards who gripped his elbows. One plucked at his coat and said to the other, "He's bled through this." Bryn's eyelids drooped. Whatever he looked at slid sideways, and his eyes were too exhausted to follow.

Bryn was assisted to the infirmary, where the sheets were always a snowy white despite the wrecked bodies that rested in them. Bryn was eased face down onto a bed and left. A short time later he heard voices hovering over him. The coat was cut away with shears. Bryn felt an incredible pain snuffling about him in tightening circles. He heard the surgeon register professional dismay before giving orders for bandages, needle, and thread. Bryn passed out with the first touch of the examination. “Can you feel this?” the surgeon asked, and Bryn wanted to answer him — but he was falling too quickly.

Bryn was bandaged while unconscious and fed a potion when he woke, which quickly put him back to sleep. It tasted faintly of garlic. His second waking was slower. He lay on cushions. The tight bandages constricted him if he filled his lungs more than halfway, but the pain was manageable. For the first time in three days he could notice his hunger, a pit. Rubbing at his face and yawning, Bryn discovered that his beard had been shaved. Edgar sat beside the bed. His mouth and brows arched as he looked him over. “Alive after all,” he said.

“Yes, it seems so.” Bryn gingerly adjusted the cushion behind his head.

Edgar looked about. The infirmary was full, each bay in the long arched corridor of dark stone holding pale beds and the wounded, whose feet moved shyly as they turned in their drugged sleep. “Let me be the first to welcome you home,” Edgar said. “I’m certain you have good reasons for returning.” The cheer in his voice pierced the garlic fog which hung about Bryn’s thoughts.

“Does anyone need a reason to come home?” Bryn asked.

“No, I suppose not. The king has sent me with an invitation to dinner.”

“Tell him I’m honored, but I’m not certain I can rise from this bed.”

“It is not that sort of invitation.”

Bryn frowned. “Where are my prisoners?”

“Resting comfortably. If I understood him, this dinner will determine their next accommodations. And your own.”

“I see.”

“I will help you up?”

Bryn shook his head. He was learning his body’s limits, and weary as he was, it was nothing like he had felt at the foot of the tree. He swung his legs from the bed and sat up, indulging himself with a hiss. “Something for me to wear?”

“I have that here.” Topmost on the neatly folded stack of clothes was one of the doublets the king had given him. Bryn brushed his fingers across the fabric’s dense nap. He had been concerned with these doublets, he remembered, long ago. It seemed impossible. The mind that could have worried over such things was unrecoverable as all that was past.

“What sort of reception should I expect?” He put his arm through one sleeve.

“Who can say?” Edgar replied, but when Bryn struggled with the second sleeve he leaned in to help him. He whispered, “Be careful with him. He’s not forgotten anything.”

Bryn nodded. “I’ll manage the rest,” he said. “Find me later — I have more to discuss.”

“As you say.” Edgar left, and Bryn dressed. The clothes did not fit, though they were his. He cinched the belt tighter and left the infirmary.

The king sat alone in the quiet of burning tapers. Their small flames twinkled on the burnished table and glinted in his eyes. His steepled fingers rested against his lips, as they did when he thought deeply. When Bryn was announced, he rose from his chair and spread his arms.

“You have returned.”

“In poor circumstances,” Bryn said. He took the king’s offered hand and smiled when he smiled.

“Regardless. Sit.” He gestured to the chair nearest his, and Bryn sat.

“You have questions for me, I imagine.”

“A few,” the king said. “Yes, a few. But I forbid you to speak to me until you have filled your stomach. You’re a ruin.” The king rang a bell and Bryn’s favorite foods were brought on platters. These were the foods he had been unable to recall in the woods: a roast chicken with its crispy

skin flecked with herbs; soft black raisins; dark rolls that steamed when torn; and a pale cheese, veined with blue. Having lived with hunger for so long, the quantities alone moved him. Unwilling to be seen as too grateful, he inclined his head towards the king and then concealed his emotions with the business of eating. Wine was poured, but he did not touch it. The king picked at his food, and watched him carefully.

Bryn ate until he was full, and then had another serving. Pushing the plate aside, he said, “Why did you do it?”

“You’ve stolen my question, it seems.”

“Ask me what you like — only answer me first.”

“Very well. Do what?”

“The bounty.”

“I do not know what you mean. After you were discovered hiding with the prince in a rebel den, I thought it was time you explained yourself.”

“It was a blizzard, the night Tetny found me. It would have taken him two days to return to the palace, at least. For my face to be at that inn only three days later?”

“Three? How long do you think it has been since you were found at the mill?”

“Six days.” The king’s light amusement did not falter. “Maybe seven.”

“Two weeks. What happened to you, Bryn?”

Eight missing days lined up before him. Even his sleep and blackouts could not account for eight. “I don’t — what did Tetny say?”

“Ah. You have asked your question, and I have answered. Now I would have you remember that you come here as a possible traitor, and should speak quickly. And accurately. What have you been doing?”

“I have been tending to the prince. I found him not long after I left here. We were hiding in the mill. The cousins came and Tetny followed them. He found us there.”

“The dead man?”

“His name was Lenos. He did not want the prince to be rescued, and so I stabbed him here.” Bryn touched his neck.

“Explain to me how you escaped Tetny.”

“I don’t know. The prince did something. He took us far away.”

"Tetny says there was a blue flash."

"Yes."

"And then?"

"We were in the woods. In the north. The prince and I made our way out. I was captured at an inn by two of Artum's men. You know that Artum has betrayed you?"

The king grimaced. "Yes. And I am determining who else. What happened after you were captured?"

"I was beaten and thrown into a cart. I tried to convince them to release me. I made promises of gold. I told them that Varra would pay more than you were offering."

"And why did you do this?"

"Because I knew I would be in no danger if I was delivered to her."

"You suspected me of malice?"

"I knew nothing of your intentions, only that you had put a bounty on me. It seemed safer. But if you'll tell me that, even now, I am not in danger, do so. It would be a relief." The king was silent, and Bryn continued. "The younger one, Nikos, might have agreed. But the driver — I don't know his name — heard enough. He whipped me."

"I saw as much while the surgeons were treating you. The man has a strong arm."

"Yes."

"He'll find our questioners similarly competent, do not worry."

"You must ask them where Ippoleus has been taken."

"Of course. But — your pleas fail. You're whipped. And yet when you arrive at our gates you are holding the whip, and they are bound. How did this happen?"

"Varra saved me."

"Then it should follow that you would be with her."

"No, sir. I saw an opportunity to return home. I was safer with Varra if the alternative was being brought here in chains. But if I came freely, despite risk, that might sway you to my sincerity."

"And Varra agreed to this because?"

"Because I told her I would be insincere. She believes I am here on

behalf of her rebellion.”

“I wonder if I am hearing you correctly. Do you claim that you have secretly represented the crown’s interests, all through your exile?”

“No. Why would I? You discarded me. I stand for myself and the prince, only. But her rebellion’s doomed, even though she is not yet aware of this. And I am weary, sir, past everything. I’ve had enough of the peasant life.”

“Then Varra believes your purpose here is to...”

“To kill you, sir.”

The king laughed. “She’s cunning, by all reports. Why would she believe that she could turn you against your home and family over the course of a few months?”

“Because she believes that I love her.”

The king laughed again. “She’s more man than woman, is she not?”

“She is. But she believes I am infatuated, and she has some fondness for me.”

“And how do you feel about her?”

“She is powerful, and cunning as they say. But I do not think she will win, because she refuses to risk everything. And she made clear that if I attempted to bring Ippoleus home, we would both be killed.”

“This is all very interesting, Bryn. But you can appreciate my dilemma. For even as I listen to you claim no special allegiance to Varra, I can imagine you saying much the same about me to *her*. And surely you did, to win her confidence so thoroughly. So what am I to do with you, Bryn?”

“You are right to question my loyalty. I question it myself. Because I hated you when you cast me out — some part of me might still. I think I am willing to forgive that, however. And some part of me believes in Varra’s cause. The peasants are starving. And they deserve an open door. But my loyalty doesn’t matter.”

“No?”

“You don’t need loyal men. You need anyone who will be of use. And I will be useful.”

“How?”

"I brought you two of Artum's men. They may know something. And I know where Barabo and the cousins hide."

"You offer the possibility of Artum, and the whereabouts of a few wildwood barbarians. If you think to escape punishment through usefulness, this is not useful enough."

Bryn did not hesitate. "In three days, I am to meet Varra at a place called Gevio's Field."

After speaking with the king, Bryn was led across the palace to the chambers reserved for visiting nobility. He was given five rooms, richly appointed, designated for leisure only. Bryn explored them in turn, fingering the heavy cloths on the tables and brushing his hands over the filigreed candlesticks, noting with satisfaction the plushness of the couch cushions and the magnificence of the view. He stood at the high window for some time and looked down at the toy trees and statues. In the last room silk drapes concealed a massive bed. Seeing shadows in the shapes of women, he pushed aside the drapes and found only heavy blankets. Bryn removed his boots and was tugging off his shirt when he remembered the message he needed to write to Varra. His full stomach exhausted him, and he scratched out his message quickly. Unsure what to write, he included the position of his window and a general statement of his safety and commitment. As he blew on the parchment, he heard a fire crackling in the front room.

Edgar turned as Bryn emerged warily from the bed chamber, wielding a chamber pot.

"It appears I have the advantage," he said, lifting the fire poker.

Bryn set the pot down. "You might have announced yourself — considering my situation."

"I apologize. I thought it prudent to visit discreetly. There is a hidden door. Though the king assumed you would already know this."

"Yes," Bryn said. "I learned all the secret ways when I was a boy."

She had been the most beautiful daughter of a trivial noble, enchanting Bryn and the princesses for different reasons. One day Amara had led

them into the suite by the secret door, and they wandered about, sniffing the lilac-scented air. Bryn had stolen an earring, whose mate was gifted to Amara in a gesture of bemused goodwill by the beautiful daughter at the end of her visit, not knowing that he had it, and kept it, until one day years later when he threw it into the river.

“Good, then you understand that you should say nothing in here that would displease the king. There might be listeners. What is your situation?”

“Alive on sufferance, if I read him right.”

“Hmm. He is far too fond of you, isn’t he. May I sit?” Bryn nodded. “Thank you. I admit I’m surprised that we’re meeting again.”

Bryn sank into a couch and stared at the ceiling. Ancient creatures writhed in a muted fresco. “Why is that?”

“You’re a traitor, simply.”

“Not an uncommon phenomenon, as I’ve learned.”

“Yes, but not every traitor has been discovered in a rebel den. Some are so far... purely theoretical.”

“I was only looking to the prince, who is like my brother. It is plausible.”

“It is not. The king is blind to you. I don’t know why I’m irritated — this is useful. Provided, of course, you’re still committed in the way we spoke of some time ago. Which I have been wondering about, myself. Brutalized, starved, frozen... I wonder if you will maintain your resolve in spite of such soft cushions?”

Bryn did not answer. Edgar asked why they were meeting. “I need to go and look for Ippoleus,” Bryn told Edgar.

“The king has ordered you watched. He wants you to run to Varra. Leaving is not wise.”

“Won’t you hear my reasons?”

“They do not matter.”

“All you must do is tell the king you were watching me, and that I never left this chamber.”

“A brilliant strategy. What happens when I tell the king I was watching you, and he tells me some other cloak was watching *me*, and that nothing of the sort happened?”

“He doesn’t trust you?”

“He does not trust anyone. And if you’re wondering why, look in that mirror there.”

Bryn stared through the floorboards. “Then we reach out to this other spy, and we enlist him too. The rebellion will have something to offer him.”

“No. Absolutely not. One does not *make* allies — you find them. A made ally turns the moment someone makes him a richer one. You can hardly trust found allies.”

“Artum is going to use the prince to fight a war he knows nothing about. Ippoleus is innocent of everything, and yet no one will help him but me.”

“Being born is crime enough for many.” Edgar stretched his legs. “Have you thought that it might be time to let Ippoleus go? Yes, I know,” he held up his hands, “he matters to you. You’ve risked your life for him before. But is that any reason to do it again? Why chance so much for — and I say this for accuracy, without malice — for the sake of an idiot?”

“He is my family. I’ll do for Ippoleus anything you will do to save your own son.”

“But you share no blood. I understand that an orphaned boy wants a family, but why not choose a less... difficult brother?”

“He is my kin because I can’t remember my life without him.”

Edgar nodded. “If you must be reckless, at least be cunning. You could leave the palace, provided that you did nothing treasonous while outside it. I will try and make arrangements. Until I do, you will stay in this room.”

“Very well.”

“And you give your word?”

“Does it mean anything?”

“You cannot talk like this. You cannot throw yourself away.”

“Then I give you my word.”

“Good. And have faith that I am searching for the prince. Accept help. Now I will leave you to your sleep, as I’m needed elsewhere.”

Bryn shook his hand. “Tell me, is your family well?”

“Yes, for now. But we are all as you say — alive on sufferance. Good night, Bryn.”

When the spy left, Bryn fed Varra’s message to the fire and slid into bed. His thoughts before sleep were of silk, not rebellion.

Bryn woke and would not rise from bed. There was no reason to. He blinked languidly and watched fresh snow piling on the window sill. While he slept, one of the servants had lit a fire in the grate. His unease at this benign trespass — he had not even stirred — was outweighed by the warmth and the novel sense of being rested. The prince’s terrors and his own constant fear had ruined his sleep at the mill. Both were gone; no one could come for him now, and all he had to do was surrender.

Worry for the prince’s well-being, along with a full bladder, finally drove him from bed. Bryn dressed and exited the suite, nodding to the guards there.

“Am I free to come and go?” he asked.

“We’ve had nothing from the king, so not yet.” The contempt in the guard’s voice was lacquered by the thinnest possible coat of civility.

“I see. And what is your name?”

“You don’t need to know my name. All you need to know from me is if you can come and go, and I’ve told you no, so our commerce is done. Get back in your rooms.”

“An interesting strategy. A little risky, though. What happens when this confusion is cleared up and I am free again? Are you not concerned about how I describe your hospitality to the king?”

“And what if this confusion is not cleared up, and we find you a smaller room, one that is underground?”

The other guard lifted his eyebrow. He was a smaller man, with black hair and pocked cheeks. “My name is Raske, my lord. This is Iulus, and forgive me, but you really must be in your room until the king says otherwise.”

“Then tell me, Raske, am I meant to starve in these chambers? I need food, and some entertainment. A book from the library.”

“Name both and I will see about getting them.”

Bryn requested poached eggs, a filet of cured ham, and the bestiary he read with Ippoleus.

Wiping the grease from his lips, Bryn opened the bestiary and located the entry for the griffin. Two folios were devoted to front and side views of the creature. Another three pages contained reports of its diet and habitats, accompanied by less finished sketches. “Once and half again the height of a tall man. A ravenous terror to men foolish enough to disturb it. The Tibryns are the only clan of men brave enough to make the creature their prey.”

The bestiary was created in a time nearer the building of the Wall, when the world was bolder and the gods had not yet diluted their blood. He closed the book and thought of the diminished creature he had discovered in the woods.

Time passed. Snowflakes stuck to the window pane and melted to beads. Bryn left the room again. “I would like to meet with the king.”

Iulus frowned. “As I said before—”

“Yes, follow me, then. Unless you’re meant to protect the furniture, as well?”

The guards shrugged to each other and trailed after Bryn.

Bryn found the king in the garden, as he had expected.

“You’re out here more in the winter than the summer, I think,” he called from the arcade.

The king sat on a bench, distinguished from the statues of his ancestors only by the lack of snow on his head. “I always found the scent of flowers cloying,” he replied. “Join me. Not you, guards.”

Bryn walked down the shoveled paths, enjoying the snow crunching beneath his boots. In the summer the queen and princesses came here to watch the bees and butterflies ply their erratic circuits. In the winter there were only the statues and the king, thinking deeply. Bryn sat down beside him.

“Your sleep?” the king inquired.

“Better than I can remember — and no dreams.”

“I wonder if I should find that surprising.”

“I told you the truth. Nothing more I could do.”

“It would seem so. Artum’s men answered our questions, and they present a similar sequence of events. Their interpretation differs widely, of course.”

“And how are you inclined to interpret?”

“As a boy it was your inconstancy that frustrated me. Difficult to keep you to one subject or pursuit. Now that you’ve returned — you’ve become something else. There is some conviction to you. Even if I’m not clear how it lays, I can see it there. One of the many things I ponder here as I freeze myself.”

“And what else?”

“If Ippoleus will be recovered. Those men told us all they knew, but I do not imagine it will lead to much.”

“You must find him. Your brother will try to use him.”

“And you think that likely? The boy is too simple to be harnessed.”

“He brought me across the kingdom in an instant, with talent only.”

“A special case. He thought he was protecting you. Artum will get nothing from him.”

“Perhaps.” He gazed at the snow drifts. “You’ll kill Artum’s men?”

“Yes, they’ll hang. This bothers you?”

“No. In fact, I’d like to make a request. Feed them to the griffin.”

“The griffin?”

“A show of power, as your ancestors would make: the griffin is a monster, and we command monsters. It might be an effective reminder that the crown is not weak. Even in winter.”

It was too cold for clouds. Wind flung street grit into the faces of the king’s retinue. Bryn walked at the front, separated from the king by three bloodguard, including Tetny, who scowled at Bryn whenever he turned his head. Bryn wound his scarf more tightly and rubbed his gloved hands together. Something had changed for Tetny, and Bryn decided not to

discover what that was. In Bryn's opinion they had been friends, but he understood that others could afford to define the term more strictly, and so he was not surprised at Tetny's hostility. This was no different than the behavior of the servant children he had fostered with, who had been his friends until they grew old enough to understand their station, and how it related to his.

The execution took place just north of the city in a small arena that once hosted lion-baits, before lions had become extinct in the kingdom. A crowd had gathered in spite of the cold and suddenness of the event. They had come on whispers they would see a griffin, whispers planted by Edgar and his men in the larger taverns and pleasure houses. Now the people stamped their feet on the old stones of the bleachers, clouds of mist rising over their heads. They watched silently as the king, Bryn, and the bloodguard took their position in a roofed box. It was crowded inside. A slot afforded them a view of the arena and shielded them from projectiles. At the center of the ring the condemned huddled together. They had been given swords, at Bryn's suggestion. "Let them see that fighting is futile."

The king had nodded. "A stern lesson."

Horses were shy of griffins, and so a cart with heavy iron bars was wheeled into the arena by lower-ranked talents. The cage rattled as the furious griffin threw itself against the bars, and its shriek was familiar to Bryn.

The king gave no speech. He only leaned from his window and bellowed, "This is the end of all treason!" At his signal, one of the talents — all had stepped well away — unlocked the cage from a safe distance. The griffin burst out. Bryn crowded to the front to see: how the two men cowered together and how the beast circled them. They waved their swords tentatively, but the torture had sapped their strength. They must have been weak as Bryn and Ippoleus had been during their own encounter. If the condemned could hear his advice, Bryn would have told them to try hollering, or waving their arms. They stood hip to hip, hunched and silent. It was clear the griffin would not be frightened off.

The griffin pounced on Nikos first, driving him to the ground with one of its huge paws. The anonymous driver — Bryn assumed his name

had been tortured from him, too — attempted to stab at the griffin while its claws extended into Nikos's lungs, but the griffin swiped at him and tore his jaw away.

The battle was over, and the griffin settled to its haunches to begin its feast. The disgusted spectators drained away as the griffin tore strips of flesh from the carcasses. Bryn wiped away a few tears and waited for the king to signal his satisfaction with a curt nod. The royal party exited their viewing platform, leaving the arena to the griffin, its handlers, and its meat.

AUGURY

BRYN WOKE ON THE THIRD MORNING AFTER HIS RETURN, temporarily ignorant of what the day meant. The cold water of his washbasin jolted his memory. She had told him to betray everything, and he had. But had she expected him to? He coughed and rubbed his eyes. The guards knocked at the door. “King requests your presence,” Raske said.

Bryn stopped at the threshold. The king belabored a steak with his knife and finally brought his fork to his mouth.

“You asked for me?”

“Yes, Bryn, sit. I wanted to discuss today’s plan. But mostly I have grown bored of taking my meals alone.” The king’s eyelid fluttered as he yawned. “And I am so tired, even in the mornings. Am I growing old, or guilty? I was taught that your rest measures your labor.”

“You have much to weigh on your mind.” Bryn worked to achieve a neutral tone. He did not like it when the king asked these sorts of questions, which compelled a certain reply. It was as if the king were an actor practicing a script, and Bryn’s participation was essential only for the sake of rhythm.

“This is true.” The king began sawing at his steak, preparing their

next exchange.

Bryn decided to preempt him, curious if he could. "If I were you, I would have left long ago. Let them take an empty throne."

The king's knife paused halfway through a cut. The king glanced up at Bryn and set his utensils to the side of his plate. "And what does the world beyond hold for someone like me? The chair makes me king, I make it a throne... separated, we mean nothing."

"You'd be alive and with your family. Out of danger."

"I am too old to become someone else. All the possibility was wrung out of me long ago. Easier to die as one man than try to live as two. Like my brother. He thought he was one thing for all the years until I was born. And that simple fact proved his first idea to be a lie. But he's never surrendered it, or forgiven me for breaking the illusion. You can see how devastating it is. To balance what you know yourself to be against all the world's proofs — that takes true greatness. More than I have. Certainly more than he has. Tell me, what will he do if he wins?"

"He has said he will open the Door to all those who wish to leave."

"Do you believe him?"

"Partly, because it would be prudent."

"Also what those peasants want to hear."

"Yes."

"He can't give it to them. Even were I to die, the Door would still be closed to him. I wonder if he recognizes as much... perhaps he cannot help his ambitions."

"You sound less concerned than you look."

"Do not mistake me: even a fool demands concern, provided he's rallied enough fools to him. And he's won victories. But his army and his victories are tin, no matter what the people think."

"Tin can take an edge, too."

"And I thought you were hiding in a mill, not a smithy. I suppose so, however. Still, I know my brother and his every capability. I'll be quite relieved to have removed this Varra."

Bryn shrugged. "Artum took her soldiers."

"And still I say what I say." The king had forgotten about his break-

fast. “She has charmed you.”

“I deny this, of course. But if you’ll credit my judgement, perhaps I should tell you—”

“That this trap is ill conceived?”

Bryn nodded.

“How surprising. But tell me why.”

“She’s far better than your talents. She’ll sniff them.”

“Marius is quite skilled at concealing himself. Though you’d never guess it from his temper.”

“You’re sending Marius?”

“I would do it myself, if only I were surer that this is not some trap of yours.”

“Sir, how can you say this to me?”

“Please — you have forfeited any claim to righteousness, at the very least. Remember that someone like Artum would have killed you simply for appearances.”

“Yes. I will always be grateful you are not a lesser man.”

The king’s lips thinned. “You will wait for her in the field. Do nothing to alarm her. We know the cipher. You’ll stand at the western edge, by the road. Where the purple flowers grew.”

Those flowers had meant *no danger*. “What if it means something else, now?”

“Varra remembers her codes. When the woman comes into the open, Marius will do his work. Do you understand?”

“I understand.”

Bryn rode alone with his paranoia. He looked back at irregular intervals, hoping to surprise someone, but he saw the usual kinds of travelers, turning from the road at the usual times. They would work in teams, he decided, so any rebels watching would not be certain of his being guarded. Embracing his powerlessness for the time being, Bryn applied himself to the small tasks of proper riding. He corrected his posture as much as his bandages would allow, and gripped the reins more firmly.

During the night a rainstorm had pocked and sullied the snow. This morning the melting was continued by a mild wind in which Bryn could smell springtime. It gripped him, as unseasonable weather did. His life was passing. Wistfulness accompanied that knowledge, two-faced as Ianous: he felt nostalgia for who he had been and who he would be, different in every season. The roads were cold churned mud, and the horse was shod a second time by it. Bryn marked the sun and judged that he would not reach the field quickly. There was time to think.

The sky over Gevio's Field was a confusion of torn clouds the colors of a goose's plumage. Pale and darker clouds contended silently; anyone who saw it would expect weather. Bryn balanced in his stirrups, overlooking the shabby flat space for a moment before swinging his leg and dropping down from his borrowed horse, which was not as good as his last horse, but still reliable. He patted its neck and walked forward, wondering what had become of that horse. He had never given her a name.

The trees at the field's margins felt empty, though they were not. From some quiet vantage, Marius observed him, all his monstrous talent tensed within. Bryn interrogated his own poorer sensitivities for a hint of Varra's presence. He could feel nothing but the fitful wind on his brow. Under his feet, the snow compacted with soggy crunches. He came to stand a small way into the field, where the purple flowers would soon grow. At the palace, these were called queensglove. The peasants called them mothflowers.

Bryn weighed his options in this empty space. He could end a war with a snowball. In a few weeks his back would heal. Ippoleus would be brought home. They would build the kingdom with blocks again. In the spring Bryn could ride in the countryside, unarmed. His thoughts had been muddled, but peril and the damp chill in the air now sharpened his thinking. He entertained Varra's death as a general proposition, abstract as truth or human liberty. With every death, gifts and problems left the world. He considered each for some time, and made his decision. He was not surprised by it, only how slow it was in coming.

Bryn folded his arms and waited.

Three birds burst from a tree across the field and flew away to the north. Some time later, a rabbit began its long journey across the field. Bryn observed every hop, anticipating a hawk. The rabbit reached the other side without incident. Overhead, the clouds rowed past.

Finally Marius came striding from the woods, disgusted.

“Did you see anything?” Bryn asked him.

“Besides that fucking rabbit? No. She was too timid to even come near.”

“Perhaps she knew you were here.”

Marius laughed. “If she did, she guessed it. But maybe she assumed the king wouldn’t leave a rat unwatched.”

“I have your permission to leave?”

“She isn’t that talented, boy. Believe me. I was going to strew bits of her all over this field for you to see that.”

Bryn waited patiently.

“Yes, you have my permission to leave. And you have my permission to fall off that horse and break your neck, besides. Anything else?”

“Only that,” Bryn said. He mounted his horse and trotted away.

In the early days of the kingdom, the crown had kept oracles who claimed to see the future in the flight of birds. They had lost favor and were executed for their lies: the future was blank, and everyone knew that birds flew for their own reasons.

“She was not there,” the king said. His arms were folded.

Bryn had been brought directly to the king. Though he had rehearsed his excuses throughout the return journey, still it was not convincing when he offered, “She must have sensed Marius’s presence. I told you she was talented.”

“Or she was never going to be there, and you are providing only the illusion of cooperation.”

“You cannot blame a fur trapper if one of his traps does not work. Chance is involved.”

“How true. And yet I would not employ a trapper who never brought me any pelts, either. But yes, let us safeguard our future endeavors against chance.” He pulled a scroll from the drawer of his desk and held it up. “You will write down on this paper as many names as you can think of, and where they might be found. Include any common meeting places, too. Give me a hundred names if you must — so long as this scroll brings me ten dead rebels, I will be convinced of your good faith. And if this information proves as flimsy as your last, then we will find you different accommodations.”

The tight scroll was splayed before him with two ornate paperweights of rampant griffins. The golden pen — stolen from the outside by an earlier iteration of Edgar, for the use of a previous king — was pressed into his hand. With exaggerated throwing motions Bryn drew the sluggish ink to the pen’s tip. He spent some time scratching it dryly against the parchment, leaving marks like a cat’s claws. The names of the rebels, who had housed him, and took him at his word. The pen was prepared to write. It hung, eagerly, over a white expanse. Bryn would not press it down. Behind him, the king’s boots clacked on the stone floors. Cool air lay across his neck.

He only knew he could not write *Calline* or *Inogen*. He thought of rebels and tried to recall some deficiency which would justify their inclusion. It might be better — fairer — to write down those he only knew by name. Or those least likely to be caught once he betrayed them.

“Begin,” the king said.

Sighing, Bryn started to write. As he did, the king ambled the room’s perimeter, inspecting the small precious ornaments which decorated the many mantels. Bryn was struggling with the tenth name when Edgar appeared at the door. He whispered to the king, but glanced over the king’s shoulder at Bryn, who tapped the face of his dead clock and then his chest. Edgar nodded to the king and Bryn simultaneously.

After Edgar left, Bryn threw down the pen.

“There are your names,” he said. It had been difficult to invent so many. The only genuine information related to the cousins. The rest of the rebels had never existed.

The king glanced over the list, pleased. “You are dismissed.”

Bryn nodded and made his long walk to his suite, under guard. Iulus and Raske took up their positions at the door; he went inside and discovered Edgar in his bed chamber. “I need you to take a message to Varra for me,” he said. “I don’t know where she’ll be, perhaps near Gevio’s. Do you think you can find her?”

“Of course,” Edgar said, irritated. “It’s much easier to hide from Marius than from me.”

Bryn scribbled quickly, smudged his name as she had instructed, and sealed the message.

Edgar took it and left.

Bryn waited for hours. He passed them under the blankets, shifting whenever he grew comfortably sore. Long past midnight he heard the soft scraping of the secret doorway. Bryn rolled out of bed and met Edgar in the sitting room. “You saw her?”

Edgar nodded.

“And what was her reply?”

The pistol clunked as Edgar set it on the table.

A week after he had written the names, Bryn cradled the pistol in his lap. Staring helped him feel he understood its secret mechanisms. If he stared long enough, he might intuit if the weapon was impotent. A sword would be better, he thought: to test it required no more than a press of the thumb. Outsider technology was mysterious as kingdom talent. Edgar had fired it for them, but since then months had passed and it had been silent. Bryn could not help thinking that, left alone, the oily bullets were like bees, stupid and lazy in the winter cold. Soon a knock would come at the door, and he could not be seen with the weapon; neither could he put it away. Perhaps he could pull the trigger, once, and blame the noise on something else.

From where he sat Bryn could see his reflection in the oval mirror. Bryn stood and aimed at his reflection, placing the bore over his right eye. He cycled his focus between the perfect black circle of pistol’s eye and his

own, set within his impassive face. His finger went to the trigger, curved like a fang, inviting his pull. Beside the crack there would be smoke, and a smell, and the jolt of the weapon in his hands. Once would be enough — if he did not miss.

There was a knock, and by the time the door opened Bryn had turned and hidden the pistol under this jacket.

“The king will see you now,” Raske said. They walked silently through the halls. Thus far, the crown’s hunters had failed to locate any of the rebels Bryn had named, but soon — perhaps tonight — the king would blame something beside their ineptitude. He had summoned Bryn without explanation. Perhaps the king wished to condemn him personally.

Arant and Cail, posted at the king’s door, did not search him for a weapon, and he silently scorned their complacency as they admitted him to the king’s presence. The door clicked shut. At the far end of the chamber, the king stood facing the window. His back was turned, and no one else was in the room; two guards stood outside, another three were nearby. Six men in all. It would be a long run to one of the unguarded doors Bryn knew of. His palms were slick.

The king turned. He was studying the results of his written labors. “Tell me how this sounds.” He cleared his throat, and held the paper at the distance required by his ageing eyes. “These traitors among you claim that they are you, and you are them. But the rebels’ interests are not yours. They would burn your family’s homes as long as that fire would destroy the palace too. They would kill you and your family, as long as the king died too. Protect yourself and this kingdom, and bring the crown information about these traitors.’ And then I will tell them how much gold they will receive.”

The pistol lay hard against Bryn’s heart. “Gold for information?”

“It is sound. The rebels rely on the protection and silence of the other smallfolk. Deivo only knows why this has been granted, but perhaps an incentive will spur them to do their duty. We need peace. If this rebellion continues much longer, the planting will be disrupted. You yourself said they were starving.”

Bryn’s heartbeat slowed. He knew nothing of weapons. All he had

ever done to the king was talk. “And they are,” he said. “But ‘doing their duty’ will see them murdered by the rebels.”

“No one compels the rebels to butcher their own kind. And no one will be forced to assume the risk.”

“You’ll wave a gold coin in front of peasants who have never so much as held a piece of silver, and then say that this is an opportunity they may reject?” Bryn planned to say more, but since his return it was no longer safe to play the contrarian with the king. “Very well,” he said. “I would remove any mention of their loyalty to their kingdom. They will do this only to save themselves. And you might claim that you have extended a peace offer, and that the rebels have rejected it.”

“Forceful,” the king said, “but risky. The peasants will know that I have offered no peace.”

“Not many, in fact. And it does not matter anyway. If you like, send another proclamation first, some peace offer.”

“I do not sue for peace with traitors.”

“You won’t — it will only appear that you are. Make the treaty as generous as you please: it will make no difference. Artum and Varra will never yield, just as you won’t. This will make them unreasonable in the eyes of the peasants.”

“Clever. Very well. Write both proclamations. I will review them tomorrow. I must retire.”

“Wait, sir. I want to know what happened when Tetny found me at the mill.”

“What is left to know?”

“Tetny was hunting the cousins, yes?”

“Correct.”

“How did he lose them at the mill?”

“It was snowing quite heavily, Bryn. Perhaps you remember nearly freezing to death?”

“They aren’t birds. The snow slows them, too. Did he go the wrong way?”

“No, the girl there told him the way, and he followed their tracks to Hektor’s body. They split there, and he didn’t trust his men to hunt either

cousin without him.”

“What happened to the girl?”

The king laughed. “It is rare to see someone back that delicately into their point. Tell me her name, then.”

“Calline.”

“And she was your lover, then? Your peasant romance?”

“What happened to her?”

“It’s not wise to grow fond of women you could never have. So your father was common — you are a noble in everything but the smallest point of fact.”

Bryn could not keep the emotion from his voice. “Is she alive?”

“Is she — Bryn, what are you insinuating? Of course she is alive. Tetny asked her a question, she answered truthfully, and that was all. By the time he returned to the mill she was gone. What interest would the crown have in harming a girl like that? Now write.”

VISITING

THE GUARDS ALWAYS KNOCKED TWICE, LOUDLY. Bryn was reading and did not bother to call out. When Raske entered he gazed about the room blankly, not noticing Bryn, who sat quietly by the window. Seeing him, he bobbed his head, and Bryn returned the nod. It was difficult for Bryn to not be cordial with someone he saw every day, though he wished he could manage the small revenge of haughtiness.

“The princess Thetia is here to see you,” Raske said.

“I have no wish to see her. Send her away.”

Raske fidgeted. “I don’t think I can.”

Bryn sighed and closed the book. “And you will not try, either.” When Raske said nothing and did not move, Bryn waved at him irritably. “Then send her in.”

Thetia excelled in dance lessons as a girl, and had unconsciously mimicked her beloved instructor in every respect, including her gait, which was not appropriate to a princess — particularly a young one. At the time, Bryn had pretended to find the rocking of her hips ridiculous as Amara did, and now that it was no affectation he still had to feign indifference.

“This is where he put you,” she said. Her voice was slower and more considered than he remembered. “Is the extra space worth the guards?”

“Certainly,” he said. “But now I receive more visitors than I ever wanted.”

“So this is why you have not come to see me. You’re angry.”

“No. I did not come to see you because I did not think you wanted to see me.”

“Why would this be? Do you not think that Amara and I missed you, while you were gone? That I am not happy to see you again? You said goodbye as though my father were piqued. And we finish our lessons and discover it was *exile*. Now you are back, and for days, and you do not come and visit? Not even me?”

“I have been busy.”

“Is that so? Because you have guards at your doors.”

“Have you forgotten?” He gestured to the secret door’s façade.

“Surely father has bricked that up.” Bryn shook his head. “Guards, then?” He shook his head again.

“He is testing me. Why have you come, Thetia?”

“To see you and talk with you. Why must you look so suspicious?”

“Because if you have come here for some amusement, I would rather return to my book.”

“No amusement, though we could use some. I haven’t set foot outside the palace since the first hangings. I can only walk the garden so many times. Tell me: how is our brother? What happened?”

“He was alive when they took him from me. Not well, but alive. I’m sure he will be found soon, wherever Artum hid him.”

“I want to know what else has happened out there. We’ve heard nothing credible.”

“Things are desperate. A lot of hunger.”

“You are thin.”

“I lived easy, compared to most of the peasants. Varra made sure we had enough to eat.”

“Varra — we’ve heard a lot of rumors about her.”

“And I cannot tell you if any are true or not.”

“Thin and mysterious, too! You are a new man, Bryn.”

“I’m not. I simply don’t know.”

“But you were with her?”

“Yes, often. She reminds me of your mother, a little. Inscrutable.”

“Believe me, I know that woman better than I know myself. Every waking moment I’m in her quarters. She’s grown serious about my education. She thinks I might be queen. Very soon.”

“You would be a good one, I think.”

“Maybe. But so many terrible things would have to happen first... I wouldn’t have anyone to help me.”

“I would help you.” Bryn regretted saying it. It was too easy to slip into old ways of being — they were always comfortable. “Though I suppose if you became queen, I would be long dead,” he joked, to distract her from his earnestness.

“Do not be morbid,” she said.

“You asked me what it is like out there — it is hard not to be.”

“Luckily you are back with us now.”

“As far as that goes.” Thetia frowned, and Bryn explained. “The king does not trust me anymore.”

“Of course he does. Even ready to hang you, the king trusts you more than he trusts me, or Amara. That’s always been so.”

The snow melted, exposing yellow grass. Curtains of cold drizzle dropped at angles and vanished, sometimes the afternoon’s only accomplishment. While the weather and plants effected spring, there was no news of the rebellion. Artum was quiet. Even the cousins were lethargic under the low gray sky. Gold had been offered, but no one had seen the giant, or the griffin killer.

Without either man suggesting it, Bryn and the king resumed their old practice of reading alongside each other. It passed the hours. Every few pages the king would quote something, both of them saving their place with a finger. The king favored the oldest histories and the bawdy verse of a poet named Thurides. “Wisest man in the kingdom,” the king said, after reading a couplet aloud. “Whenever he managed to get his head out from between someone’s legs.”

Bryn nodded and returned his attention to the swarming text beneath his finger. He was exhausted constantly, from the long days of reading and the subtle muscular strain of fear. He tried to make out a line — the book was an old fantasy of a pilgrimage to the great cities of the outside, a genre popular with the court in the days of the king's grandfather — but the description of a city of stone and metal and glass was impossible, its meaning breaking its own back like a mad horse. More than the incomprehensibility of the text, Bryn was distracted by the king's agitation. He was thinking so intently it was nearly audible.

"Tell me, Bryn. Do you think either of these cousins still lives?"

"I do."

"It's possible they took sick, or starved."

"Maybe. But so long as they have their weapons, and someone else has food, they will never starve."

"But their butcheries have ceased. Which would suggest they have retreated to their wildwood. Perhaps it's time we followed them there," the king said. "You remember the way well enough to create a map?"

"I believe so, sir."

"Excellent. Marius will assemble a detachment. Tetny — fetch a messenger."

It was easy to forget the presence of the bloodguard, and when Tetny came to attention it was as if a vase had opened eyes. "My lord," Tetny said.

"I said to fetch a messenger."

"Yes, my lord. I humbly request to accompany Marius's troops."

The king put his palm to the table and leaned back, contemplating Tetny with his chin in the bracket of his thumb and forefinger. "You are one of my protectors. You are not an assassin."

"If I kill Barabo now, I won't have to protect you from him when he next attacks."

"No. The bloodguard is the king's shield, and you are too valuable to me. I won't have you wandering into the den of these cousins."

"You sent me after him once before."

"And you failed."

Tetny inclined his head and stepped into the hallway. When the messenger appeared the king concisely dictated his wishes: that Marius handpick a score of the strongest talents he could spare, and have them prepared for an expedition in two days. The messenger nodded as he listened, and Bryn noticed that Tetny listened too, glowering.

The next morning Bryn's door banged open and the flat of a sheathed sword smacked his bare chest. Tetny stood at the foot of the bed, in full armor. "Get up."

Winching, running his stinking tongue over his dry teeth, Bryn asked why. "And what does this have to do with it?" he asked, pushing the sword aside.

"We're going to find Barabo."

"No, that is Marius's task. Weren't you listening? 'The bloodguard is the king's shield. You are too valuable,' something." Bryn slipped from bed and padded to his washbasin.

Tetny stood in his way. "It's not Marius's task. It's ours, and we'll bring Barabo's head back by nightfall."

"You know I'm sorry about Osmos, but I won't wander into the woods with you to be butchered by the cousins. Will you move?"

Tetny reached behind Bryn and braced his shoulders with his right forearm. Then he punched him in the stomach. It lifted Bryn off his feet, dropping him to hands and knees. Tetny knelt beside Bryn and spoke in his ear, though the pain and the retching made him difficult to understand: "I do not care what you think you won't do. You are going to take me to the cousins."

Bryn shook his head. Tetny curled his lip and stood up. He walked behind Bryn, then kicked him between the legs. Bryn groaned and curled about himself, pressing his hands to his groin in a useless attempt to stanch the waves of queasy agony. "I'll call the guards. You'll be put in the dungeons," he groaned.

"I know what you are." Tetny set his boot on Bryn's ear and ground his cheek into the floor. Bryn tried to hit him, but only managed to injure

his knuckles on the red plate. “Do not talk. You can’t lie to me, because I already know. And I don’t care. But if you do not take me to the cousins, I will kill you. You understand?” Bryn felt the pressure increase, then saw Tetny’s other foot lift from the ground.

“Yes,” Bryn gasped. “Stop.”

The bloodguard stepped off his head.

Bryn grabbed the rim of his washbasin and hauled himself upright, cradling his head with his other arm. “I won’t bring a sword,” he said, when he could see again. “You have to give me something else.”

On the road, Bryn said to Tetny, “You’ve made a mistake, taking me out of the palace. I doubt the king will forgive this.” Tetny had absconded with Bryn on the authority of his red armor, which made him a king among lesser guards. Tetny did not respond to Bryn’s comment, or to his string of increasingly innocuous observations. Frustrated, Bryn said, “If I were a traitor, then you’d be a fool to follow me into the cousins’ woods.”

“No. You’re Varra’s man, and we know that she and the cousins have fallen out. So if I die, you die too.”

Bryn hoped his indignation sounded real enough — it came from a genuine anger. “The king knows I am loyal. Do you think you know better than the king?”

“He can believe whatever he chooses. But I was at the mill. I saw. You didn’t want to be found.”

Since Bryn had last been in the wildwood, the trees had leafed. Before it had been dense; now it was like pushing through curtains. Bryn found the anvil-shaped rock, and the red tree, but from there he was lost. He began to make random, decisive turnings, hoping to delay Tetny’s inevitable accusation.

“You’ve lost us,” Tetny said.

Bryn shrugged. “Perhaps if I had twenty scouts...”

“You told the king you knew where they hid.”

“If you’d hoped on ambushing them, you are a fool. These are their woods, and you’re not a hunter. Just a swordsman. We will be lucky if we

manage to find a way out before they find us. And what if it's both of them?"

Tetny eyed the looming trees and their branches. "A good thing I gave you that crossbow, then." He laughed.

Bryn's horse was intrigued by something to the right, and he indulged it. Bryn worried about snakes and shaky ground, but a stillness in the hush gave him the insight of quarry — it would be Barabo's knife, not any snake. The bloodguard goaded Barabo, and he would soon be answered. The weakness beneath Tetny's ferocity incensed Bryn, and he said, "You could have drowned yourself. Fallen out a window. It would have spared me some riding."

"You think that is what I am doing? We bleed for the king. We defend him past death. But when we die, who avenges us? Who pays for our blood?"

Even though he could still feel the hobnails of Tetny's boot on his throbbing ear, Bryn did not have the heart to argue with him. He could say that the king had good plans to avenge Osmos, which they had preempted by two days, or that, by inciting the assassination attempt, the king was also complicit in Osmos's death. This logic would mean nothing to Tetny, who only understood that until he struck down the man who struck down Osmos, justice shunned the kingdom. Starving like a peasant would cure Tetny of his romanticism, but for now Bryn was its captive.

"You're wasting yourself, Tetny."

Tetny's hand raised for silence. As slowly as the sweat trickling down his cheekbone, his head turned, searching the forest. "He is here," Tetny declared, softly. Bryn reached for his pack and pulled the crossbow. Tetny pointed. "That way." With the weapon down at his leg, Bryn cranked the string back and laid the bolt in its groove. The horses tramped forward. Tetny hunched over the pommel of his saddle to peer between trunks. A clearing lay before them: at its center stood Barabo. He held a sword in his hand, and his knife was sheathed on his belt.

Nearly growling, Tetny prompted his horse, and it sprang into the glade. Bryn contrived to emerge from the trees at an angle, with his right hand hidden from view. Barabo's enormous colorless smock, with

yellowish crescents beneath the arms, rippled over his thin frame in the weak breeze. Only his straight nose and wounded eyes distinguished themselves from the tangle of his black hair and black beard. "I shouldn't be surprised you still live," he said to Bryn. "The weakest men always find a way to live longest."

Tetny dismounted and pulled his sword free, holding it overhead a moment before bringing it before his face. Bryn had seen him perform this ritual before training. With the blade dividing his sight into two fields, Tetny called out to Barabo. "Last summer you made an attempt on the life of King Aelius, the rightful sovereign of this kingdom. As you failed in this, you killed a man in red armor like mine. For murdering that man, today you will die."

Barabo listened to Tetny's proclamation, amused. He returned his attention to Bryn. "When I kill him, try running. I'd enjoy some sport."

Bryn nodded. "As you say."

When Tetny shuffled forward and Barabo focused on his opponent, Bryn lifted the crossbow he had hidden behind the horse, aimed it, and fired. The bolt struck Barabo in his thigh. Tetny, surprised as Barabo, hopped forward to attack. His first three stabs were knocked aside, but when Barabo's body understood its injury, the defiance drained from his face.

"Malo," he howled, "they've killed me." Barabo could not even pivot on his wounded right leg when Tetny circled towards that side; he parried the lunge and the first two cuts out of custom only, and could do nothing to defend himself when Tetny's sword crashed into his ribcage. The impact knocked him off his feet. Maniac adrenaline allowed Barabo to shove himself into a kneeling position. "He has very good ears," he said, just before Tetny decapitated him with a woodcutter's stroke.

The head bounced to the right and settled on the new grass. The body toppled left. Blood issued from the stumped neck in heavy spurts, and Bryn did not look away.

"What did he mean, Bryn?" Tetny asked. "About Malo having good ears."

"He's not here, is he?"

"No," Tetny said, but his falling expression revised that statement.

“If you have another bolt, I’d load it.”

Bryn did not, and would not have had time to do so even if he had. Malo could be heard crashing through the undergrowth to their left. He leaped into the open with a roar, lashing out with an axe that should have required two hands. Tetny flung his blade up; sparks kissed his face. He staggered back into a crouch and held the sword level, waiting. Malo was staring at Barabo’s body, his eyes too wide open to see. Then he snorted and attacked. Malo aimed for Tetny’s face, which was on the level of his shoulders. The first flurry was four or five strikes, Bryn could not tell. Impossible speed streaked the head of the axe into silver flashing arcs. Tetny answered each, interposing his blade at the critical moment, guiding the screeching axe from his flesh. Malo was not deterred: he pressed forward, chopping. Tetny sidestepped, ducked, and parried, but not strongly enough. The axe rent the pauldron of his weak arm and came away red. The sight of his own blood inspired Tetny.

He leaped forward with a grimace like a smile. His sword lashed. At such speeds, armed with an axe head no longer than a hand span, Malo’s defense surpassed mortal limits on quickness and accuracy. The giant and the bloodguard fought until the steel failed. Tetny drew his arm back fully and leveled a swing at Malo’s neck. When Malo blocked, there was a tremendous clang, and then Tetny held a jagged stub.

Seeing his advantage, Malo roared, bringing his axe down and across his body. Tetny writhed out of the way and used his talent to urge the axe into the dirt. In the moment it caught there, Tetny stomped and shattered the wooden haft. To Bryn, Malo looked no less dangerous for being unarmed. He discarded the stub of the haft and came at Tetny with his hands. Tetny ran him through, and the two struggled over the blade. Tetny wrested the sword away by kicking off Malo’s leg. The blade gashed Malo’s palms as it slid from his grasp. Tetny’s triumph vanished when his momentum carried him backward too quickly, and he tripped. Malo jumped atop him, reaching for his throat. Before the big man landed, Bryn saw Tetny lift the broken sword upright. Malo was impaled again.

This did not stop his hands from closing about Tetny’s throat. The bloodguard choked. Bryn did not know who would die first, or if Malo was

even capable of it. He dismounted with a leap, casting about the clearing for a weapon. The pistol lay in his pack, but if he killed Malo and Tetny lived, he would have to explain it. So he scrambled to grab the stem of the axe. It was heavy enough, he thought. He hopped forward and swung, striking Malo squarely in the temple. Malo grunted and his hands loosened; another swing sent him to his back.

Tetny gasped and retched. Malo looked at the sky, amazed, his belly pierced. In a moment Tetny would recover and finish him, or Malo would rise — Bryn realized he knew nothing about the capabilities of warriors. He decided not to wait. Remembering Malo's face that night he had offered to kill the prince for nothing, as something incidental, Bryn hit him in the face until his body only moved when the club struck it. Bryn threw the axe handle aside and fell to the ground, his arms aching.

"Tetny?" he asked. "Will you live?"

After some time Tetny managed to stand. His left eye had filled with blood, and he could not speak above a hoarse whisper. Bryn helped him into the saddle. Tetny pointed. "Take the head," he whispered. Breath squeaked and hissed in his crushed throat.

"No."

"Don't worry. I already did the hard part."

Bryn grimaced and spat.

The griffin's claw lay in its wooden sheath. Bryn detached this from the belt, and tied it to his own. Then he removed the shirt from the body, and took the three steps to where the head lay. He approached from behind; he would not look into Barabo's eyes, and had no curiosity about what he might see in them. Using the shirt, he swathed the head and tied off the bundle. Bryn did not understand how a man's life, all his memories and secret thoughts, could reside in something so light. When he presented the bundle — staining red at the bottom — to Tetny, the bloodguard calmed his shying horse. "The saddlebag," he whispered. Bryn stashed it there and stalked to his own horse. When he mounted, he saw that Tetny had been attempting to get his attention. He was pointing at Malo's corpse.

“Both,” he whispered.

“No. I’ve done enough to him.” Bryn craned his neck. “You couldn’t tell who he is, anyway.”

Tetny scowled. He would have argued if he had his voice. Casting a longing look at his dead enemies, he spurred his horse, and the king’s men rode away.

Later, when they ate at an inn, Tetny watched Bryn apply himself to his meal. Tetny himself could only manage a few swallows of water. Bryn had been telling Tetny that he had never seen swordplay like that. “Malo’s the biggest and fastest man I have ever seen, and you were faster.” Tetny said nothing, and Bryn ducked his head for another bite of mutton.

“Bryn,” Tetny rasped. Over the din, he was hard to hear. “Bryn.” Bryn leaned closer. “I wouldn’t have stopped him. If it had been you choking.” There was a quiet hatred in his eyes.

Bryn chewed some bread. “I doubt I would have saved myself.” He scraped butter on his slice. “But at least you’ll always know that you owe your life to me.” He took another bite.

Upon their return, they were roughly shepherded into the king’s chambers. Coolly outraged, the king demanded an explanation that Tetny was physically incapable of giving, and so Bryn spoke for him.

“Forgive our rashness, sir.” Barabo’s head, still bundled, lay on its ear between Tetny and the king. “Tetny was perhaps overcome by zeal. I made my reservations known.”

Tetny gave a mangled chuckle.

“But as you can see, we have returned, safe and victorious. I know, sir — this was disobedience. But it was undertaken with good intentions. Tetny’s only goal is to protect you and avenge Osmos, who was like a brother to him. Now you will not need to risk Marius’s men, and you are a good deal safer than you were this morning.”

“The soundness of a decision is not determined by its outcome, but the quality of the thinking that led to it. Very good, we now have a bloody head staining my table, but that was no guarantee. In fact, that was mostly

luck. I fought Barabo, and he is — was — more talented than you. Not to mention the brute. Which means that, by all probability, you should have cost me my strongest guard and returned Bryn to the wolves, after he worked so hard to come home. And so, Tetny, you disobeyed me for the sake of passion and prevailed, through a small miracle of Deivo's."

The king and Bryn had to lean their heads towards Tetny to hear him speak. "Bryn shot him. With a crossbow."

"A cross—Regardless. Since the Maker has favored you today, I'm under no obligation to do the same. You are relieved of your duty as my guard until I see fit to reinstate you."

"I can serve," Tetny said.

"The armor will keep. Go and see the surgeons, you fool. Thank Deivo that you are still among us."

Tetny bowed and left the chamber, his armor creaking softly. The king seemed to be watching him through the door. Then he pointed at Bryn's torn ear. "You might be the bigger fool, to have joined a fight against those cousins."

"Tetny's doing. I was not eager to join him." Seeing the king's horrified expression, Bryn shrugged. "Do not punish him for that. Your loyal subjects will risk much to serve you."

"This is a fine gift. Messy, though. As you leave, find a servant to take it away."

"Very well. I brought you another trophy, too." Bryn drew the griffin's claw knife and set it down. "Barabo was a skilled archer, as it turns out."

The king nodded grimly.

THE LEDGER

BRYN HEARD FROM THETIA THAT BARABO'S HEAD WAS TARRED and mounted in Deiton's Plaza. She visited often with this kind of news. Bryn asked her if she had heard anything of Ippoleus, as he asked Edgar whenever their paths crossed: neither had. But Edgar made assurances he was looking. So when Bryn and the king's daily reading was interrupted by Edgar, Bryn felt hope. It was clear the spy had news.

After a truncated obeisance, he began to speak of a massacre in the countryside. "They caught wind of one of the informers. A mob sprung up, I'm told."

"And what did this mob do?" the king asked.

"Killed them and burnt the house."

"Why do you tell me this?"

"It was Tecles."

The king drummed his fingers on the table. "Send some men. Ask questions, find out who did this."

"Yes, my lord."

Bryn said, "I would like to go along."

"Why?" the king asked.

As he prepared the lie, Bryn attempted to forget that Edgar was in

the room. To even glance at him would be endangerment. “I know who he was.”

“And how would you know this?”

“The steward keeps good records, but he is not so careful with his locks. I’ve known for some time.”

“Did you meet him?”

“I did.”

The king was fascinated. He leaned forward. “And what did you think of your father?” he asked. There might have been a taunt there, or only curiosity.

Bryn shrugged. “It doesn’t matter. Tecles and his people are dead. Someone has to see to them.”

“Of course. Yes, accompany Edgar.”

Past sunset. Bryn was tired of thinking. All his frenzied rumination upon good and bad resulted in nothing: he could no longer remember if he was supposed to be devastated. Without expectation, he instead applied his attention to dull phenomena. The horses’ hoofbeats slipped in and out of unison. Seven footmen rode behind them. One sneezed four times. The final sneeze, late in coming, drew a small cheer from the other footmen. Edgar rubbed his eye with the first knuckle of his thumb.

“I don’t think it’s wise, you accompanying me,” Edgar said. “I am told that Tecles and his people did not die cleanly.”

“He was my father.” Whatever cruelty had been visited on Tecles, it was not his part to save him. Only to see him buried decently.

“He sold you off. How can that matter?”

“Evil, foolish, or greedy, Tecles is in my blood.”

Bryn had thought himself a capable witness, but when they reached the ruins of Tecles’s estate he shuddered. The bodies hung from the high windows, arranged by size. Mutilations had rendered all but one of the faces useless for identification as humans, let alone individuals. Of the charred and hacked corpses, Bryn judged the leftmost to be Tecles: it was

largest, and he had been a big man. To the right of him the others dangled, a few possibly female, a few children. The last and smallest had not been touched beyond the noose: his clothes, limbs, and features had all been left to him. Spared desecration, the boy's bruising face denied Bryn the fiction that he was only looking at butchered hogs. His stomach turned and he retched, but nothing came up. It was no brother of his, he told himself. Celia had died long ago. A half-brother, at worst.

"You can turn back," Edgar told him.

Bryn shook his head.

With the killing done, the cool business of looting remained. Throngs of people milled about in the fields, while others moved in the upper stories, tossing out the windows sacks of valuables to be caught by accomplices waiting below. Bryn did not resent the looting. But to destroy a man and his people, to take their faces, was what made him shake. When he climbed off his horse, Edgar warned him.

"Accuse no one, Bryn. We are not among friends, and I don't know if these footmen will pull the mob off you."

"Go and ask your questions. I will do nothing risky."

Edgar nodded, satisfied, and went to find his men. Bryn walked unmolested through the deteriorating mob. They could see wealth and power — they could not see responsibility. The knowledge was his alone: the knowledge that the king he would not kill had made decrees, and those decrees had led to this crime. He had even improved the language.

A man dug through a heap of furniture. Two chairs lay overturned beside him. He struggled to extricate a third from the pile.

"All those bodies the family?" Bryn asked.

The man glanced at the house and winced. "Who knows? I wasn't here to see. Lift that, would you?"

Bryn pulled aside a table that lay atop the chair, which then came free. The man crowed thanks and hurried off with his bounty.

Bryn entered the house. It echoed with footsteps; half-seen figures scampered through the shadows of the emptied rooms. He stood in the entrance hall. The paintings were gone or tattered, the carpets rolled up and carried off. Shards from a broken mirror reflected the little bit of light

that entered through the gaping doorway — the doors had been taken off their hinges. A man burst out of the upstairs chamber and appeared on the balcony. For a moment he stood where Tecles had, when Bryn had first come here. Then the looter clattered down the stairs, his arms full of clanking things. He rushed past Bryn and into the night.

Bryn walked among the rooms, trying to guess at their former purposes. He imagined the people who had inhabited them, and how they might have done so. It was difficult without light. He came to a small upstairs room and was nearly attacked by a young man who whirled on him with a knife, snarling, “This room’s mine!”

Bryn held up his hands and backed away. He visited the room where Tecles had granted him an audience. It took some work, but he found the ledger Tecles had referenced. Presumably, Bryn himself was listed in there, among the profits. With the book under his arm he went downstairs and encountered an older man who held a spitting torch.

“What are you going to do?” Bryn asked him.

“Burn it,” the man said. “But they stole everything that’d catch, seems like.”

Bryn said, “They did. Don’t burn it. Let the others see what happens to informers.” Let them see the people’s brutality, he thought. “Will you give me the torch? I would like to look for a few more things.”

“Waste your time however you like,” the man said. He handed Bryn the torch, and squinted at him when Bryn repaid him with a silver. Then he shrugged and left.

Bryn carried the torch to the room with the eviscerated couch, wedged it into the sconce, and sat down. In the inconstant light he studied the ledger, turning the pages and running his eyes over the neat columns of figures. Years of careful accounting, every transaction faithfully logged. It must have given him comfort. The pages’ margins were shiny with grease.

Edgar surprised him. “I’ve gotten my answers,” the spy said.

“And who did it?” Bryn asked.

“The answers are for the king. You don’t need to know.”

“Corl, then?”

“Are you ready to leave?”

“I still have work to do,” Bryn said. “Will you help me bury them?”

“I don’t have time. The king will expect me.”

“I can’t leave until they are under ground.”

“I will tell the footmen to help you.”

“Thank you, Edgar.”

Edgar nodded and left. Bryn returned to his reading, until the torch began to gutter and he heard the footmen in the other rooms. They called for him. Bryn did not respond at first. He listened to the silence in the house. The torch burnt out. He could no longer read Tecles’s numbers.

Bryn laid the ledger on the couch, found the footmen, and led them upstairs. The wind banged the window frames against the wall. He leaned against the sill and looked out over the property. In the cemetery atop the hill, the solitary tree held the moon in its net of branches. Bryn drew his knife and slashed the taut rope. The body fell to the ground with a thump.

COREIUS

WHEN BRYN WOKE, IT WAS STILL DARK: he had missed the daylight. He confirmed this with the guards, then requested food. Iulus, incredulous, walked down the corridor, muttering the glutton's litany Bryn had delivered. When the food arrived, Bryn devoured it, interrupted only by Thetia, who drank some of the wine and remarked on his blistered hands. He acknowledged her vaguely, and said goodbye vaguely when she drained her cup and left. He was tired again. Grateful for this fog, he returned to bed and slept.

When he next woke — it was still dark, only a few hours had passed — Edgar stood at his bedside.

“Get dressed,” he said. “Quickly.”

Bryn joined Edgar in the small chamber farthest from the guards, still rubbing his face.

“What is it?” he asked.

Edgar whispered, “It's called Coreius. It's north, closer than I thought to look. Some smallfolk have seen impossibilities. There have been strange storms. Just now I've had reports of some great fire kicking up. I think it is him, Bryn.”

The fog evaporated. His second boot had wandered since he had

last removed it, and Bryn careened about the room like a trapped bat. He found it while flat on his belly, peering under the couch. A grunt, a stretch, and he had it: the leather scraped as it dragged towards him through a blanket of dust.

“You remember our plan?” Edgar asked.

Bryn nodded, and yanked the boot on.

“Do not deviate from it. When you leave the city, take the eastern road.” Edgar consulted his watch. “I can give you a few hours before I must deliver this news to the king. Marius will be on the road in perhaps three. That will be enough.”

“It has to be,” Bryn said. He grabbed Edgar’s arm below the shoulder and squeezed. “Thank you.”

Edgar confronted Bryn with the twitching face of his watch. “No time for this,” he said.

Bryn sat on a soft chair in a brothel. A man sat on the bed. He was much like Bryn in size and features, and he was explaining to Bryn what he would do.

“I wait a few hours, stagger off to another building, then I slip away. Is this agreeable?”

“Yes,” Bryn said.

“Very well. Come and sit by the light. I have not yet figured out your nose.”

Bryn did as instructed, and angled his head while the man examined him. “I can touch you?” the impostor asked, and when Bryn nodded, he laid delicate fingers on his face. After some time the man grunted. “Very well. You have the coin?”

Bryn handed him a purse. The man weighed it in his hand, and when Bryn looked back to his face he was looking at himself. “Accurate?” the impostor asked.

“Yes, I think.”

“Then here is to neither of us being hurt. Out that door,” the man said.

Bryn lowered his hood when he escaped the city. A breeze played over his face, and was suddenly disturbed when a cloud of bats glided past on either side. Velvet wings made them silent; he only realized what had happened as the wingtip of the last flicked his ear. The encounter prepared him for another, so he was not surprised when a mounted figure accosted him at the next fork in the road.

“Good evening,” Varra said.

“Should I be worried that you’ve found me?”

“It seems to be a skill. Do not worry, no one is following you now.”

“That is a relief.”

“Can I ride with you?”

“Of course. I’m looking—”

“For the prince, yes.” She brought her horse alongside his, and they rode north. “The others are already whispering to me that you’ve betrayed us,” she said.

“I had it with me, and he turned his back... I do not have the courage.”

“The pistol was to keep you safe. I do not blame you that he still lives.”

“So you’ve come to protect me, then.”

“Admit that you did not think your plan through. You’re riding for a battlefield. Why did you not ask me for help?”

“I thought you must sleep sometime.”

“I do. During the day, along with the owls.”

“Tell me something — is Calline well? The king told me she escaped.”

“She is fine. Inogen, too.”

They rode together. Now there were only two men in the kingdom he feared to encounter, and neither was yet awake. With security came a creeping exhaustion, however, and Bryn’s head began to droop.

Varra shoved him lightly. He kept his saddle, but the sensation of falling snapped him back to wakefulness. “What?” he asked.

“You looked ready to fall out of the saddle. I thought I would speed the process.”

He sensed her smile in the dark, and wondered about her, the

woman that could wear any face. Each devalued the others, like currency. It was possible that the face she wore around him, with its tight jaw and fine nose, was yet another mask, like the fat man. It was possible that she revealed her true face only in the darkness with no one to see.

He bobbed along in the horse's rhythm. "Do you think we will find him?"

"I do not know. But I think it is a good thing, to search. It is an act of hope. Which is important — even when it is futile, or exhausting."

When they saw the red smudge glowing on the horizon, Varra did not need to tell Bryn to ride faster.

"We don't know anything yet," she reminded him.

He spurred his horse. "He's there," he said.

The glow soon resolved into an inferno spewing black smoke into the belly of the night. It burned silently at that distance. A change in the wind washed them in the scent of smoke. They rode faster.

Then they heard it over the wheezing of the lathered horses: a crackle, steadily building. The silhouettes of broken towers wavered within the swirling flames.

They were close enough to feel warmth on their faces when the fire's maker sprang up from the its heart. Obscured by smoke, revealed by flame, the dragon's form was indistinct in places and terrifyingly vivid in others. A heavy jaw curved like a dagger; translucent wings billowed with the shimmering furnace air; a spiked tail flickered in and out of a smoke cloud, its length impossible to determine.

Staring, Varra said, "The dragons are dead."

"It's the prince."

"How can that be?" she asked, but the Citadel had inured her to marvels, and after a moment she called, "Rein up! I'll go ahead."

Bryn stopped. "It has to be me," he said.

"You will be killed, Bryn. You have no talent."

"Neither do you, not compared to him. Wait here for me."

"And what will you do, Bryn — tell him a story? Sing one of your

songs? I think he is past hearing.”

The dragon was circling higher above Coreius, like a bird above the market. Its roar startled the horses. Bryn did not bother to confess his ignorance or his fear. He kicked his horse and rode towards the fire.

The light grew until it hurt to look on. While he fought to keep the horse moving forward, Bryn looked down at his hands gripping the reins. They glowed and ached, the dark hairs plainly visible among the straining tendons. Then a shadow fell over his hands, and Bryn looked up to see the dragon swooping at him, its great stained glass wings outstretched. A gust of hot wind buffeted him as the beast landed with a crash on the road.

Bryn’s horse threw him. With one buck he was knocked free of the saddle, and slammed to the ground before he knew enough to break his fall. Too eager to turn about, the horse tumbled, and scrambled back to its feet with a squeal. Bryn lay gasping helplessly as it galloped over him, its hooves pounding the dirt inches from his face. In an instant it was gone, leaving Bryn alone before the dragon.

He looked behind and saw Varra coming forward. He waved her back. Not knowing which limbs functioned, Bryn tried to simply stand. His left knee buckled — he gasped and fell. He tried again, favoring his right side, and managed to stay upright.

The dragon’s tail swished behind it, tearing furrows in the earth. Bryn was amazed: the drawing had been reproduced in every detail but the eyes, which were Ippoleus’s, and enraged. He reached out with his torn right hand in a gesture of imploremment. Blood trickled down his forearm. Then he bowed as courtiers did, exposing the nape of his neck. He ached everywhere. Staring at the ground, he listened.

The dragon moved. Its claws scraped against the earth. One talon pushed into Bryn’s field of vision. It was bigger than a plow blade, black and glossy as a beetle’s chitin. Scales rasped as the dragon moved its head about him. It sniffed three times, and though Bryn was scorched in that heat he did not move.

Then he was taken. The dragon delicately grabbed him in one of its foreclaws and hopped into the air. It skimmed low across the ground and into fire, banking to avoid the largest pillars, shielding Bryn from the worst

of the heat. From the air he could see a body laying atop a shifting quilt of ashes and embers. The dragon landed at a pile of smoldering rubble and set Bryn down. Staggering from the disorientation of flight, the uneven terrain, and his wrenched knee, Bryn went to the body.

It was not the prince, but a giant, eight feet of muscle and distended bone. A band of eerie, purplish tattoos girded the giant's abdomen. Scabs of small cuts ran up both sallow arms. Heat throttled Bryn, making it impossible to understand what he was seeing or what Artum had planned. He only knew this was not what he was looking for.

"Where is he?" Bryn cried.

Screeching, the dragon padded, dog-like, towards a wrecked building. Using its heavy claws, the dragon pulled aside blocks of stone until a pale naked body was revealed. Excavation finished, the dragon sat on its haunches and keened.

Bryn rushed to the prince, lying prone. Heavy iron cuffs swallowed his thin wrists; gashes wept on his back. The soles of his feet were filthy. Bryn knelt, took the prince by his shoulder, and turned him. His bloodshot eyes were open, staring, empty. But he was alive. He touched Bryn on the wrist, and a grayness encircled them. It was not smoke, but emptiness made visible. Surrounding the gray was a greater dark, and in that void, blue lights pulsed.

When the world returned, the dragon was gone, along with the worst of the fires. Varra stood there among the scorched masonry.

"Artum tortured him," he said. "See the cuts."

"I see them."

"Do you think he died in the fire?"

"I wouldn't expect it. Rats are usually the first out of a burning barn. Bryn, we should leave this place."

He did not reply.

Varra crouched beside him. She drew her knife and showed it to him. "It might be kinder. Some wounds are not worth surviving."

He knew the blade was sharp, having heard her whetting it during their conversations at the mill. Bryn imagined it would cut flesh as though it were a leaf. "What would you know about it? We are taking him back."

Varra nodded. “As you wish.” She wrapped the prince in her saddle blanket and helped set him atop the horse. “I will walk,” she told Bryn, and he mounted the horse from the wrong side to spare his injured knee.

The roving banks of acrid smoke condensed the night, and they travelled through it with itching eyes. Ippoleus slumped in the saddle before Bryn. Rosettes of blood spotted through the blanket. Unlike the angry and random gashes left by Bryn’s flogging, the prince’s wounds were deep, artistic. Ippoleus had been carved upon like a soft wood. Someone — if not Artum, a man under his direction — had given thought to the aesthetics of disfigurement. Ippoleus shivered against Bryn’s chest: Bryn could only think of murder.

“We need to find Artum,” he said. “And kill him.”

“Marius will handle that for us when they meet. It won’t be long.”

“Law of least blood. Every day, more die.”

“It’s out of our hands. The king will wait until Artum can whip the peasants into a frenzy, and then watch them break on his walls.”

“The king wants this done. He’ll fight in the open if he knows there is no risk. Then the war is over.”

Varra considered this. “And while Marius marches to battle, the Citadel would be weak. That would be useful.”

“What? You’ve always said the Citadel does not matter.”

“The tower itself, no. But what’s inside it.”

Artum’s men found them a few miles from the ruins. They materialized on horseback from the smoky dark, heralded by Ippoleus’s sudden yelp. It was Ippoleus they noticed first, and moved toward, by which time Varra had stabbed the nearest. That man slipped from the saddle and thudded on the ground; his horse started forward, exposing the second man to the sweep of Varra’s blade. This man twisted aside and reared back to strike. As his sword descended, Varra chopped at the throat of his mount. Squealing, the horse lurched right, spoiling the rider’s aim. His cut missed and Varra seized him and threw him to the ground, freeing the horse to sprint into

the dark after the first. Blood mixed with its tracks, and Bryn did not think it would catch up. It would stagger and die in the smoke, listening to the other's hooves receding.

When he turned back to the scene before him, Varra had already sliced the stabbed man's throat. She knelt on the arms of the survivor, and blood dripped from her knife onto his forehead. "Where's Artum? You were to collect the prince. Once you had him, where were you going to take him?"

"Just kill me," the man gasped.

"That might come later. First you talk."

He cursed her, and she pinned his earlobe to the dirt with the point of her knife. He thrashed and kicked, but Varra held him down. "Squirm and you'll tear it," she said. "If I pull it out straight, you'll still have an ear." Bryn watched avidly. Ippoleus whimpered. The man screamed through clenched teeth.

"Ride on, Bryn. This may take some time."

"The prince is safer with you. I'll wait."

"Don't be a fool. There are probably more of these out there. And do you think this hasn't reached the king by now? The longer you stay, the easier you are to find. So get away. And I do not want you to watch what I'll have to do." With one fingertip on the knife's hilt, she jiggled it back and forth. "Ride to the crossroads south of here. Turn to the west... there's a village, with our people. They will take Ippoleus from you. Do you understand me?"

He nodded.

"I will find you when I have an answer."

There were no more difficulties: Bryn delivered Ippoleus to Albeire, who was waiting like Varra said she would be. Relinquishing the prince was hard, but Albeire was competent, and properly outraged by Ippoleus's wounds. She swore she would make him safe, and Bryn thanked her; then he returned to the palace. It was still dark when he left his horse in the city, at the stable of a man friendly to the rebels, and it was minutes from dawn when he came to the small door, still unlocked. Sighing, Bryn opened it, then rushed through the little-used hallways until he reached the passage-

way behind the walls. He climbed the steps wearily, quietly, and slipped into his room. His exhaustion almost prevented him from stashing away his muddied clothes. Bryn crawled into the bed and slept.

DISCIPLINE

AFTER ALL THE RUDE AWAKENINGS inflicted upon him in the past months, it was unusual to open his eyes to nothing more than a slant of sunlight. No guards held chains at the foot of his bed. Edgar was not in the sitting room with terrible news. Silence reigned in the palace.

Cautiously, Bryn went to the suite's doors, and found Iulus and Raske outside. They gazed at him with their customary disdain.

"It must be pleasant, sleeping so late," Iulus remarked.

The impostor had worked. Careful to conceal his relief, Bryn requested a light breakfast and quickly withdrew.

Stomach full, head clear, Bryn was enjoying tea — the cup clicked upon the platter, all else was quiet — when Thetia threw open the doors.

"Why are you not dressed?" she asked. "It is starting soon."

Bryn set down his cup. "What is?"

"The tribunal." Confused by his confusion, she explained. "Marius has accused Lycia of treason. He was going to put her to death himself, but I think Father wants to make a point of his authority."

"Lycia, the commander?"

"Yes, yes. Come along, it should be good theater."

“Excuse me, my lady,” said Raske, “but Bryn does not usually leave unless the king has summoned him.”

“Oh? Tell me, are you fond of dogs? Because you will be guarding the kennels tomorrow if you say another word. Come along, Bryn.”

The king sat atop the dais. Two chairs had been placed at its base. Marius sat in one with his legs crossed, considering his fingernails in a way that would signal nonchalance to his most loyal officers, who lined the walls. Beside him, the general Lycia scorned her chair. She stood with her hands clasped, chained, and her chin was set hard. Though her hair was nearly white, she stood like a soldier, not a grandmother. Thetia and Bryn watched from the dais’s edge, along with Amara. The queen was elsewhere.

When the king signaled, the page beside him blew a quick flourish on his trumpet, and the room quieted.

“I now convene this tribunal,” the king declared. “In observance of the ancient custom, set down before the Wall was built, justice will be sought. The accuser will speak, and the accused will answer, both with the sacred pursuit of truth foremost in their minds and hearts. Let no one speak falsely, for Deivo listens. I will now receive your complaint,” he said to Marius.

Marius rose from his chair and straightened his neck with a flick of his chin. “It is simple, my lord. There is a village beside the Siedon which is known to harbor rebels and rebel sympathizers. I commanded the general to skirmish with any rebels she found there and make sure they could not hold it in the future; my scouts had reports it served as a cache for weapons as well as a hiding place.”

The king lifted two fingers, interjecting smoothly. “You say she was to make sure the rebels could not hold the village. This means you wished her to burn the town?”

“Yes. She disobeyed this order. It is the Citadel’s custom to punish such dereliction with death. This is the justice I now seek from you, my lord.”

“This is all you wish to say?”

Marius nodded and sat.

“Very well. Lycia, you may now offer your defense.”

“I contest none of the particulars,” she said. “Only their import. All we found in that village were some children and the ancients too feeble to escape in advance of our coming. No weapons, no rebels hiding in the walls. Just a town of the kingdom. Seeing no strategic value for the rebels, I left the place as it was.”

“To be clear, then: you admit that you disobeyed your commander’s orders?”

“I do not deny it. But they were bad orders. Marius is trying to fight shadows, and instead of killing what’s casting them, he has us stabbing at the dirt.”

“Enough lies,” Marius said. “You stand in the presence of Deivo, Lycia. Admit that you found the rebels. Admit that you found them and let them go.”

The king leaned forward and said, “You have evidence of this charge, Marius?”

Marius swatted at the question. “She is a traitor, my lord, and has been for years. She doted on Varra.”

“No,” Lycia said. “I simply did not hate her as you did.”

“You are lying before this tribunal.”

Lycia looked at Marius, sniffed, and turned to the king. “King Aelius, am I here to answer for my supposed disloyalty, or Marius’s obsession with Varra?”

“You are to answer for your treachery!” Marius slapped his thigh.

Lycia did not look at Marius as she spoke. “Commander Marius has forgotten our purpose. Deivo, the architect, built the Wall and then the tower. These things are oldest in the kingdom, older than any dynasty. The bloodguard protects the king, fine. The Citadel protects this kingdom’s talent. All of it — not just the talent favored by the crown.”

“I have heard enough of this,” the king said. “We are here to determine your guilt, not make speeches about Deivo’s intentions. Lycia, I now judge you, as is my right as king. You flouted your commander’s order, but did so with righteous intention. Such an action during battle would

merit more stringent punishment, but outside of battle, martial law must acknowledge our more common ideas of justice. This kingdom does not brook the murder of the old and young, and since the accuser offered no proof that any rebel soldiers were in that village, it was not necessary to destroy it. As such: Lycia of the Citadel, I permit you to live. Yet for disobeying your commander, you will lose your standing in the legion. Until such time as this rebellion is quelled, you will be granted a chamber in the palace and live there as an honored guest.”

Marius scowled, and Bryn’s fists tightened as he controlled his impulse to grin.

Lycia’s silver hair swayed as she shook her head. “No. I reject your judgement, and your right to judge me. I invoke the ancient rights of Deivo and his tribe, which are granted by birth and not kings. So keep your false mercy.”

“Let it be known that the king has extended clemency, and Lycia, once of the Citadel, has spurned it. Take her,” he said to the guards.

That night, Bryn watched a spider at work in the corner of the ceiling. Wobbling on light threads, flailing its intelligent limbs like antennae, the spider trundled across its net to rip the wing from an imprisoned fly. Other dark specks, future meals, hung seemingly in air.

Bryn thought of Lycia, who had received her death sentence with disdain. Balking the king must have given her some satisfaction, but he doubted that would survive in the midnight damp of the cells.

The palace did not stock the peasant cider he had come to favor, but the wines were not bad. He kept at least three bottles in his chambers, to tartly erode these long nights, and he chose the two best of these. In the corner of the ceiling the industrious spider hauled at a dangling filament.

Bryn eased open the hidden doorway and skulked through the cramped, unlit passage. He kept the fingers of his left hand on the wall, trailing through a fur of dust, until they touched upon splintered wood. Groping with both hands, he located a small iron ring and tugged. After a moment’s resistance, the door lurched towards him, and he emerged

from behind the tapestry into an unpopular hallway near the aerie. Bryn hurried through one hall, then another, until he reached the stairs downward. As a boy he had made a game of racing through the dizzy spirals. Now Bryn moved quietly.

The cells were tended by two men at night, Koris and Leuteron. Bryn had known both since he was a boy, and used to imprison them in their own cells during games of make-believe. They had always acceded cheerfully, having the keys and strong drink to entertain themselves.

Bryn rapped at the thick door which opened on the stairwell. A metal plate scraped aside, and Leuteron's red eyes could be seen. Bryn held up the bottles. "Do you want the older, or the stronger?"

After some debate the jailors took the stronger. They supplemented their grimy mugs of drink and asked his errand.

"To talk with the one called Lycia."

"Just talk? No plans of giving her something sharp?"

"Only a drink of this," he said, and shook the bottle. "But search me," he said, and Koris did so half-heartedly. Finding nothing, he handed Bryn a candle and a tin cup, then unlocked the stout door which separated the guard's chamber from the cells.

"She's at the end, on the left. Don't anger her. Oh, and walk the center of the passage. Some like to grab."

Bryn nodded and stepped inside. The door was closed behind him, and he went walking, heel before toe, into the dark. On either side of him he heard the small clinkings and rustling of chained bodies at rest. Sometimes he heard whispers, or throaty chuckles. Sometimes he heard nothing, in the darkness at his side, and these cold quiet patches he hurried past. Soon the puny sphere of the candle's light touched the bricks before him. He turned to his left and crouched, finding Lycia sprawled there at the bars. Both her eyes grabbed and threw back the candlelight: she watched him steadily.

"I don't know if they told you who I am. But I would not come in here," she said.

"Not my intention," Bryn said. He showed her the bottle. "Are you thirsty?"

"Not for that. I'd rather die in the open air."

"Does the Citadel make all of you so wary?" Bryn pulled the cork with his teeth, took two swallows, and showed her his empty mouth. "Shall we wait and see if I'll turn purple, or may I speak with you?"

"Speak with me about what? Pour," she said.

Bryn splashed wine into the shallow cup and passed it through the bars. "Varra," he said. In deference to her talent, Lycia's cell was outfitted with enormous bars and segregated from the others by a length of twenty yards or more. Still, Bryn spoke quietly. "Today at the tribunal Marius made it sound as though you knew her."

"What is this to you?"

"I know her, too."

"You do not. She died long ago."

"I know it is difficult to believe. But I've been among the rebels. She's alive. She's going to attack the Citadel."

"More proof I'm right. Varra would not be foolish enough to attempt such a thing."

"Perhaps. But I'm offering to carry your last message to her. If you had one." The candle wax dribbled. Lycia, like Varra and the king, had a patience for the truth. "And I was curious. She will tell me nothing about herself."

"I am telling you, boy, she can't. Your Varra is someone else. Probably some Citadel escapee who grew up with her and was inspired. She was always a better leader than Marius."

"Then tell me about the Varra you knew."

"There would be no point."

"Perhaps not. But dawn's a long way, and neither of us can sleep. Unless I am wrong?"

Bryn set down the candle and sat with his back to the wall. He sloshed the bottle of wine and she presented the cup to be filled.

"What should I tell you?" she said, after some time.

"Only what happened to her."

"Well. First you must understand that, to the Citadel, there is no difference between a boy and a girl. There is only talent, and this is how

they sort you. And for the first few years they may be right. We chopped off the girls' hair and put them into the barracks. Without mothers and fathers to teach them weakness, we made those girls strong. We tested them and beat them and turned them to soldiers, and they all lived together, boy and girl, not knowing enough to be ashamed or frightened. Varra was strongest. She was first rank, along with Marius.

"But there is a difference between boys and girls: a girl comes into her talent faster. As with all things — girls are faster to become women than boys become men, and men will always resent them for this. And when Varra became a woman and possessed all of her talent, she did not know to hide it. She was proud to be strong. She embarrassed Marius. The boys began to call her 'bitch.'" Lycia smiled weakly. "When before she had never even been a girl to them. When Marius matured, he became more direct in his aggression. The mock wars were not enough for him. He sought her out when I could not protect her.

"One of them would die, I thought. Either he would kill her, or she would kill him, or she would kill herself. But the Citadel knows the difference between men and women. The best of the first rank are sent to stud."

"What?"

"Why bother with a messy choosing when you have that talent already under your roof? It is a secret, of course. And in a little room we keep the books — the pedigrees. The superiors were so excited to pluck a talent like Varra from the farmlands. Marius was chosen for her. Their offspring would have had enough talent to start a new royal house. The Citadel would no longer obey the dynasty. And they weren't related, either, so the child's blood wouldn't sour like the prince's."

"What happened?"

"It was training, her last war with Marius." Lycia knocked two knuckles on one of the iron bars and listened to the meek reverberation. "In our exercises we encourage injuries, to keep anyone from becoming careless, but none of the wounds are supposed to kill fast. We give them blunted weapons. Marius put a real sword in her belly and twisted. When I found them... I am not sure he believed he could kill her, that it was possible. I took her away, and two days later my surgeons told me the wound had

festered, and then she was dead. Twelve years old,” Lycia mused. “You say that she is alive, and I want to believe you. But we had a funeral. She spent hours on a slab in front of all the Citadel’s talent. I touched her hair.” Lycia’s voice caught. “Deivo never raised the dead.”

“Lycia: if she is alive, will you deny her your last words for the sake of skepticism?”

Lycia thought for some time. “No, I suppose not. Tell her...” She cleared her throat. “Tell her I’m glad she’s still living, and that I have thought about her many times these past years. That I’m sorry I didn’t protect her better. Tell her I hope she has the chance to stop fighting, some day.” Lycia waved her hand. “Make it fancier, if you have to.”

“It will be fine.”

“What is your name?” she asked.

“It is Bryn.”

“Bryn,” she whispered, “I’ve been talking to Deivo all night, but if I am honest I don’t think he listens, or even exists. Now you are here and I want to tell you I am frightened. Is that dishonorable? What do they say about fear, outside the Citadel?”

“We say there is no shame in it. I’ll be there for you in the crowd, tomorrow. Perhaps I can bring Varra.”

“No, please. I’d rather she not see it. But you can tell her one more thing. Have you a good memory, Bryn?”

“I do.”

“Then listen closely to me. I want to tell you where the pedigrees are kept.”

Bryn kept his promise. He stood in a small crowd that had gathered at the base of the Citadel to watch Lycia die. Thetia did not accompany him, but her threat had been effective: Raske and Iulus had escorted him without complaint to the king’s quarters, where he was granted leave by the distracted king.

Now expert in the procedure of hanging, Bryn could anticipate each step. He knew when the executioner would fit Lycia with the hood and

noose, and knew when Deivo would be invoked. A human life would end and so there should have been danger, but this death was crafted, and like all human labor it was graceless. As it unfolded, he stood to the side of the gallows. A guard leaned against him; the guard's hand slipped into his pocket to deposit a piece of paper.

"They're hanging her," the guard mumbled. The voice was the same as the fat man's. Varra gazed at Lycia — now collared — through the face of an impassive glamor. "Say nothing," she warned. "They can see you fine." Bryn glanced over his shoulder. Iulus and Raske were absorbed by the executioner's work. He took Varra's hand and squeezed. "Be discreet," she said, in the guard's rough voice. She pulled her hand away, and left before the gallows door slapped open.

When the wind shifted and they could smell that the executed's bowels had emptied, Bryn took the paper from his pocket and opened it. There were a few lines in a clean hand, and Artum's name was among them. It concluded, "Edgar already knows. You convince them." Bryn read carefully, then twice more. He tore the paper to strips and dropped them to the ground. Then he walked towards the gallows, where Marius squinted up at Lycia's corpse.

"The women always soil themselves," Marius said. "Never seen one that didn't." His lips compressed and pulled towards his right cheek. "Should have given her the sword. She deserved as much." Marius pointed to one of his subordinates. "I've changed my mind," he said. "Don't put her with the unnamed. She can be buried with the first rank." The talent nodded and went to arrange it.

"Odd treatment for a woman you worked hard to kill," Bryn observed.

"Kill the traitor, honor the talent. Do not speak. You know nothing."

The challenge, when Bryn was summoned to the war council, was pretending to be surprised by the same information Varra had delivered to him: Artum planned an ambush for the legion, and had somehow enlisted a federation of pygmies to aid him.

"Is this report trustworthy?" Bryn asked the king.

"Precisely what you will advise me on. Edgar is confident."

Edgar shrugged. "Relatively. My men and I caught one of Artum's men sniffing about Coreius."

"And you say he has giant pygmies at his back? That is a little hard to credit."

"Yet it's the only thing we are sure of," Edgar said. "We found a corpse in the wreckage of Coreius. Tattooed like a pygmy, but tall as two of them. What created them, and how Artum came to command them? I do not know — but they exist."

"Hm," Bryn said.

Marius scowled vaguely at Bryn. He rubbed his thumb and first two fingers together as if testing dirt. "My lord, he has no expertise in these matters, and his presence in this room could endanger my soldiers."

"Ask my guards if I have gone anywhere the king has not approved," Bryn said. He stared flatly at Marius. All four men in the room knew it was a lie, but no one yet saw an advantage in exposing it. Marius tossed his head, and Bryn continued. "I would tend to believe this. When Artum first returned, he spoke about how the pygmies were ready for a war."

"This is the first you have mentioned it," the king said.

"The rebels did not seem interested in it. And a coordinated ambush is not their way, as you know. Usually the time between a pygmy deciding to make war and a pygmy making war is however long it takes to descend the mountain. But Artum did approach me. Offered me a kingdom of my own if I helped him. So he seems ready to make allies."

"Yes, very interesting," Marius said, turning to the king, "but am I supposed to marshal my troops on the basis of two stray comments made by your treacherous brother?"

"There is one more thing," Bryn said. "Artum was certain he could beat you, Marius. Maybe it's only his arrogance: or maybe he does have other resources. He suggested that it would be easy."

When Marius slapped the table, the wood splintered. He held up his finger.

"I fight the king's wars. I am entrusted with this task because I know

tactics. You think I'm reckless. You thought you would use this, like someone might use a piece of high ground. Good — you are trying to be clever, though you know nothing of the world of men. If you have seen me angry and short-sighted, this is only because you live in the world of boys and women, and there are no consequences in that world, and so I can afford my temper. But in these matters I am not angry, and I will not walk into an ambush because you tried to wound my pride.”

“You are right — I do not know tactics — are they usually so convoluted? You fear an ambush which is itself an ambush?”

“That will be enough,” the king said. “Bryn, I'll consider your counsel delivered, unless you have something to add?”

Bryn hesitated, remembering Varra's instructions. “I would do nothing with this report. You can wait — Artum cannot.” It was a child's idea of deception, but Bryn did not care if it provoked Marius. Considering Varra's plan, and his part in it, Bryn was eager to deflect any further suspicion.

CITADEL

THE LEGION MOBILIZED, AND THE KING — with Bryn at his side — oversaw their departure. The soldiers came loping out of the Citadel's huge gates, carrying heavy packs but moving as easily as wolves. They saluted the king as they passed. At their uncanny pace, they would reach Artum's chosen grounds in a day. While the rebellion was decided, Varra would assault the tower.

The night of the attack, Bryn forced himself to spend an evening in the king's company; though he would have preferred seclusion in which to panic over the events to come, the king had requested his company while they waited for news of Artum's fate. Despite his resentment, Bryn could not deny that the king was a great talker, and his eloquent reminiscences were soothing. For a time Bryn forgot his fear and forgot that the king had seen many killed for pride. But forgetting made the remembering even sharper, and as the king talked, Bryn stared at him, amazed. He tried to count all the lives the king's imperative had touched: all the children that had been chosen to strengthen his Citadel, all the rebels killed to keep his wall closed. Bryn himself had been claimed in a selfish grief.

His hour for meeting Varra drew nearer on the beautiful clock which ticked over the hearth. He yawned falsely and announced that

he would retire. The king smiled warmly when he dismissed him, and Bryn reminded himself that a monster could wear any face, and sometimes be kind.

Edgar awaited him in his room. “I would not do this,” he said. “You’re like me, Bryn. We are not fighters. And this only works if one does not go looking for *figh*ts. Particularly if you’ll be fighting the talented.”

“I don’t plan to fight. Just help.”

“But why take such a risk? These aren’t your children. If you’re captured, after the mercy the king showed? He will send me outside, just to find some new and awful torture to inflict on you.”

Bryn donned his cloak and tightened the laces of his boots. He retrieved the pistol from its hiding place among the joinery under the wardrobe.

“How many times can I shoot this?”

Edgar blanched. “You hid it there?”

“How many times?”

“Ten. There are ten bullets. But don’t you want to save them for... greater game?”

“One bullet kills one man, yes?”

“Here or here,” Edgar tapped his forehead and heart, “yes. But anywhere else? I do not know. I have never used mine on a man.”

“Then if we’re planning on using it for anything else, I will test it. Nine bullets — nine dead men. No matter if they are talents, or fighters.”

“Eight. To be safe. And make sure you are not recognized. If I tell the king you are in the slums and you are also in the Citadel, I will be forced to answer questions. Unpleasant questions.”

“I understand.”

“Then be careful,” Edgar said, and Bryn thought he said it for unselfish reasons.

His scraping footsteps echoed in the narrow staircase. At the bottom was a narrow door, and beyond that the palace grounds, under the surveillance of the king’s men. Edgar had not been lying about the risk, and was

reasonable to question his participation in Varra's plot.

Bryn was eight years old when he learned of his parentage. Amara, then five, told him to hurt his feelings. In his surprise and rage, Bryn struck her in the face, blacking her eye. Guards seized him, and when the queen saw the bruise, she yanked him from their grip, dragged him to his little room, and threw him inside. "I could put you in the dungeon cells, you know," she told him. "If I so chose. Because Amara was not lying, and that is where we put commoners who forget their place."

Sniffing, too upset to sit on furniture, Bryn crouched in the corner of the room and imagined being rescued from the palace by his common family. No one came for Bryn. A few hours later the king appeared, frowning impressively and holding Amara's hand; he had come to broker a truce. Bryn apologized desperately, remembering the queen's threat.

Now stealing away in the dark, Bryn paused and looked back at the palace. Trapezoids of gamboge light faded to shadow on the lawn, thrown by the tall windows. Every memory he had was created inside its walls. If he returned, that would be luck; but every day and moment was attended by the great noiseless clattering of dice, and no cast could be affected by worry. He decided he would see the palace again, and the density of pistol in his hand concurred.

Bryn journeyed into the city to meet with his impostor. From there he doubled back to the agreed-upon place, a hollow in the woods behind the Citadel, where the talents drilled. Their activities had warped the landscape: neat regular gouges marked a boulder, a flayed tree grew without bark, and unnatural earthworks zigzagged among the trees. Varra and her twelve best talents waited there. Inogen, perched atop a boulder, waved at him. Bryn smiled and reached up to squeeze her hand. "I am sorry about Lenos," he whispered, and he was glad the dark hid his expression.

"Thank you. You are brave to come."

"Calline?"

"She is well."

Bryn had further questions, but Varra called her soldiers to order. They huddled around her, and she asked Bryn if there was any news from the palace.

"I do not think we will be expected," he said. "And I have learned where the pedigrees are kept." The rebels were pleased by this, and Varra nodded. After he related their location, he took her by the arm. "Can I speak with you?"

They stepped away from the others, who linked arms and muttered an invocation to Deivo. Bryn tried to relate Lycia's message.

"I don't want to hear it," she replied. Bryn waited for some explanation, or an apology. As the messenger, he felt some responsibility to Lycia, and he believed that Varra needed to hear it. He tried again, but she interrupted him by pressing some cloth into his hands.

"I brought you a mask." It was black, with ragged eyeholes. Bryn's breath caught as he remembered how he had felt, looking into one just like it the night of Ippoleus's capture. "If you feel any better about it, it was not me," she said, as she gave it to him.

"Who was it?"

"Dead, now."

Bryn pulled it on. The smooth fabric clung to his cheeks. He could see passably. "You know nothing about children," he told her.

"There are no children in the Citadel."

"Could Artum have beaten them?" Bryn asked. "If we had said nothing?"

"Never. I only hope he knows to surrender before he loses everything."

Bryn made a distracted noise; he wanted to know just how many soldiers remained in the great tower. Through the canopy breaks it reared up, incontrovertible.

"Bryn." Her voice was soft. "Stop staring at it. Look at me." He obeyed her, and saw no fear in her face. She believed in her war as he never could. "If we do nothing else — if we die and the dynasty reigns another thousand years, and our memories are condemned — this will have been enough."

Bryn could not borrow her zeal, but he would follow her, even into the Citadel, because that was his strength and his faith. Still, he wanted her to admit the truth.

"Tell me why you want to do this," he said.

"I told you that I could only ever give you my word."

"I thought that was because you did not trust me with anything else."

"I trust you now, and still I can't tell you. Can you respect this?"

"Let's begin," Bryn said. "I can't talk any longer."

Varra nodded and donned her mask. She made the signal, a green haze that sparkled high above the treetops. She maintained it for a minute, then let it fade. Varra waved Bryn and the others forward. Varra gave last instructions.

"Remember that we aim to release as many as possible. So make sure any you take are old enough to move and follow orders, but not so old — some of those might fight to defend the Citadel."

"What are we supposed to do about those?" Bryn asked.

Varra was carrying an ancient weapon of the Citadel, the scorpion: a chain whip with a dagger affixed to the end. "Don't let them kill you."

In darkness the Citadel's pinnacle could not be seen; it might have risen forever to tear the rain from the bellies of the highest clouds. Each block in its base was massive, perfectly rectangular, and so snugly fit that its crevices would not accommodate a stiletto.

"That's where the guard watches," Varra said to Albeire. "Can you see him?"

"It is not important," Albeire said. She nocked an arrow to her bow and drew to her temple. In the time she took to aim, Bryn could admire the bend in the greatbow and listen to the string's creaking. Albeire's arms did not shake. She released, and the arrow bolted into the obscure middle distance and was gone. They listened intently for the sound of a clatter on stone, but heard nothing.

"We should move quickly, then," Albeire said.

A boulder had already been selected. The talents encircled it, crouched down, and grabbed hold. "One, two, three," they chanted, and suddenly the boulder was aloft, gravel sliding from it. "Forward," and the boulder was carried between the tree trunks, smashing through the

unavoidable branches. Gaping, Bryn jogged in the talents' wake, and watched as they moved past the tree line. In the strong moonlight, its bearers obscured by its shadow, the boulder appeared to levitate over the grass. It approached the tower. It gained speed. "Throw!" and the boulder flew, impossibly fast. It struck the wall and rebounded with a massive stony clack, but it had made a hole, through which Bryn could see a hallway lit brightly by torches.

The chaos began — at first silently. Adjusting their masks, the talents and Bryn vaulted through the opening and stood in a long hallway of facing doors, with a large, fortified door at the end. Stray rubble clacked under their boots. One of the doors slammed open. A man took two steps into the hallway, looked away from them, then turned his head. His face registered shock in the moment before Albeire's arrow struck his throat. After penetrating his body, the broadhead skipped on the floor and spun to a halt. Quietly he clutched at his throat with one hand. With the other he attempted to support himself against the wall — but the wall was farther than he expected, and he crumpled. A second talent emerged, stepping over her comrade's body like it was a spill of water. By this time the rebels were moving. Varra's scorpion reached and cut the woman's hamstring, then twined upward to pierce her heart. Varra turned to the hole in the wall and waved her arm. Bryn saw a mass of shadow start forward. The other rebels had come.

Those rebels already inside rushed through the doors in pairs. Bryn found himself in a dark room full of sleeping children. They slept in stacked beds with so little room between them they could not draw their knees up. Varra clapped her hands, and motes of light swarmed her like gnats. The room was illuminated. Her voice was calm. "Wake up, children. You are not asleep anymore, you are not dreaming. We have come to take you home. Follow us." Then the noise began.

The screams of the boys were indistinguishable from the screams of the girls. While some children wailed and cowered, others scampered for the unblocked door. The more alert recognized the rebels who had unmasked, and these children ran towards their kin. Bryn moved between the beds, murmuring soothing things from behind his black mask while he

checked each bed for a certain face. The children shied and twisted away from him, assuming pitiful defensive postures. They were the right age, but he could not find her. Frustrated, Bryn crossed to the other side of the room and began checking the second aisle of beds. He did not even know a name to call.

“Bryn! It doesn’t matter who, just get them out of here!” Varra chastised him from the center of a knot of children mesmerized by her flickering corona.

Bryn kept looking. At last he spotted her — the girl with the curly hair and mismatched eyes. “Wait!” he called, but she slipped past a rescuer and vanished into the hall. Bryn raced after her, and chased her down the long corridor. She bounded like a deer, but even with her talent her legs were short and the door at the end of the hall was locked. When she discovered this the girl squealed; she turned and placed her palms flat against the door. Panting, her eyes darted back and forth, judging the available space between the wall and the reach of his arms. Bryn had removed the mask and now held it in one hand.

“It’s me,” he said, “do you remember me? I was there when you were chosen. I was there with the king and I gave you that white flower.” She looked at his face for the first time. Her chin was tucked into her collarbone; the whites of her eyes formed stark crescents.

“Do you remember that white flower I gave you?”

She said nothing.

“My name is Bryn and I came here to take you home — back to your parents. You remember them, don’t you?”

The girl nodded.

“What’s your name?” Bryn asked, and glanced over his shoulder. The rescuers were leaping into the shadows, clutching children or leading them.

“Claudia,” the girl said.

“Not what they call you. Not that name. That isn’t you anymore. What’s the name your parents gave you? I know you remember.”

“Myra.”

“Good, Myra. Will you come with me?” She nodded, and she stepped

forward.

The voice behind Bryn cracked as it told him to leave the girl alone. Bryn turned and found a young talent standing there with his hands in fists. He was no older than twelve, bare-chested, wearing the Citadel trousers which cinched just below the knees. His scrawny arms demonstrated no muscle, only the architecture of the elbow. Before Bryn could tell him to step aside, the boy rushed forward. Whatever else Bryn had planned to say exited him in a blast of air as the boy punched him in the gut. Bryn fell to his knees, and shielded himself from the looping punch that followed. The impact rocked him off-balance, exposing his jaw to the ensuing uppercut aimed at his left side. The boy had a grown man's strength. Though his technique had not advanced beyond the spastic, Bryn was too winded and surprised to protect himself. The boy battered him to the ground and pounced to throttle him. Bryn tried to dislodge the boy's wrists, but his arms were like iron rods, and Bryn's vision contracted to a smeary-edged cloud of light and color, all bordered with darkness. As the strength drained from Bryn, he could only contemplate how young the boy was, and how the fury twisting his face never reached his eyes, which were like ponds in winter, iced black.

Suddenly the weight lifted and he could breathe. The boy lay dead at his side. Varra's scorpion had lodged in a shallow depression of his shaved skull. Blood and a clear fluid issued from the wound and braided to pink as they converged on the slope under his jaw. When Varra touched Bryn's cheek, he started.

"You didn't have to kill him," he croaked. His head pounded.

"That was not a boy, Bryn. They take that when they choose you."

The boy had died prostrate, with his knuckles against the stones. His fingers had assumed their automatic curl.

"No," Bryn said to Varra.

"Can you stand? I need you to help the others get away."

Bryn realized there was fighting outside, bursts of light. Myra was gone. "Where did the girl go?"

"I do not know. Find her."

He stood, and when she saw he could, Varra left him. She yanked her

scorpion free of the boy's skull, then broke open the door Myra had tried and disappeared into the Citadel's inner halls. Bryn had difficulty staying upright. He waited for the spots to fade from his vision. The hallway was empty. Outside, there were screams.

Myra had not gone far. He discovered her crouched in a small closet which contained mops, buckets, and red-stained rags. "We're going to go now," Bryn explained. "We're going to get on a horse and ride it to your village. Have you ridden on a horse? It's fine that you haven't — I'm very good. Now I'm going to wear this, but it's just me under, isn't it?" He put the mask on and she nodded. "Myra, I want you to hold my hand and don't let go. Will you do that?"

All her hand fit inside his palm. Bryn closed his fingers gently, aware that a life depended on his, and that some failings could not be permitted. When they left the mops and were accosted by two adult talents, each holding swords, Bryn did hesitate to draw the pistol, or fumble when he fired it. Despite the noise, the gesture was so subtle that neither talent understood they were wounded until they tried to leap forward on legs that would not carry them. As the blood spread across their chests, the talents pivoted into this new and complex task of dying, and paid no attention to Bryn and Myra as they hurried past.

As far as Bryn could tell, the rebels' plan had failed at many points: he recognized some of the corpses scattering the tower grounds. But amid the ethereal fires and shouts, a rebel had a horse waiting for them, as had been planned. Bryn snatched the reins and thanked the man as he hoisted Myra into the saddle. Bryn vaulted up after her, and before he spurred the horse, he told the man to run. The man agreed but was struck dead by a slingstone before he could. Bryn drove his heels into the horse's flanks and it plunged forward. As the horse built to top speed Bryn thought nothing of guiding it; he concerned himself with keeping the saddle, holding tight to Myra, and placing his back between her and the Citadel, should any more stones come flying.

The battle explained itself as they fled it. The few guards in the barracks had been easily dispatched, but the Citadel's remainder had responded quickly. Eschewing the dangers of confined combat, they had

sallied from the front gate and flanked the rebels as they made their escape. The skirmishing was most intense before the great gates of the tower, as the talents assaulted a line of rebels trying to keep the road open to their comrades escaping on horseback.

The air sizzled with magic, the color of which could only be seen in darkness. It moved in fluid arcs and waves of gem colors: ruby, emerald, sapphire, and amethyst. Intent as he was on wrestling the horse towards the road and safety, Bryn was still enthralled by the lights. The gifts of Deivo and his tribe had flowed through blood for generations, undissolved, and now lit the dark.

His awe burst when a shadow tried to pull them from the saddle. But their horse was nimble and leaped aside, leaving the shadow grasping as they surged onto the smooth and open road. The horseshoes clopped in furious tempo on the cobblestones, and Bryn smiled to himself. Myra was squirming in his grasp to peer around his side.

“Don’t look back!” he told her.

“But they’re following,” she said.

Bryn saw it was true. Two of the Citadel’s talents raced after them, their horses’ legs flickering between shadow and moonlight. Bryn looked ahead and smiled once more. If the talents caught them, and the pistol failed, Bryn would be torn to pieces, his bones broken, eyes put out. But the talents rode common horses, like his. And while Bryn was on a horse, they could never catch him.

Myra fell asleep during the peaceful remainder of the long ride. When they reached the village, Bryn woke her and asked which house was hers. In her bleary confusion, she pointed at one, and then another. Bryn nudged the exhausted horse forward, then dismounted. He was saddle sore — the talents had given good chase. Now it was quiet. He lifted Myra from the saddle to set her down, but she wrapped her arms around his neck and he decided she did not need to walk. Holding her up with one arm, he knocked on the small door of the farmer’s house. The wood resounded and no one answered. He knocked again and listened to the night birds.

Myra's parents might have died: killed by disease, rebellion, or a horse's kick. She might be his, he realized. His breathing was even and slow as hers was against his chest.

The door opened. A man and a woman stood in the threshold. He held a stubby knife, and she held her fists at her throat.

"Your daughter," Bryn began, and the man tossed aside the knife and took her from him.

"Myra!" the man gasped. The family reunited with few words: the parents cried and laughed. Myra was quiet, though she laughed once when her mother tickled her neck and kissed her cheek. Bryn stood by until they remembered him.

The father and mother embraced him in turn; she would not set down Myra, and only used one arm.

"How did you do this?" she asked.

"Varra cracked the Citadel. They may come looking for her. Hide yourselves. Not with family," he added. "You know anyone in the rebellion?"

The woman nodded.

"Go and ask them to help you. They will."

"Thank you," the man said. "We are so grateful... What's your name?"

Myra, sleepy again, said into her mother's neck: "Bryn."

They asked him to stable his horse and sleep under their roof. "You are exhausted," the woman said.

He was. Bryn looked to the east and saw gray easing back into the world. If the king summoned him, he would need to be there. Someone from the Citadel would have reached the palace by now. Perhaps it would be safer to not return. "I have to ride on," he said. Bryn asked the father for a skin of wine, and the man complied, though bewildered.

Bryn raised the skin in salute. "Goodbye, Myra."

She waved goodbye.

AFTERMATH

WHILE HE RODE FOR THE PALACE, urging the horse and not resenting it for ignoring him, Bryn drank wine and watched the new sun shine redly on the earth. The warmth felt good on his neck. He poured some wine on his shirt. By the time he reached the city, he was thoroughly drunk.

He left the horse tied up in the same courtyard as before, and briefly spoke with one of the rebels there, who agreed to keep his effects. Bryn put the pistol into a bag and gave it to him. Then, covering his face, he crept into the brothel through the back way. He climbed the stairs and spoke briefly to his impostor. They clasped hands, and Bryn dumped the contents of his purse over the bed.

The city was waking up. Night soil cascaded from high windows; men and women spoke excitedly of a battle at the Citadel. Bryn crossed the bridge on foot. The sun flashed upon the river in white snaps. He exaggerated his weaving as he came within sight of the guard post, hoping they would smell him and wave him on with a laugh. But when they saw him, they began to shout. He took a deep breath. He wanted to sleep.

Bryn was escorted directly to the solarium, where the king drank his tea amid his advisors. The king was listening politely to a shouting man, and when the man turned to see whose entrance had interrupted his rant,

Bryn saw it was Marius.

"You," Marius snarled, stabbing a finger towards him.

The king set down his cup. "Sit down, Marius. I can't imagine how you can be so angry on a day like this. I will ask the questions." The king thanked the guard and dismissed him.

Bryn blinked and looked about the room. "What's happened?"

Marius laughed scornfully. "Why yes, boy, something has happened. Two somethings, in fact."

"My brother has been dealt with," the king explained.

"That is good news," Bryn said.

"And the Citadel was attacked. A number of young talents were kidnapped."

"Why are you telling him this, my lord? He already knows," Marius snarled. "He was there, after all. Ask him. He was right there, burning our books. Ask him!"

The king's nostrils flared. "Yes, thank you, Marius. Bryn — you were not in your room last night. Explain your absence."

"I was with a woman. I know you were hoping I'd use that door for something more interesting, but that's all. It was late and I was alone."

"Is he drunk?" the king asked. The steward and the other councilors gathered about the long table — the two closest to Bryn sniffed and nodded.

"No, you're lying. You were with a different whore. You were with Varra when you burned our pedigrees."

"Enough!" the king said.

Marius panted, inches from Bryn's face. Bryn did not back away. "My purse is empty. See?" He took it from his belt and threw it in Marius's face. "You do not believe me? Ask Edgar where I was. I know you have him follow me."

"Yes. I have spoken to Edgar," the king said. "He claims that you went into a tavern and then later a house of low women."

"Then Edgar is lying," Marius growled.

"Our other man confirmed his report. He went inside and found him asleep on the floor, in a puddle of wine."

Bryn wished he had more gold to give his impostor. “Well, then?” he said. “Tell the dog to stop slobbering on me.”

The king did not, and when Marius backhanded him, he said nothing until Bryn regained his feet and explored the loosened molar.

“If you plan to embarrass yourself, try and do so agreeably,” the king told him. “Marius, I remind you that you’ve won us a great victory. Our work is nearly done. Let us not concern ourselves with the boy’s indiscretions.”

“May I go?” Bryn asked.

“Yes, Bryn. Go and sleep — you look ready for it. And if your head doesn’t ache too much, we’ll celebrate this victory when you wake.”

“Thank you, sir. I congratulate you.”

He was allowed to return to his chambers unescorted. No one waited inside with a knife. Bryn ordered a servant to bring him water for a bath. When it came, he removed his clothes — stinking of sweat and wine — and climbed in. He shivered, though the water was hot, and then fell asleep.

Iulus brought him food. Bryn, staring at his shriveled fingertips, asked what his orders were.

“No different,” Iulus said. He set down the tray. “But Edgar has sent me with news.”

Bryn’s stomach lurched. “What? Why would he do that?”

“My lord, we do not have time for this. Just listen. I am to inform you that Varra lives, as does Artum. Marius crushed his army, but he escaped the rout. Edgar has not yet found him. The other thing: Varra’s called a meeting for tomorrow night. She’s ready to bring things to a conclusion.” His voice descended each word like a stair, until ‘conclusion’ was hardly audible. “You’ll be needed there,” he said.

Bryn blinked. “How long have you —”

“Enjoy the food,” Iulus said. He returned to his post outside the door.

Bryn spent the next day by the window. When he was not reading, he stared out it at the Wall and the forest beyond. The trees contained noth-

ing but light, shadow, and the occasional bird that somehow always knew not to cross the Wall. When the sun set he could not look out the window or read the book in his lap. The meeting would not be for hours, but he was content to wait in darkness: lighting the lamps seemed impossible. Then Raske knocked, and showed Thetia inside.

“Brooding?” she asked. She briskly lit the lamps with a flame of her own devising, and Bryn wondered how talented her father was.

“Sitting, I thought, though I see your point.”

“Come and sit with me, Bryn.” Thetia lounged on his couch; she was happy.

Bryn loitered at the window before joining her.

Thetia asked, “So — will we win? Will the war be over soon?”

“Artum has been defeated. We are sure to win. Isn’t that what everyone says?”

“Yes, that is what they say. But they don’t know anything. You do. So tell me what you think will happen.”

“I think it’ll be over soon. Very soon. Artum is finished: he is the type that only has to be beaten once. Now all that’s left is Varra.”

“They say that all her followers threw in with Artum.”

“Even so, she will not surrender. The king will have to kill her.”

“Hunting down one woman? That does not seem so formidable.”

“No, I suppose not.”

“Then Amara will finally be married.”

“Is that Marius’s reward?”

“He has spoken of it for months.”

“I am glad it is not you.”

Thetia smiled weakly. “She thinks she can be his wife,” she said. “I do not know.”

They sat for some time, thinking, until Bryn decided he would ask his question.

“You like me still, don’t you?” he asked.

“I do, yes.”

“But our not sharing blood — did you ever think about that?”

“Anything I did to tease you, or... that was only a girl being bored

and cruel.”

“No — no, I wasn’t talking about that. I meant that we aren’t kin. But you and I, we still care what happens to the other.”

“We grew up together.”

“I want to know how far that goes. No matter what Artum has done, the king knows he is his brother still. And however it ends, that will remain true. You and I — will you always care, no matter what happens? Not your brother, I never wanted to be that, but something close?”

“Of course,” she said, but Bryn suspected they were having separate conversations.

Thetia was gone. Bryn was back at the window, staring at the darkened palace grounds. It was close to midnight, but his broken watch insisted it was three. He pocketed it, unsure why he had checked it at all. If he left now, walked into the city, and collected his horse, he would be well in time for the meeting.

He drew on his cloak. This would be the last time he crept from the palace. The subterfuge and fear would end. He stepped into his boots and pulled them snug. The king would relent when he had no other option. For their part, the rebels would demonstrate a king’s clemency and spare the royal family. He crossed the room. It would be unpopular, but Bryn could convince Varra, and she would convince them. Perhaps they would even see the irony in it. However it was received, it would be the just course. Tonight would be the first steps, and with luck, everything would be concluded in a week. He pushed at the secret door.

It did not open. Grumbling, he pushed again. Nothing happened. Suddenly frenetic, he rammed his shoulder into the door: it rattled, but did not budge.

Bryn strode to his chamber door, remembering at the last second to shuck his boots and cloak. He leaned out of his doorway and found both guards at their posts. They regarded him with an amused curiosity.

“Has the king sent for me?”

“No,” Iulus said.

“Has he sent any messages for me?”

“If he had, you would know. What is it?”

“Nothing, nothing.”

Bryn shut the door and paced around the couch for a few minutes. Edgar had said his presence was required at the meeting. What would happen if he was not there? Without a clear plan, only a need to escape, he went to speak to the guards again.

“I think I will go and visit the princesses.”

Raske smirked. “Those the girls you actually want to see? You’re not leaving the palace, Bryn. Nor that room.”

Iulus scratched his neck. “King decided those poor brothel girls deserved a reprieve.”

Bryn shut the door and listened to their chuckling on the other side. His hands were trembling as he fidgeted with the hem of his shirt. Midnight lunged through the windows and stained his floor; somewhere out there the rebels decided the kingdom’s future, while Bryn was locked in his chambers for whoring. He circuited the room with one of the candles Thetia had lit, and lit those she had not. Then he flopped onto the couch and sat in the bright room, listening to the burning silence. He slept only when his mind conceded there was nothing left to do.

Three booms woke him. It was morning. Bryn wiped his mouth and pushed himself upright on the couch as the king entered, smiling. Bryn smiled back, bleary enough to forget that the king’s satisfactions had diverged from his own.

“It’s over, my boy. The rebellion is done.” He stretched out his arms as actors sometimes did at the end of a performance. “We survived.”

“What happened?”

“The beating Marius gave my dear brother cleared his head. Varra’s rabble had a meeting, and he came to it, talking of reconciliation, new offensives. And they believed him. Astonishing how gullible hope makes us. He captured them all: Varra and any left to follow her. We just received his rider. The rest will be here in hours. The woman will be dead before

midday, and it will be over. We will go on living, as we did.”

The woman will be dead. For a moment, Bryn thought of nothing else. Then he remembered the king was standing before him, and he hid the rest of his reaction by rubbing his eyes and feigning a yawn.

“I see,” Bryn said. “Congratulations, sir.” Seeing the king’s frown, he added, “Forgive me. Even good news takes a moment to land this early.”

He rose from the couch and walked stiffly to the basin in the other room. The king followed him, talking:

“I have been thinking about what to do, now that we have our possibilities back. Artum will be spared, but he must be stripped of land and title. We’ll have need of someone to manage his territory, deal with the pygmies as necessary. You’ll take Artum’s place, and Amara’s child will take mine. Our future will be secure.”

Bryn scooped water and splashed his face, again and again. He swiped away the excess and patted his face with a rag. “Thank you, sir. You are generous. But Thetia told me about this marriage. Marius as king? Amara deserves better. Every girl in the kitchen has a tale about him.”

The king laughed. “Considering your behavior the other day, you might reconsider the piety. The sovereign must have talent, and Marius has plenty of that. But these are matters for tomorrow. Before you can take your new station, we must first reassure the rest of the kingdom of your loyalty. There were too many rumors of your involvement with the rebels.”

“You know I only did it to protect Ippoleus.”

“Of course. But others may not believe you. This is why I want you to lop off this Varra’s head.”

Bryn nodded. “I would be honored.”

“Excellent.” The king embraced him. “The tailors are working up something for you to wear. They’ll be along with it shortly. I must go and prepare.”

“Yes, sir.”

The king smiled and patted his cheek. “Very good.” He turned to leave, but Bryn had a question.

“Sir? What about Ippoleus?”

The king spoke from over his shoulder. “No news, but with no one left to use him against us, that doesn’t matter. Don’t worry, Bryn. I’m sure he’ll be found.”

Bryn waited until the door closed to fling aside his rag.

THE DEFEATED

THE GUARDS ENTERED HIS ROOMS with a new set of clothes and watched him dress. The tailors had not been subtle: the mirror mocked him as the dynasty's man. Nearly everything was blue, red, or gold. He tugged at the blue doublet and wrapped the crimson sash about his belly.

"Come on, then," Raske said.

As Bryn was prodded through the hallways, he extrapolated two futures. In the first, Artum had captured Varra, and he now walked to her execution as her headsman. In the other, Varra had manipulated events in a larger ruse, and today was the day of the assassination. His imaginings braided and intertwined, a contingency from one irrupting into the other and rendering them both nonsense. A glance at Gevio's Field would resolve everything, but he could not leave the palace. For a few hours he would have to live in turbid uncertainty. Whatever happened, he would own one death by sundown. Through action or reticence, he would kill. Unless he could devise some other plan.

Bryn was one of the last members to join the king's retinue, which had gathered before the great doors of the entrance hall: two score at least, mostly soldiers in dull chain surrounding the brilliantly garbed royals. In the dimness they stood quiet, shifting, while above their heads shafts

of morning light from the high windows ignited the dust in the air and burned whitely on the walls in perfect lozenges.

“Toward the middle,” the guard said, and pushed Bryn into the crowd. Bryn sidled through the press, noting the grim expressions of the talents. Under the vaulted ceiling, their whispers thinned to almost nothing.

He found Edgar at the center, amid the advisors and favored cousins.

“Edgar,” he said, taking him by the elbow. “What is happening?”

“Rebellion’s end,” Edgar said, brightly. “Hadn’t you heard?”

“I’d feel better in armor,” Bryn said, pawing at his finery.

“I should think we have enough armor about us,” he said, gesturing at the soldiers, all high-ranking talents. He spoke loudly.

“Yes, but—”

Edgar stepped on his foot, then whispered to him like an actor speaking from behind the closed mouth of a mask. “I don’t know what is happening either. Be watchful, and if it is...” he looked at the back of the nearest man’s head, “meet at the Grove. And outside, you keep away from the king.”

“Why?”

“Just stand clear. Understood?”

Bryn nodded. A lengthy fanfare announced the king, and the retinue swiveled as one to see him descending the stone stairs, flanked by his red guard. The king beamed, and the jewels in his crown winked. A blue cloak, embroidered at the breast with gold thread in geometric designs, lagged his feet by two steps. Tetny went before him, watchful and thin — he had only recently regained the ability to swallow solid foods. Thetia walked at the back, nearly hidden behind her father and the rest of the bloodguard.

“What is she doing here,” Bryn murmured, and he repeated it when the king strode into the pocket of space cleared for him by bowing and cheering subjects.

“Why wouldn’t she witness the restoration of our dynasty?” the king asked.

“We don’t know that’s what it is. What if Artum has planned something?”

“Planned something? He’s chained in a wagon being pulled by Mari-

us's horses. His planning is finished."

"Where is the queen? Amara?"

The king's nose wrinkled. "The queen does as she will. And Marius commanded Amara to stay in the palace, as is his prerogative."

"Then do the same for Thetia. Send her to her rooms, sir." Though he addressed the king, Bryn faced Thetia. She was beautiful this morning, in a new dress of green, with slashed sleeves that hung over her hands.

"Bryn, we do not have time for this fretting. Open the doors," the king commanded.

The doors opened, and spring awaited them. Preceded by the marching soldiers, the entourage advanced into the sunlight, sighing a little as the warmth and breeze first touched each forehead. Triumph shone in the faces of these loyal subjects, to whom the rebellion had been nothing more than a tedious winter. Bryn did not feel their jubilation; he hardly felt the sun. Peering all about, he could see no immediate danger. The road from the palace to the bridge was surrounded by grass fields and tidy hedges that hid only rabbits. He wished to break away on a horse and ride to Gevio's, to spare himself this sun-drenched anxiety. He drifted from the king's right hand to Thetia, whose skirt shortened her steps.

"If you had to," he said, "could you run in that?"

Thetia looked up at him. Years ago, when she was twelve and he was fourteen, they had been the same height, and peers. "My seamstress does not usually design my dresses for running, no."

"You shouldn't be here."

"All the soldiers and all the bloodguard are here. This is the safest place in the kingdom, right now."

"The queen told you to stay with her, didn't she?"

"She did. So?"

"Ask your father to let you leave. It isn't safe," he said.

"Why not?" Her eyes widened. "Do you know something?"

"No. But what if something happens to you?"

"I am the king's daughter. If anything happens, I promise I'll try and protect you."

Of his traitor's abnegations, Bryn most regretted the ability to be

honest in these small moments. But with Thetia, he had not been able to be honest with her since they were the same height. “If anything happens, we run. Both of us.”

The king called his name. Bryn lingered with Thetia for a moment to see if she had an appropriate fear, and to wish idly that they were walking alone, elsewhere. Thetia looked at his face as though she were memorizing landmarks in an unfamiliar terrain. He wondered why, and wondered if he loved her still. Then he thought of Varra, chained, and decided the question irrelevant.

“Bryn.”

As a courtier, Bryn attended to the king, because the king had need of his courtiers. But he had no genuine need for Bryn. Ippoleus needed him, as did Varra, who had told him not to go at the moment he had given her what she wanted. To the king, Bryn had first been a doll to help him grieve for his living son, then an attentive listener, and finally a disappointment. Now, expected to listen again, Bryn had difficulty complying. His eyes fixed on a point of sky next to the king’s eyebrow while the king spoke.

“Should I start over?” the king asked, when he noticed this.

“Yes, sir. I’m sorry.”

“Bryn, you are afraid.” He put his hand on Bryn’s shoulder. “This is fine; prudent, even. But remember what I’ve told you: fear can live here—” with his other hand he tapped Bryn’s stomach “—but we can never allow it up here.” The hand on Bryn’s shoulder mussed the hair at the back of his head.

“Now,” the king said, “this is what will happen. We will climb the dais at Deiton’s Plaza, and Varra will be brought forth. I will address the people, draw my sword, and hand it to you. You will salute the crowd and then myself, in this order, and then step forward. Remember that she cannot hurt you. She will be bound, with a dozen talents to dampen any... final outbursts. It would not be proper for you to approach her timidly. And then you simply do what must be done. But with two hands, and as hard as you can without missing. I imagine her neck is rather stiff.”

Bryn remembered the knife sliding into Lenos’s throat. “Yes, sir.”

“It is understandable if you have misgivings. Whatever you felt or

said among the rebels, that is forgotten. You are back home, where you belong. And this is simply the last thing you must do to make this homecoming complete.”

Tetny appeared at the king’s elbow to whisper about their safety. As the king leaned in to listen, Bryn thought on what he had said. He had no misgivings. The carriages awaited them at the bridge.

Bryn heard the crowd before he saw it — many voices melded to one, echoless. The sound built as the carriage rolled forward through the emptied streets. Jaw lifted, the king listened and tapped at his knees. At moments he allowed himself a small smile. Bryn looked out the windows at the rooflines, expecting bowmen or talents wielding massive chunks of masonry, ready to crush the trundling carriage. All he saw were the intermediate developments in the sky of a perfect day: a deepening tinge in the blue, a high quivering surge of vividness, the motionless drift of three clouds soled by blue shadows.

The carriage stopped with a gentle jolt. A guard swung open the door. Bryn hopped down from the carriage, shut his eyes, and inhaled. A blurred roar greeted the king’s appearance. Bryn opened his eyes and turned around. Guards and commoners filled Deiton’s Plaza. When the king waved to his subjects, they responded. Plumes of flower petals burst into the air, flung by dancing and cheering peasants. The majority stood watching. Stewardship over dirt and vegetables had infused them with patience, an eerie inertia.

While the statues of the defeated looked on with blank stone eyes — abased, awaiting their new companion — the royal party arrayed themselves on the dais. Bryn and the king stood at the front, with the bloodguard gathered close enough that the maroon shadows of the guards’ capes lay over their boots. Each red man was faster than a quarrel, if he saw it in time. Still, Bryn was glad Tetny stood by the king’s side and not his; a rage was clearly forming in Tetny. Bryn looked at the tense jaw of Cail, his guard, and assessed the chances that Cail would suffer a mortal wound for him.

Bryn looked over his shoulder and was relieved to see Thetia to the left, towards the back. She had allowed a number of royals, eager to occupy space in the people's memory of the historic day, to step in front of her. She answered his grateful look with a small grim nod.

Edgar stood behind him and to his right, hands clasped by his belt, apparently at ease — which meant nothing. The spy tapped his thumb against the knob of his other wrist as his attention roved over the crowd. Bryn followed the line of his eyes but saw nothing. Overhead, the sun continued to climb.

They did not wait long in the growing warmth. A contingent of dark-armored talents from the Citadel waded into the back of the crowd, shoving open an avenue, clouting peasants too slow in moving. When the sluggish reflexes of the crowd permitted, a great procession entered Deiton's Plaza from the east. In full regalia, Marius headed the parade standing in a dray drawn by two chestnut horses. His bronzed steel breastplate flashed in the light. His helmet, topped by a crest of griffin feathers, was removed so that the crowd might gaze on his determined scowl. Two figures rode in the dray with him. One sat with his hands shackled behind his back, and as the procession drew closer, Bryn saw it was Artum. The other was Varra.

She lay on her side with her knees drawn up, chained at ankle and wrist. Her body limply echoed the dray's motions as it bumped over cobblestones. Wind fluttered her hair, the only part of her that was unbound. The crowd booed. Varra did not move.

"Is she already dead?" the king asked.

"Marius had orders," Tetny said. "Though he probably wasn't gentle in obeying."

Behind Marius's cart shuffled two coffles of rebels. Bryn recognized the faces of Varra's most talented followers. The crowd felt free to pelt these prisoners with small rocks, trash, and pygmy apples, since there was no risk of striking Marius. Outraged, but aware of the king's attention, Bryn strove to match the rebels' stoicism. But there were not quite twenty. Even during the rebellion's death throes, Varra had more soldiers than that. He began to search the faces in the crowd.

The dray reached the clearing at the foot of the dais. With Marius's rough assistance, Artum gained his feet and gingerly approached the edge of the cart. He jumped down, overbalanced upon landing, and fell into the arms of a guard, who shoved him upright and ushered him towards the dais. As Artum waited at the foot of the steps, Marius hauled Varra up by her hair. For a few long seconds he presented her to the crowd, which roared its approval. Her boot tips scraped on the cart bed as she tried to put her feet to ground. All could see her pitiful grimacing. But Varra had taught Bryn that every face was a mask, and masks meant nothing. This bruised and mud-streaked face represented her no more than the crude woodcut of the bounty poster, no more than the fat man or the hag she had effected for secrecy.

After the cheering died down, Marius threw her from the cart, and the cheer went up again as she struck the cobbles. Bryn flinched, and his weight had already shifted towards his toes before he remembered himself. He watched as Varra lay there: she made no attempt to rise.

Three guards lifted her from the stones and put her on her feet. Prodded by spear butts, she tottered to stand beside Artum. The king waved his hand, and the spears poked them forward again. Varra and Artum climbed the steps wearily. Marius trailed them, resplendent and self-satisfied, his armored boots describing quarter arcs before landing on each step.

The king, Artum, and Varra stood in the puddles of their soon-to-vanish shadows, their eyes narrowed against the glare. The king pointed at Varra, his arm fully extended. "Kneel."

The torn collar of her jacket flapped in the breeze. "No," she said.

"Very well." The king extended both arms, palms down. As he lowered his hands, Varra's knees buckled and she crumpled into a kneeling position. At the margins of the dais the royal sculptor sketched with a stick of charcoal, his eyes cycling between the unwilling model and his rendering.

"Easier than I had thought," the king said. "And still you troubled me for so long." His nostrils rounded and he inhaled. "Let's not waste any more time."

He drew his sword and presented it to Bryn hilt-first. Bryn's hand

groped unsteadily around the jeweled pommel as his attention was divided by three epiphanies come all at once: Varra was glancing over her shoulder to locate Artum; Artum's eyes darted like an animal not caught, only cornered; and at the front rank of the crowd there stood Corl.

The king murmured, "Quickly, Bryn."

The sword point sank towards the flagstones, reflecting a jittering bar of sunlight onto Varra's chest. He waited for her sign, as she had waited in the frosted trees at Gevio's Field. After three shallow breaths — the king was impatient, he could delay no longer — the sign came. Varra looked at him for the first time that day, and smiled.

Then she sprang to her feet as a dozen talents, Marius, and the king attempted to restrain her. Bryn's skin prickled, and he staggered clear. To Bryn's eye the disputed motion unfurled at half-speed, due either to his astonishment or the battle of wills. She spread her arms and the thick chains parted with bursting clinks. The guards gave up on subduing her, and ordered her shot.

"Fire!" and two crossbows twanged. The first quarrel refracted as it neared her ribs, diverting subtly into the heart of Artum, who was wrestling a sword from a guard and goggled at the feathers protruding from his chest before tumbling backwards down the shining stairs. The second quarrel was caught by Varra's prehensile chains and flung back at greater speed to slip through Tetny's visor and punch through the helmet's rear wall with a red spray. Blood spattered Bryn's cheek, and he dropped the king's sword as the chaos began. The chained rebels were no longer chained; previously disguised rebels appeared in the crowd; Tetny was dead.

At the edge of the dais there was a scramble. Bryn caught a glimpse of Thetia's green dress before his view was obscured by the bloodguard, which leaped forward as one to protect the king. Varra came at them, screaming, the chains whistling above her head. More rebels bounded up the stairs, wielding the short spears of dead guards who were still in the process of collapsing. Four mobbed Marius, interrupting him as he attempted to plunge a sword in Varra's unprotected back. As the brawl developed on the stairs, Bryn looked to his right and saw Edgar take an apple from his jacket pocket. Confused, Bryn watched as he yanked

the stem, then lobbed it underhand towards the center of the melee. It bounced off the stones and went skittering between feet; something in the way it rolled disturbed Bryn, and he understood fully when he looked up and saw Edgar waving him off.

“Shield yourself,” Bryn screamed, and yanked the king by his collar. The king was not the only one to obey him: the air distorted about Varra as she lifted her arms. There was a *whump* — too loud to hear, felt in the bones — and a sear of light, and then Bryn was no longer standing. He and the king flew through the air and struck the stones an instant before the hail of torn flesh. Bryn stared out from the center of a ringing silence and saw mangled corpses where there had been soldiers, moments before. Now blood flowed over the alabaster flagstones in a gory starburst. While he attempted to coordinate his arms and legs, the rivulets of blood began to obey something besides gravity.

“We have to run, sir,” he said, and then shouted it because he could not hear his own voice in his ears.

It will protect us, he thought the king said. His lips moved too fast to be certain.

“But him first,” he shouted. “Your brother’s bleeding, not you. Quickly, sir!”

Together they stumbled towards the edge of the dais where Thetia and the others had made their escape. Seized by a sudden impulse, Bryn dragged the king in a new direction. With the king following unsteadily, they ran towards an alley that was familiar to Bryn.

Bryn looked back before dodging around the corner. He saw Varra atop the dais, swinging a glimmering sword. Looming at her side was the red giant, striking out with its fickle armory, burgeoning in the massacre. Soon it would stand taller than the rooftops.

Five rebels accosted them in the alleys. Before they recognized their prey, the rebels were confident. Then the king attacked them. There was a flash of green light. Nothing happened for a moment — then the three closest men began to frown. Blood dripped from their eyes and ears. Already dead, they made no effort to catch their falls, and collapsed like trees. The fourth man tried to run, and was killed by a half brick travelling at the

speed of an arrow into the base of his skull. The fifth man surrendered to his king and was ripped apart at the shoulders and hips. During the massacre, the king's hands never moved. A red fury twisted his features.

When the king regained his senses, Bryn guided him forward through the human wreckage. It was clear that the king had taxed himself. They first ran, then trotted, and finally walked when the king was exhausted. As he led them impatiently through the rat's maze of alleys — rerouting whenever he heard noise ahead — Bryn looked back at the king. Talent did nothing for a man's lungs, and the king had never looked older: pale, haggard, too breathless to make a commanding speech.

Bryn probed his reasons for saving the king from Edgar's strange apple, but it had been reflex. When the apple had bounced at their feet, there had been no time to think. Now there was time, and quiet, in the deserted alleyways of the seemingly emptied city. Bryn made his decision.

"Follow me, sir. I know a place where we'll be safe."

Sunlight flooded the courtyard, illuminating the dents in an overturned wheelbarrow. His horse stood in the faint thin shadows of the western side, and flicked its tail lazily when it saw him. Bryn walked through the hot glare, climbed the steps, and knocked on the blue door. A man answered quickly. He looked over Bryn's shoulder and saw the king standing in the dazzling light, holding the crown in one hand and running his fingers through his sweaty, thinning hair. The man grabbed Bryn's elbow and pulled him inside.

They stood in the stifling vestibule and spoke in low voices. The man's excitement sought other outlets. While he whispered, his hands chopped at the air.

Finally, Bryn said, "You have my pack?"

The man returned quickly with it. He wished Bryn luck as he opened the door.

Bryn stepped out, and the blue door closed behind him. His boots rasped on the grit that paled the uneven stone landing. The king had replaced the crown on his head, and now performed a frowning survey of

the courtyard.

"We need to move, Bryn. They'll try and block the roads to the Citadel — we have to get there before they can."

Sighing, Bryn sat down on the top step. He shut his eyes and let the sun lay red on his eyelids. He reached inside the pack and felt about.

"We are not leaving this courtyard yet," he said. "First you have to make a choice, sir."

"What? We have been attacked, we must respond."

Bryn's fingers brushed against the cool grip of the pistol. "No. No more fighting. I am offering you a choice. It is simple: abdicate or die."

"What did you say? There is no time for nonsense. I must find Marius, we need to respond."

"Listen to me, sir. The dynasty is finished. The people no longer accept a king, and this means you must *listen*, now, even to a commoner like me. This is what I want you to do. You will throw away the crown and follow me to the Wall. Once we are there, you will open the Wall, and you will live in exile in the outside world. If you do not do this, I will kill you."

"Kill me? You just dragged me from an assassination."

"I want you to choose exile. Please believe me. I have no wish to harm you."

"And how will a commoner like you accomplish such a task, that your betters have failed at?"

Bryn drew the pistol from the pack. The king's gaze fixed on its precise geometry, and Bryn saw something crumble within him. A long silence unspooled as the king stared, his head shaking slightly. "But I am giving you the choice," Bryn said.

"No, Bryn. You hold the weapon. And though I could disarm you, I will not. You are just trying to think of some way to absolve yourself of this responsibility. This is the act of a child."

"You do not have to die. You can go on living the rest of your years."

"And how could I go on living, knowing that the world contains a creature such as you?" The king sighed. "Tell me, what is the name of that weapon?"

"A pistol."

“Yes, yes — Edgar mentioned those to me. I am growing forgetful, in my old age. They are the weapons the outsider peasants use. I am faster, surely.”

“You are not.”

“Then let us find out. I don’t have to remind you what I will do to you after. You are past all redemption.”

“Will you not take my advice, even once?”

“Why would I — because I once loved you? You are a foolish boy trying to be noticed by someone. I see you now, Bryn. More clearly than when I took you from that ragged farm and gave you your life. You think that killing me will improve something. It will not. There will be blood for years. And the outsiders will find us, and talent and griffins and all the secret things of our kingdom will die out. But enough hesitating, son — I am growing impatient.”

Bryn shot the king in his forehead. The pistol sighed smoke and the king toppled, his head snapping backwards as if he were tracking the flight of a bird. A fan of gore spread over the cobbles above the king’s head; the crown cartwheeled away from the body, managing three full revolutions before tipping over. Bryn stood, holding the pistol loosely. He became aware of his breathing. He descended the steps. He circled the body twice, then kicked the crown away.

The blast had panicked the horse. As he soothed it, Bryn was amazed: his voice was calm.

THE WALL

THE GUARDS WERE GONE, THE STREETS EMPTY. Behind him, draped over the horse's hindquarters, was the shrouded corpse. Much further behind was a cacophony, at this distance mostly imagined. Bryn rode unchallenged through the Eastern Gate, his horse's hooves clacking and reverberating upon the carvings of the archway. As he rode through the dark tunnel, Bryn ignored these. He looked straight ahead, at its exit. When the horse plodded back into the light, he began to breathe again. The mild breeze seemed to deny that anything had happened. Cloud shadows skimmed over the tender green fields of new grass. The road ran on straight. There was no one about to stop him.

He passed Gevio's Field on his way to the grove. The answer to his earlier confusion grew in the dirt: all the field bloomed with roses. Their density and vividness tricked his eyes. They seemed to subtly undulate, as though they grew on water. The red was so bright that he saw it even through his closed eyelids — he reminded himself it was just the sunshine.

The horse walked gingerly along the narrow path that led to the grove.

Cracked globes of fresh dung littered the path, the sight of which inspired a shiver of fear in Bryn. He had seen no one for hours.

All waited for him at the Wall: rebels in various states of injury, Varra, her remaining lieutenants, and the prince, who crouched against its masonry. As Bryn entered the clearing their murmured conversation ceased. They strained to look at the roughspun-wrapped bundle behind his saddle. Varra had been leaning against the Wall with her arms crossed. Now she strode forward, beaming. It took Bryn a moment to see that they were all smiling.

She came to stand beside him and reached up to squeeze his knee.

"I brought him," he said.

"We know, Bryn. The Wall is weak — I can feel it. And you're alive." Her smile widened.

"What do we do now?"

"We'll get him down. The prince must see him."

Bryn dismounted carefully. More rebels appeared with every moment. A few stepped forward to take the king, but Bryn warded them off. He and Varra lifted the king's body, grown rigid in its bent posture, and carried him over to where the prince crouched. They laid the body on the ground.

Varra said, "I'm going to take away the shroud. Will this upset you?"

Bryn shook his head.

With a knife she cut away the cloth and exposed the king's face. Others crowded in to see.

Death had drained him of all expression. A hole the size of a coin blackly glistened at the center of his forehead. The back of his skull was a ruin. Bryn wished he had remembered to close the eyes, but Varra did so then.

"Show the prince," she said.

Though he was close enough to touch it, the prince paid no attention to the body. He stared at Bryn, ignored his pointing.

"He doesn't understand," Bryn said.

Varra muttered something to herself. Then, loudly, she said to the others, "It doesn't matter. Let's have our king lead us past the Wall. Grab his feet. And make sure he sees, Bryn."

Bryn backed away while two men grabbed an ankle each, and Varra took the king under the shoulders. Together they went to the Wall. After a brief count, they flung the king over. The others rushed to stare at the body lying on the other side.

The prince's eyes wandered aimlessly, as though he were standing too close to an inscrutable painting. Suddenly he turned and grabbed Bryn, hugging him with his thin arms. The prince clung so tightly his feet left the ground, and he pressed his face into Bryn's neck. Bryn laid his palm against the back of Ippoleus's head, the same place where Ippoleus had healed him. They were fools to expect anything from the prince. He could not even participate in his own grief, let alone a rebellion.

With the prince's fingers digging into his shoulder, Bryn felt the urge to cry. To stop himself he whispered in Ippoleus's ear. "Help me, Ip. After everything I have done."

Bryn disengaged himself from the prince, walked to the Wall, and placed his hands on the rough stone. He needed to make the prince understand. If he did not, then Ippoleus would not be a key but a lock, like his father, and treated the same way. Bryn pantomimed a furious effort, allowing his boots to slip on the grass as he pushed. After an embarrassing pretense of struggle, Ippoleus understood. He sidled forward in the hunched way he had learned from Artum's torturers. He touched the Wall with one hand and gave a push. A section thirty feet wide collapsed and coughed up a cloud of dust.

All of the rebels leaped back. Some shouted with surprise. Varra, recovering quickest, was the first beyond the Wall, her hands trembling at her sides. Bryn and others followed, stepping carefully over the tumbled stones. The crossing was imperceptible. The air smelled the same — earth and new vegetation — and the sun shone as usual. Still, Bryn felt different standing on the other side. He thought of the king's words, and realized those would be the last. The bright afternoon sun discovered the small gaps between the rebels before him. Bryn stepped forward to be at Varra's side. Her eyes were closed and her lips were parted as she tilted her face towards the light. Then she opened her eyes, and gold flooded green.

She smiled and turned to him. "There's little time," she said.

The first pioneers streamed forth into the new world, more appearing in the grove every minute. Bryn watched them diminish on the plain, or follow the curve of the Wall northward.

Varra was double checking the contents of her saddlebags.

Bryn asked her, “Artum truly thought he would be king?”

“I told you that the rebellion could find a purpose for every man. He played his part.”

“The blood elemental?”

“A terrible thing... but it worked.”

“And you knew that if you did not kill him, I would.”

“I knew nothing for sure. Who can say with men and their fathers?” She tightened the saddlebag’s straps. “I gambled that you’d weigh the right thing more heavily than the easy. You did that. Now we are all in your debt.”

“He told me — just before — that I’d only be making more war.”

She shrugged. “Maybe. But now everyone has the choice to flee it.” She put her foot in the stirrup and tried to climb into the saddle. Bryn grabbed her shoulder.

“Out there? What if it’s worse than here? What have I done?”

“I have to leave, Bryn.”

“Let me go with you.”

She released the saddle and turned to him. “If you came with me, I’d be taking the kingdom along.”

“But what will it have been for, if you go by yourself?” He imagined the slow suffocation of an anonymous life in the world outside. They had five oceans, each large enough to drown the kingdom a thousand times, trafficked by behemoth fish. “I’ll go with you. I love you,” he said.

She grimaced gently. “You think you do. But how could that be enough?” He turned away and looked at the new saplings rising from the leaf litter. Her cool fingertips brushed the back of his hand. “I would love you if I could,” she said. She kissed his cheek, and lay her forehead against his jaw.

Bryn put his arms around her. The buckle of her belt pressed low on his stomach.

“Are your real eyes green?” he asked.

She drew back. “They are.”

Looking into them, he said, “Be careful.”

“I will.” She mounted her horse and brought it to the kingdom’s threshold. “In the days to come you will despair,” she said. “Promise me, Bryn: never destroy yourself. I will be happier knowing that you are alive, somewhere.”

He was shocked, then realized there was a danger in him. “Goodbye, Varra.”

“Goodbye.” She put heels to her horse, and it trotted forward. He rested his elbows against the Wall to watch her leave. When she was a quarter mile off, the blond began to drain from her braid, and soon it was a dark-haired rider that crossed the broad plain, alone.

Bryn turned from the Wall and ambled to the tree that Ippoleus sat under. Groaning, he lowered himself beside the prince and squeezed his shoulder to let him know he was there. Ippoleus smiled, dazzlingly, and muttered “Bryn,” not like it was a name, but a judgement of quality. At first Bryn tried to mold the fog in his head into a coherent plan. Then he was content to wait. From their tree they could see through the Wall, when their view was not obstructed by the legs of those in the passing exodus. They heard every kind of rumor — that Marius survived, that the blood elemental had spoken like a man, that the pygmies had attacked — and then the reverse of these, offered as refutation. The only point on which all passersby agreed: the king was dead. Bryn’s eyes were fixed on the horizon, past the hot shimmering air, where the dark specks bobbed and strove onwards.

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