The Negrecumulous

Adam Teeling

Book One · continued in *Saskatchewan*

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1

An Account of Absences

My dear reader, though the night sky may shine with a billion stars, most of it is dark. The intervals are considerable. Perhaps you have noticed this. Perhaps, looking up, you have felt yourself to be insignificant and very small.

Your size is not in dispute.

The papers from which this account has been prepared occupied two biscuit tins and a case intended for a violin. There was no violin. The tins contained exercise books; the case held drawings, several envelopes, and a folded length of cloth which, on examination, proved to be an ordinary cleaning rag. I mention the rag because it was offered to me as part of the collection and affected the price.

I attended the sale because the notice advertised furniture. I had recently acquired a room without any, and the auctioneer, having advertised what he hoped would attract purchasers rather than what the deceased had owned, seemed to consider the resulting congregation proof that he had described the estate correctly.

The only chair worth carrying had been reserved by a relation. The rest of us stood.

The tins were under a table. Someone had put them there to stop its shorter leg rocking. I asked to see them and was told that the table was included. When I explained that I wanted the tins alone, the auctioneer asked whether I was a dealer in old metal. I said that I dealt in print. He raised the price.

"They're exercise books," said the woman who had reserved the chair.

"Used?"

"Naturally."

"Then I ought to pay less."

She looked at the table, which had begun to rock again, and suggested a figure neither of us thought satisfactory. That is how collections are formed.

I cannot make the transaction noble. The woman wanted the house emptied. I wanted the paper, which could be sold by weight if it proved to contain the usual accounts of births, illnesses, weather, and the moral deficiencies of relatives. The first book contained all four. On its fourth leaf, beside a calculation for flour, there was a drawing of a baby suspended above the open mouths of two other babies.

I asked who had drawn it.

"My mother."

"Was she an artist?"

"She had eleven children."

The answer settled neither question, but the woman had begun to stack crockery and I had already paid.

The violin case emerged last. Its lock had been forced long before the sale; two small screws had then been fitted to hold it shut, so that opening it required a tool the household could not find. I borrowed a knife, broke its point, and paid for that too. There are cheaper ways to enter literature.

Inside were the drawings, folded by size rather than date. The smallest bore grease marks at each corner. The largest had been made on the back of a bill for a coffin. I initially placed this one at the end of the sequence. Later I found that the coffin belonged to a neighbour and the drawing to an event Mrs. Small-Toates had recorded forty years before her own death. My first act as editor had been to bury the wrong person.

The title presents a similar difficulty.

Negrecumulous appears first in blue-black ink. Mrs. Small-Toates's surviving purchases account for pencils, red ink used in household accounts, and a bottle of black which she complains was mostly sediment. They do not account for the blue-black. This absence proves very little: she could have borrowed a pen. More troublesome are the capitals. Her ordinary N begins low and is pulled upwards; the N in this word descends from a flourish large enough to cover the next line. A specimen of the same flourish occurs in her drawing of a notice above the Abbot's desk.

I have resisted the profitable temptation to call these facts proof of another hand. On the page following the title, she has tried the word herself three times. The first version copies the flourish. The next two become progressively less like it. Beneath the third she has written: *His word. Not mine.*

The first binder asked me whether I was sure of the spelling. I said I was sure of what the manuscript said. He explained that this was not what he had asked. We proceeded nevertheless. When a later reader suggested *The Stolen Boy*, a title with advantages I need hardly enumerate, I declined because *Negrecumulous* was already on the spine of the first binding and I had paid for the binding.

That was the immediate reason. The other reason belongs to the Abbot, whose considerable vocabulary included a term for everything except permission.

Before I arranged the notebooks I laid the three drawings of the barred room side by side. In each, the empty circle above the table had been rubbed until the fibres rose. In the last, where the table stood empty, the rubbing had made a hole. I placed a clean sheet beneath it. A white circle appeared where there had been a black one.

An editor can accomplish a surprising amount by changing what is underneath.

I should record what I did not buy. The sale included a trunk of the household's later papers: receipts, letters from grandchildren, a certificate of apprenticeship for a son named James, a pamphlet on the care of

fruit trees. I looked through it and put it back. It seemed to me at the time that these were the ordinary documents of an ordinary family and that their ordinariness made them worthless to anyone but the family, who had already decided they were worthless by putting them up for sale.

I have since come to regret this. The notebooks refer constantly to the household: to a latch, a plate, a list of things needed for a daughter's room. On several occasions I have wanted to know what the plate looked like, or whether the latch was ever properly mended, and I have found that the answer was probably in the trunk, and that the trunk went to a dealer who sold paper by the pound to a mill that made it into card.

I mention this not to excuse the gaps but to locate them. When the account is thin about the people who stayed, it is not because they mattered less. It is because I was looking for the one who left, and did not recognize, until too late, that the record of him had been kept on the back of theirs.

Mrs. Adelaide Small-Toates had written in pencil, ink, and, on three occasions, what appears to have been a blue copying substance transferred from another sheet. Her handwriting altered over the years. The subject did not.

The earliest drawing of the room with the barred window is dated long before the most accomplished drawing of the same room. In the first, a child lies on a table beneath a blank circle. In the second, the circle has become an arrangement of eyes. In the last, drawn with a trembling hand, the table is empty. It would have been convenient to regard these as three successive events. Unfortunately, the writer had supplied each with the same phrase: *Before he fell.*

Chronology has therefore required judgement. Where I have exercised it, I have attempted to remain faithful to the record. Where the record fails, I have supplied what is necessary to make its surviving portions intelligible. Readers who object to this procedure are welcome to

imagine the parts between a woman waking and reaching for her pencil. They will find themselves practising the same profession.

The conversations are not transcripts. Some are reported in full; others consist of a name, an action, and a few words underlined with unusual pressure. Mrs. Small-Toates was often required to stop writing because someone in her household needed something. One of the most terrible incidents breaks off at a request for flour. The incident resumes on the reverse of a bill from a coal merchant.

There are those who will say that the interruptions establish the domestic origin of the whole invention. This is possible. It is equally possible that events of consequence fail to arrange themselves around the delivery of coal.

I have retained the names as consistently as the documents permit. The writer sometimes used two names for one person before she understood that a change had taken place. At other times she left a space, later filled in with a different ink. These corrections should not be confused with certainty on my part.

Her own son's name presents no difficulty. It appears inside the cover of the first book, written firmly and without revision: Robert Small.

For several years, almost everyone in his story called him the Boy.

—R. Shiraz

2

The Unending Misery of Mrs. Adelaide Small

When Mrs. Adelaide Small lost her first child for the third and final time, she could no longer account for the world. She had fed him, watched him, carried him. She had searched every place in which a child could reasonably be put, and several in which no reasonable person would put one. Robert was gone.

For the rest of her life, although she moved on in a geographic and familial sense, she could not forgive herself for whatever she had done to bring this about. No one could tell her what it was. Some assured her that she had done nothing. She found this difficult to reconcile with the result.

The place of Robert's birth could not reasonably be blamed either. Lil' Pile-of-Bones was a settlement on the Saskatchewan prairie, first a seasonal camp serving the slaughter of buffalo, then a collection of stores and shacks whose owners had begun to call it permanent. Several hundred farmers and trappers lived there. The village's principal landmark was the sky.

Its water came from Redmud Creek, which was brown and scarcely large enough to justify the name. The settlers had arrived with equipment, families, debts, and varying ideas of what the land would provide. The railway would eventually pass elsewhere. For the time being, each

new building supplied evidence that the previous buildings had been a sound investment.

Mr. Small had come from the East with his young wife to trade in dry goods and furs. He built a shack for them and a second one in front of it for the store. His shelves were level. He extended credit cautiously and repaired things for neighbours who could not pay him at once. He was not much given to the drinking and loud talk by which the other men made themselves known, but he had acquired friends nevertheless.

There was nothing exceptional about his appearance. His clothes were clean, his manner quiet, his work good. Had he lived, these qualities would probably have been sufficient.

On the afternoon before Robert was born, Mr. Small took down a shelf which everyone else considered finished. One end stood a little higher than the other. Adelaide could not see the difference until he placed a marble upon it. The marble rolled to the edge and dropped into his waiting hand.

"Will the flour object?" she asked.

"The jars will."

He had marked the wall with a square he kept wrapped in cloth. She liked the care he took of a tool that did not move and was difficult to damage. Around them, the store smelled of soap, hides, and the cold iron of the stove. The floor remained gritty however often she swept it. Outside, a wagon came down the track with a load of bones rattling above its axles.

The driver stopped at the door. He wanted tobacco and lamp oil. He had no money yet, but the bone buyer would come on Tuesday.

"He came Tuesday last month," Adelaide said.

"Which is why we expect him Tuesday."

Her husband rested the shelf against the wall and opened the account book. The man watched the pen with an attention he had not given the prices. Mr. Small entered the oil. Then he put the stopper in the bottle and slid it across the counter.

"The tobacco when you're paid."

The driver tried to explain the value of the load. Mr. Small had seen it. The bones had lain in the grass before anyone here had thought to give their removal a price; now men took teams far enough out that the animals ate more on the return journey than the bones could reliably buy, and every household on the route waited for somebody else's Tuesday.

"Oil, then," the driver said.

After he left, Adelaide asked whether the account would be paid.

"Some of it."

"Why enter all of it?"

"So we know which part."

She sat on an upturned crate while he rehung the shelf. The child shifted heavily within her, pressing beneath her ribs. Her husband saw her move and set down the hammer.

"Not yet," she said.

He took the marble out again. This time it stayed where he placed it. He left it there for her to inspect, and she watched it while he went out for another bucket of creek water.

Later, when men described him as a good man, she thought of that afternoon rather than the things they said at the graveside: the tobacco refused without a lecture, the oil given on doubtful credit, the small glass ball resting among jars, all of it performed with the unremarkable patience of someone who expected to be interrupted and to resume.

Robert's birth was unusually easy. The midwife, who had spent thirty years attending women in rooms less comfortable than this one, would later describe it as the quietest delivery she had known. The boy took a breath and released it in a sigh. Then he looked about him.

It was the looking that stayed with her.

In winter, when the cold kept everyone close to the tavern fire and she had taken enough whiskey to speak against her better judgement, the midwife would lower her voice. An unearthly child, she said. A babe aware. She could offer no more exact description. She had seen many

newborns look at things. She had not previously felt obliged to account for herself to one.

"I've seen them born looking cross," the midwife told the table by the stove. "I've seen them look hungry before they've worked out there's a mouth for it. I know what a baby looks like."

One of the men said she certainly ought to.

"Then let me finish."

She held her glass between both hands. The nearest man moved his chair, making room for a performance he expected to enjoy. She waited until he had finished moving it.

"There was his mother, tired as any woman has a right to be. There was his father trying to heat water without making a noise. There was me, with things to do. And that child looked from one to another of us as if we were late."

Someone laughed.

"I don't mean clever. They all become clever when their relations describe them. I mean I knew, for a moment, exactly how long I had been doing the same things in the same order. Thirty years. My hands went on. His eyes followed them."

The man who had laughed asked what happened then.

"I wrapped him."

"And?"

"And gave him to his mother. What did you imagine?"

The question spoiled the evening's ghost story. They began to discuss the snow. The midwife finished her drink and went out with her shawl pulled close beneath her chin.

Adelaide heard the account from a customer who had not been there. By then Robert had reportedly spoken. She asked what he had said. The customer could not remember, though she was certain it had been disturbing.

That afternoon Adelaide went to the midwife herself. They sat without tea because neither thought to make any.

"Did you see anything wrong with him?"

"No."

"Anything I should have noticed?"

"No."

"People are saying—"

"People are warm and have finished their work."

The midwife leaned forward and took Adelaide's hand. She examined the knuckles, where lye soap and the cold had split the skin during the washing of a newborn's linen. The cracks had begun to close, leaving a yellow crust.

"Does that still hurt?"

Adelaide had not been asked that for several days.

On the fourth day after the birth Mr. Small brought the marble in from the store and set it on the windowsill beside the bed, where the light came through it. Adelaide asked what it was for.

"Nothing," he said. "He's looking at things. I thought he could look at that."

Robert looked at it. He looked at it for so long, lying in the crook of her arm with his eyes fixed on the small blue glass and the white curl inside, that Mr. Small began to laugh, quietly, so as not to disturb him.

"He's checking it," he said. "He wants to know if the sill's level."

"Is it?"

Her husband bent and put his eye to the sill, and was quiet for a moment, and straightened with an expression of such complete seriousness that she laughed out loud and woke the child.

"No," he said. "I'll see to it."

He never did. The sill was still out of level on the night the door blew open, and the marble was still on it, and when Adelaide came to pack the house years later she found it there in the dust and put it in her apron pocket without deciding to. It went west with her. It was in the screw dish on the day Elias died, among the screws he had counted and decided not to use, and nobody but Adelaide knew which one of the objects in the dish had not been his.

That night Adelaide slept with Robert beside her. Mr. Small dozed in a chair near the bed. Outside, the wind worked at the boards and the fastening of the door.

Adelaide woke to the door banging open. She reached for the baby before she was fully awake. Her hand found the warm place where he had been.

Mr. Small was on his feet when she called him. He pulled back the covers, looked beneath the bed, lifted a chair as though the child might somehow have been placed beneath it. The furniture he had made and his wife had arranged stood between him and an answer. He moved all of it.

Then he went outside.

Adelaide braced the door with her foot and held up the lamp. The snow came across its light in white strokes. She heard her husband call and saw him running towards her, bent over something in his arms.

The wind caught the door. It struck her and threw her backwards. The lamp fell onto the sheepskin rug and broke. Burning oil spread through the wool.

For a moment she could see nothing beyond the smoke. She heard a shout outside, then another sound she could not identify. She forced the door open.

Robert lay bundled at the edge of the porch.

She pulled him inside. Then she caught an unburnt corner of the rug, dragged it to the door, and pushed the smoking mass into the snow. Her husband was nowhere in the strip of darkness she could see. She called until the child began to stir in her arms.

For the first morning they searched in pairs. One person called while the other listened. Adelaide stood at the door and tried to hear both the calling and the spaces after it. The lamp had blackened the ceiling; whenever she looked up, she saw another strip of soot loosen and fall.

A neighbour brought a pan of water. Another brought a blanket. The blanket was too small for a man but she accepted it, folded it, and put it on the chair where her husband had slept. Nobody moved it.

By afternoon the searchers had begun asking whether he could have gone to another house. At dusk they asked whether he had debts. The next day a man who owed him money asked whether there had been trouble between husband and wife. Adelaide looked at his boots, which her husband had repaired with leather taken from the store.

"You can look in the book," she said.

The man misunderstood her and became helpful. He brought the ledger from the front room, opened it on her knees, and stood by while she found his account.

"That much?" he said.

"Apparently."

He went back to searching.

The creek was searched because it was the only place anyone could agree would receive a body. Men broke the ice with poles and hauled at obstructions that turned out to be roots. They showed Adelaide a scrap of dark cloth. She knew it was not his and touched it anyway. The men waited while she did so, grateful for something they could bring her that was not another question.

At night she fed Robert in the chair. He took his milk, slept, and woke asking for it again. His practical confidence affronted her for a moment, then became the thing that carried her to morning. She could do what he asked. There was still a person in the house whose need she understood.

When Pete Krutsen came, he took off his cap before entering. She saw the gesture through the store window. A man behind him had brought a covered sled.

"How far?" was the first thing she asked.

They told her.

She made them say it again. Her husband had run from the porch in his indoor boots. The distance gave her an objection she could repeat long after every other fact had settled into place.

"He couldn't have got there."

Krutsen turned his cap in his hands. He agreed. He had no explanation that would shorten the distance.

Mr. Small did not return. The search found no garment, no useful track, no place close to the house where he might have fallen. When the weather changed, his body was discovered on Pete Krutsen's trap line, thirty-two miles to the north. Coyotes had found him first.

Adelaide kept the store open. There were goods to order, accounts to settle, customers who needed things whether she wished to see them or not. She learned which tasks could be done with Robert against her shoulder and which required her to put him down. She did not blame him for his father's death. There was enough blame looking for a place to settle without her helping it.

By summer, the routines had begun to hold. The swallows nested under the eaves. Robert grew. On a warm morning, Adelaide found a parcel on the porch.

It was wrapped in dark leather, thin and finely scaled. She set Robert on the porch chair and took the bundle in both hands. Whoever had tied it had done so carefully. She worked a finger beneath the fastening.

The parcel burst open.

Moths struck her face and went into her mouth as she cried out. Their wings filled the space before her eyes. She fell against the porch boards, spitting and beating at the insects. The powder from them coated her tongue. She would remember its taste long after she forgot what else had happened that summer.

Then they were gone.

The chair was empty.

She found Robert behind the outhouse, still wrapped, looking up at the boards above him. He seemed untroubled by the arrangement. She lifted him and carried him through every room of the house before she could bring herself to sit down.

Before she opened it, she had thought it might be a sample from a trader. The skin was thin enough to let the warmth of the contents reach her palm. Small overlapping scales caught at the roughness beside

her thumbnail, yet on the inside of a turned corner it was smooth and faintly pink. She looked for a seam. There was none.

The fastening had been made of the same material, drawn into a narrow cord and passed twice through itself. It was too elaborate for anything ordinarily sent to the store. She wondered whose fingers had tied it; afterwards she would wonder what creature had once moved within the wrapping, and whether its skin had been this warm before someone stripped it away.

Powder remained in the creases of her hands after the moths vanished. She washed until the water in the basin looked like weak milk. It gathered again beneath her nails. When she picked Robert up behind the outhouse, his sleeve acquired a pale print of her thumb.

She kept the wrapping in a covered jar. By evening it had hardened. By morning it had become a brittle dust which occupied much less space than seemed reasonable. A neighbour advised her to throw it away. She asked whether he knew what it was.

"Something rotten."

"It doesn't smell."

"All the more reason."

She put the jar behind the flour. During the following weeks she sometimes moved it into better light, hoping the contents would change again. A thing which had done the impossible might conceivably do something useful.

After that she kept him in her arms even when she slept. She trained herself not to turn. If she woke and found him there, she stayed awake for a while to enjoy the certainty.

In autumn she woke without him.

There was no open door, no parcel, no swarm. She searched the porch first, then the outhouse, then all the places already searched in other seasons. Neighbours came. They walked the creek and the surrounding ground. They asked questions whose answers had been the same since morning.

This time Robert did not come back.

The third search was organized better than the first. People had practised. Pete Krutsen divided the men into lines and sent them walking abreast across the stubble so that no ground would be crossed twice or not at all. Women took the creek. The blacksmith's boys were sent up onto the roofs, where a child could not possibly be, because nobody wanted to be the person who had not looked. Adelaide stood in the door of the store and gave out lamp oil to anyone who asked, entering nothing in the book.

On the second day a constable rode in from the post. He was young and polite and had been sent because a report was required. He sat at her table with his hat on his knee and a form in front of him that had been designed for livestock thefts and adapted, by the crossing out of certain words, to the loss of persons.

"Age of the missing?"

"Ten months."

He wrote it. "Last seen?"

"In bed. With me."

He looked up and down again. "Any person with reason to take him?"

She thought of the leather parcel, of the moths going into her mouth, of the door banging open in the snow. None of it would fit on the line he had.

"No one I know."

"Any previous disappearance?"

"Two."

The pen stopped. The constable read back through the form as though the question might have been printed incorrectly.

"He was returned both times," Adelaide said. "The first time his father found him. The second time I did."

"And the father is—"

"Dead."

He wrote *deceased* in the margin, beside the space for the father's occupation, and then, after some thought, *storekeeper* in the space itself. It

seemed important to him that the form be filled in correctly. She understood this. She had kept books.

When he had gone she found that he had left the pen. It was a good steel nib in a wooden holder, better than anything in the store, and she put it on the shelf above the counter to give back to him if he returned. He did not. By the following summer she had begun using it. By the summer after that she had forgotten it had ever belonged to anyone else, and only years later, finding it in a drawer on the coast, did she remember his hat on his knee and the careful crossing out of the word *cattle*.

The neighbours brought food for a week and then stopped, not unkindly, as neighbours do when they sense that bringing food has begun to mark the house instead of helping it. Customers returned. They asked for flour and nails and did not ask about Robert, and Adelaide was grateful and hated them, and then only grateful, and then neither. Pete Krutsen's wife came on Sundays with her youngest on her hip. She did not mention the child. She put the baby down on the floor of the store to crawl, and Adelaide watched it crawl, and neither of them said anything about why.

Adelaide took the ledger out one night after closing. She turned to Robert's birth, which Mr. Small had entered in the margin of the day's accounts between a sale of two traps and a payment on credit. She read his handwriting for a long time. Then she took the constable's pen and, on the inside cover of an exercise book bought for the purpose of recording debts, wrote her son's name.

She wrote it firmly. She did not revise it. She did not yet know what the rest of the book would be for.

The dreams had begun before she left the prairie. At first there was only the missing child and the need to find him. Later there were places she did not know. A boy moved through them. His face was sometimes hidden, but she knew him with a certainty she could not carry intact into the morning.

She began to draw what she remembered. When she could not draw it, she wrote a description. She put dates beside the entries, including the ones that repeated things she had seen before.

3

The Actors' Guild of the Left-Hand Part

Robert had not died. Nor had he travelled any distance for which a search party could have been organized. He had passed out of the world in which his mother was looking for him and into another, where no one yet knew that he was missing.

He woke beneath a patch of blue sky. Black branches crossed it. The air was cold against his face, and the blanket had slipped from one foot.

He could not have explained where he was. He knew that he was alone. He was also hungry, which required attention sooner.

Leparda Leguin sat at the back of the maintenance wagon and regarded the box of dung beetles beside her. The wagon was last in a long procession. Dust from the other wheels filled the view, and every tool suspended from the frame contributed to a noise for which no one had thought to charge admission.

Through it came the thin, persistent music of the Dung Beetle Orchestra. They were rehearsing. They were always rehearsing. Recently they had acquired a soloist.

Leparda was the Guild's baby juggler. She had once occupied a respectable place on the program, between acts that could not be performed consecutively because of the cleaning required. But public taste had advanced. Granny-Versus-Granny Death Matches and Lion-back

Dancing attracted an audience whose demands could no longer be met by a woman keeping several infants off the ground.

The infants themselves had become expensive. A suitable baby needed to be light, durable, and reasonably consistent in shape. Leparda had pointed out that reducing her budget would reduce the quality of the act. The Stage Manager had agreed. Reduced quality, he explained, could not justify the previous budget.

She now had two babies.

Two babies could be carried. Anyone could see that without paying.

For the Guild as a whole, these were prosperous times. The Entertainment Wars had eliminated several competitors whose names survived on old bills: the Part Behind, the Part in Front, whole companies now remembered chiefly for the territories in which one was no longer obliged to compete with them. The Right-Hand Guild had survived by agreeing to confine its performances to poetry. The Left-Hand management considered this an adequate punishment.

Those were the official arrangements. Refugees from the exhausted Right-Hand country had lately begun to appear along the roads, and Leparda had heard that some of them were entertaining without authorization. She was not sufficiently important to be told what would be done about it.

Instead she was assigned maintenance work. She scrubbed apparatus, mended straps, and helped unpack things whose performers considered them too delicate to be touched by a person of her standing until there was work to do.

The beetles began their piece again.

Leparda had travelled further than most people in the Nation. She had seen the Absolutely Deadlands beyond the old borders and stood at a prudent distance from the Sea of Consumption. Now the Guild was moving towards the Mortality Mountains and the frontier settlements of the Left-Hand Part. These were experiences with which a person of a different temperament might have consoled herself. Leparda could see no connection between scenery and the cost of babies.

The procession stopped.

A shout passed from wagon to wagon. An axle had broken somewhere ahead. Men climbed down to inspect the damage, and others climbed down to supervise them. Leparda slipped away before maintenance could be mentioned.

A grove of charcoal trees stood beside the road. She found shade beneath them and sat among the fallen black twigs. From the wagons came the sound of several incompatible instructions being followed at once.

Then something near her made a small, courteous noise.

She turned.

An infant lay in the branches, wrapped in a wool blanket. One foot was exposed. His lips moved in a manner she recognized professionally as a request for food.

Leparda looked towards the road. No one was coming.

The blanket bore a line of embroidery in a script she did not know. She would not have been able to read it had the script been familiar, but it was sound cloth, and the child appeared to have all the usual parts.

She picked him up. He settled against her arm without protest.

There would be milk near the goats. She hurried back before someone else could establish a claim.

Things were looking up.

* * *

The first thing Robert learned to do on command was hold himself straight. A bent baby described an unpredictable curve. Leparda explained this to him before he could understand speech and continued explaining it long after he had understood.

"You're not helping," she would say, lifting him again.

The other two infants grew faster. One became too heavy and was assigned to turning the handle of a display cabinet; the other disappeared during a winter in which several things were sold to meet the cost of keeping the lions. Robert remained small enough to throw for

rather longer, then sufficiently light to balance on Leparda's forehead. He learned to look at the tent seam instead of the ground.

In winter the wagon floors admitted cold along every joint. The sacks beneath Robert's bed flattened until he could feel the boards through them. He arranged the lumps again each night. By morning they had moved away from the places where his shoulders and hips had pressed, leaving little ridges around the outline of his body.

Leparda taught him to stuff the joints with discarded cloth. The good cloth was counted. The bad cloth had to become very bad before anyone stopped counting it. He learned to recognize strips which had fallen from a repair and take them before a person with authority noticed that they were long enough to save.

On a morning of hard frost, the Stage Manager watched them rehearse. He had brought the Cashier, who carried a board and made marks upon it.

Leparda spread a doubled sheet beneath her place.

"What's that?" asked the Stage Manager.

"Padding."

"Are you intending to drop him?"

"No."

"Then you don't require it."

"In case I do."

The Cashier made a mark.

"An admission," said the Stage Manager. "We can't put an unsafe performer on the bill."

Leparda folded the sheet and handed it to Robert. His fingers were too cold to hold all of it. She rubbed his hands briskly between hers, looking away from the two men as she did so, then lifted him into position.

The sheet lay beside the ring. During the performance Robert could see it throughout.

Ma Crow found him afterwards in the maintenance wagon. He was sitting with his hands between his knees, waiting for someone to remember that the act had ended.

"Open," she said.

He opened his eyes wider.

"The other end."

She had brought a piece of boiled grain cake. She put it in his mouth, then hopped back to inspect the effect. Her right foot did not close properly. When she stood still, she lifted it against her breast.

"Chew," she said. "I'm not doing everything."

She returned the following day, and many days after that. Sometimes she brought nothing and merely sat with him. These visits puzzled him more than the food.

He asked Leparda who owned the crow.

"The Guild," she said.

"Then why doesn't she do what they say?"

"Ask her."

He did. Ma drew a splinter from the wagon rail and dropped it between the boards.

"I do enough."

At night she slept above his bed, which was a space among sacks. When he woke from a dream of a woman standing in a bright room, he could hear Ma adjust herself on the rail. He was not yet able to describe the woman. He put a hand up towards the crow instead.

"Still here," she said.

The soloist was kept in a separate box. He was larger than the other beetles and had a white scratch across his shell, which the conductor described as a distinguishing mark. Robert later learned that it distinguished him from the soloist who had escaped.

Every morning the keeper spread a square of fresh dung beneath the orchestra. The beetles rolled portions along narrow tracks cut into a board. At the ends of the tracks stood cups, strings, little drums, and a row of bells made from the shed teeth of an animal whose name Robert

never learned. By moving a shutter, the keeper admitted enough light to make one set of beetles retreat and another advance; the dung struck the instruments, the instruments sounded, and the conductor bowed towards an audience which had paid to believe the beetles had chosen the program.

They were very good at the march. They could perform it faster when frightened. This was useful information to the management.

One morning a beetle took its ball over the edge of the board. The keeper picked it up and put it back. It went over again. He threatened to remove its privilege of rehearsal.

"Wouldn't it like that?" Robert asked.

Leparda gave him a cloth and told him to clean the cups.

The task left a smell which soap did not remove. During her act the babies reached towards him when they came low enough, recognizing either his hands or what was on them. He had grown too long to be thrown with the others. He stood at the side holding the basket into which they were returned, one after another, without applause.

The heavier child, Ollo, had already gone to the cabinet. Robert could still visit him there. Its handle stood too high, so Ollo operated it from a box. Within the cabinet a painted town burned, rebuilt itself, and burned again according to how fast he turned. He could not see the town from behind it. When Robert described the fire, Ollo slowed the handle until the Stage Manager came round and struck the box with his stick.

"A quicker conflagration. We have people waiting."

One evening Ollo came from the cabinet with a finger swollen at the nail. He had trapped it between the handle and the frame. He said he could still turn with the other hand, but more slowly. Robert asked Ma to look at it.

"Wash," she said.

"I've washed it."

"In what?"

Ollo showed her the water barrel. She made Robert fetch water from the kitchen before the scraps went into it. They held the finger over a cup while Ma dropped in a grain of something she had stolen from the apothecary's wagon. Ollo asked what it cost. She told him to put his hand in.

The finger hurt less in the warm water. Ollo relaxed enough to describe the town inside the cabinet. A painted woman appeared at an upper window during the first fire. If he turned the handle fast, she appeared to leap. If he turned slowly, she slid down in front of the building until her feet touched the painted street. He preferred the second version, but the audience did not.

"Can she get away?" Robert asked.

"The scene goes round."

"Before it goes round."

Ollo looked at the cup. "She's on a wire."

The two boys sat while the water cooled. Ma flew up to the rail, settled her damaged foot against her breast, and pretended to sleep. Robert knew she was awake because she opened one eye whenever Ollo shifted his hand.

Afterwards he gave Ollo one of the flatter sacks. It did not alter the cold in either wagon very much. Ollo brought him a little scrap of coloured paper from the cabinet a week later. It had been part of a sky. Robert put it in a crack above his bed, blue side down so he could see it while lying on his back.

When the wagon moved, the piece of sky trembled. He watched it until the motion ceased to be interesting and he slept.

The other baby had been called Peep because that was the noise he made. One winter morning his place beneath the wagon was empty. Robert searched the kitchens and the lion wagon before asking Leparda. She said he had been placed elsewhere. He asked where elsewhere was.

She was stitching a torn strap. She put the needle through the same hole twice before answering.

"I wasn't told."

He kept looking when they reached the next town. Ma did not tell him to stop.

At the end of that season the Cashier read the accounts aloud. This was done once a year, in the largest tent, so that every performer could hear how the Guild had fared and understand, from the tone of the reading, how grateful to be. The lamps were lit early. The performers sat on the benches the audience used, which felt to most of them like a promotion, and faced the ring where the Cashier stood with his board.

He began with receipts. They had increased. He moved to expenditure, which had increased faster, owing to the price of lion meat and a new tax on the use of roads for purposes of amusement. He paused after the tax so that the performers could resent it on the Guild's behalf.

Then he read the apparatus.

The apparatus was everything the Guild owned which was not a person on a contract. It included the wagons, the canvas, the lamps, the beetle boards and their instruments, the executioner's stool, the painted cabinet with its burning town, and the infants.

"Infant, juggling, one: transferred to cabinet, depreciated to nil as juggling apparatus, revalued as operating mechanism." That was Ollo. Ollo sat on the end of Robert's bench and did not seem to recognize himself. "Infant, juggling, one: surplus infant, placed." That was Peep. "Infant, juggling, one: acquired by finding, condition good, retained for season."

Robert heard the word *finding* and understood, a moment after everyone else, that it was him. Several performers turned to look. He sat very still, as Leparda had taught him to hold himself in the air, so as not to describe an unpredictable curve.

"Acquired by finding?" said the woman beside him, a knife-thrower's assistant with scars on both forearms. "Where do you find one?"

"In a tree," Robert said.

This was felt to be very funny. The laughter moved along the bench. The Cashier waited for it to stop, then read the next line, which concerned a crate of wooden clubs.

Afterwards, in the maintenance wagon, Robert asked Leparda what *retained for season* meant.

"It means they'll look at you again next year."

"And then?"

She was darning a stocking over her fist. She kept darning.

"And then you'll be bigger, and I'll tell them you're useful in another way, and they'll believe me or they won't."

He thought about this for a while.

"Was I good condition?"

Leparda looked at him. For a moment her mouth did something he had not seen it do, which he would later learn to recognize in other faces as the beginning of a smile that had been talked out of itself.

"You still are," she said. "Go to sleep."

Ma, on the rail, said nothing at all. But in the morning she brought him two pieces of grain cake instead of one, and when he asked why, she said that somebody ought to keep a separate account.

By his fifth year Robert carried messages between wagons. A request for lamp oil became a refusal because it had come from a performer whose allotment was exhausted; a refusal became an instruction to rehearse in daylight; the daylight was assigned to the lion dancers; the lion dancers would not yield it because the lions had to eat at dusk. Robert carried the last answer back while the lamps in the management wagon shone through drawn curtains.

"What did they say?" Leparda asked.

He repeated the words exactly.

"What were they doing?"

"Eating."

She nodded, having acquired the more useful part of the message.

The dancers had their own difficulties. The lion accepted a rider standing across its shoulders but objected to a foot placed too far back.

Its objections were sudden and difficult to reverse. Tessa practised with a hoop while another dancer held a strip of meat on a pole. The pole was supposed to be part of the illusion. Robert's job was to wash it afterwards.

Once Tessa dismounted before the final turn. The lion had begun to twitch its skin beneath her feet. The Stage Manager entered the ring and asked why she had ruined the rehearsal.

"He was going to roll."

"He didn't."

"I got off."

"Then we have no proof."

Tessa turned the hoop between her hands. The youngest dancer stared at the lion, which had now lain down and was rolling contentedly on its back.

The Granny-Versus-Granny performers rehearsed in a corner screened by canvas. One had no grandchildren; the other had several and said she preferred rehearsals because she could hear herself think. They practised falling onto sacks. They were exact about who would strike, who would duck, and how the hidden padding would be shifted while the audience watched the opponent's raised fist.

Robert liked them. They gave him the broken cakes from their tea. Then a new bill arrived, painted in red, promising a genuine conclusion. One woman read it aloud. The other asked how much more they would receive.

The answer came back through Robert: the existing fee was for a Death Match. Paying extra for the death would imply that previous audiences had been misled.

That evening they quarrelled behind the canvas. He heard one say she would leave. In the morning the pair ate together without speaking. He did not see the performance. Ma kept him in the wagon, teaching him how to remove a thorn without breaking it.

Later the executioner passed carrying his good boots. Everyone made room. He received more than the dancers, more than Leparda,

more even than the man who considered juggling clubs an art. His apparatus required no animals, his materials were supplied by the district, and he was seldom asked for a second performance.

Robert wanted, briefly, to have an occupation in which people made room for him. Then the executioner opened his bundle and asked him to help clean it.

He had been instructed to repeat the words exactly, which often caused trouble. Ma taught him to distinguish what had been said from what had happened.

At a village called Low Result, the Guild found that the execution committee had failed to provide anyone for the evening performance. Its chairman came to the tent with a basket of roots and an apology.

The Stage Manager accepted the roots.

"The bill specifies a criminal."

"We haven't caught one."

"You had six weeks."

"Everyone's been occupied with the drainage."

"Then someone has neglected their duty."

The chairman looked at the Cashier, who was already making a mark.

Robert had come to fetch a coil of rope. He stood beside it while the men discussed whether neglect of the execution arrangements qualified as a capital offence. The chairman asked for time to consult his neighbours. The Stage Manager granted him until the afternoon rehearsal.

The committee met in a room above the drainage office. Robert went there with the rope because the Stage Manager said that arriving without the equipment would encourage the village to imagine the engagement might be cancelled. The executioner came too, carrying a folded apron and a stool.

The chairman had brought three neighbours. One dug the ditches; one collected the drainage payments; one had been chosen because he had a table large enough for meetings. He now wanted to know why his

table was being used to determine an offence which might leave a stain on the village.

"It's a public obligation," the chairman said.

"We undertook to host the entertainment."

"This is the entertainment."

The executioner put his stool down. He asked whether the ceiling beam had been inspected. The table owner said there would be no rehearsals in the room. The executioner replied that he had not proposed one; he had merely noticed a beam which might save them some trouble.

They sent Robert to fetch the contract.

He found the Cashier measuring the platform. The contract was in a box beneath his seat. When Robert explained who required it, the Cashier asked whether the committee required the original wording or an account of its obligations. Robert repeated the request. The Cashier sighed and gave him a sheet with a great deal of blank space beneath a small amount of writing.

"Don't fold across the seal."

Upstairs, the collector read it aloud. The village was to provide space, accommodation, customary materials, and a person suitable to the advertised conclusion. The table owner objected that suitability was undefined.

"It must mean somebody guilty," the ditch worker said.

"Of something," the chairman added.

"Everybody is guilty of something," said the collector.

The executioner tested the edge of his stool with his thumb. "They must also be the proper height."

The remark gave the table owner a practical objection. He was short. He stood and asked whether his height would create a difficulty. The executioner examined him, then moved the stool with one foot.

"No."

He sat down again.

They began with offences which had previously required a fine. A woman had opened a sluice out of turn. Her garden had been drying, but this established motive rather than innocence. A man had concealed two sacks of roots when the collector came. He claimed the sacks belonged to his brother. The brother was dead, which made the claim difficult to disprove and the claimant difficult to forgive. A third person had left a gate open, permitting an animal to foul the meeting house steps.

The chairman proposed the third person. The table owner said that was his son.

"He closed it afterwards."

"After the animal passed."

"It wouldn't have been sensible to close it before it passed back."

They agreed to omit the gate. Robert stood with the coil against his stomach. Its rough fibres had begun to scratch through his tunic. He wanted to ask whether he could put it down but feared being required to explain why he had brought it.

The ditch worker asked whether the executioner knew a way to make the conclusion appear conclusive without actually concluding anything. The executioner looked towards Robert, who had learned from Ma that looking at a child did not make a conversation private.

"I've been asked that before," he said.

"And?"

"The audience wanted its money back."

Below the window, somebody called up that a stranger had been found near the drainage shed. He had arrived that morning and wanted work. The committee went quiet. The collector asked whether he had entered himself in the register. He had not known there was one.

The chairman asked to see him.

The stranger came upstairs wiping mud from his boots with a stick. He had walked beside the road where the ground was wet enough to be softer underfoot. He apologized for the stairs and offered to clean them when he had eaten. Robert liked him immediately because he seemed to

believe that the damage a person did could be put right by taking trouble over it.

"Why did you come here?" the chairman asked.

"I heard you had drainage."

"You mean work."

"If you've got drainage to do."

The collector asked him to produce evidence of previous work. He named three places. Two lay beyond the village's authority. The third had been abandoned. The absence of a reference became an inability to establish his occupation; the inability became an irregular arrival; the irregular arrival, entered beside the contractual requirement, gave the committee something that looked like a decision.

"Can I go somewhere else, then?" he asked.

The chairman said leaving would make the investigation harder to complete.

Robert looked at the executioner. He was rubbing a dry place on his thumb, apparently considering the condition of his hands. Nobody looked at the rope. It had already been admitted to the meeting.

When Robert carried the stool downstairs, the stranger was still explaining the route he had taken. He knew several useful ways around flooded ground. He offered to show them. The collector wrote that he possessed knowledge of unregistered approaches.

Outside, Ma waited on the railing. Robert told her there was to be a show after all. She asked who they had found. He began with what the stranger had been wearing and discovered that the rest of the description would not follow.

Ma put her head beside his ear.

"Breathe first."

He did. The words came, badly. She remained close until he had finished.

That evening a stranger from the road stood on the platform with the rope around his neck. He kept saying that he had arrived that morning. The audience began to complain when he repeated it.

Ma pressed her body against Robert's cheek and turned his head towards the canvas wall. He could feel the small bones through her feathers.

"Listen to me," she said. "When they ask you what you saw, you saw the show. When you tell me, tell me what you saw."

He understood that these were different instructions. He wished she had been able to give him only one.

* * *

Adelaide would marry again and have ten more children. They lost mittens, broke household objects, developed fevers, grew up. None vanished from a closed room. Adelaide, later Mrs. Small-Toates, regarded their ordinary lives as an achievement. She did not require them to be remarkable. She required, especially when they were small, to know where they were.

Adelaide remained in Lil' Pile-of-Bones for several years. She ran the store and lived behind it. Eventually she sold what she could and went west, as far as the sea.

The sale of the store took most of a summer. The man who bought it was from the East, as Mr. Small had been, with a young wife and debts and an idea of what the land would provide. He walked round the shelves and tapped them and asked who had built them. She told him.

"Level," he said, surprised.

"He took one down once because it wasn't."

The man laughed as though she had made a joke about the dead, which he had heard was what widows on the frontier did, and she did not correct him. She showed him the account book. He was more interested in the debts owed to the store than the debts it owed, and she went through them one by one, the tobacco and the lamp oil and the bone-driver's Tuesday, and saw him mentally strike off half of them before she had finished the page. He was probably right to. She had kept them anyway, because her husband had, and because the book was the

one place in which the whole of the settlement's small, unpaid neediness had been written down in a single hand.

She kept the book. It was not part of the sale. She took it west with the jar of dust and the constable's pen and a quilt she had made the first winter, and when she opened it on the coast, years later, looking for a figure, she found Robert's birth in the margin between the traps and the credit, exactly where it had been, and sat down.

During the day she cared for the children in the house. At night, when she was able, she followed the other one.

Her second husband was called Elias Toates. He put screws in a little dish before beginning a repair and counted them afterwards, including those he had decided not to use. Adelaide first noticed this when he repaired a window latch. The room had smelled of wet washing for three days. He opened the window, tested it, closed it, and waited for her to try it herself.

"You'll want it tighter in winter," he said.

"Will it open?"

"It opens now."

"In winter."

He considered the question. Then he took the latch off again and altered the place where the screw entered the frame.

They married without anyone being asked to forget the first marriage. When he moved into the house, Adelaide cleared a drawer. It contained the ledger and the jar of dust wrapped in paper. Elias lifted it by its base and asked where she wanted it.

She said she did not know.

"I'll leave it here until you do."

The drawer remained partly hers.

May was their first child. Others followed, arriving into a household which had neither enough money nor an appetite for describing ordinary survival as providence. Elias worked, Adelaide kept accounts, and both learned which cry could wait long enough to lift a boiling pan. When a child was missing from a room Adelaide went to the door.

When all the children were missing, Elias went with her before asking where they had last been seen.

Usually they were behind the shed. Once they were at a neighbour's. Once May had taken the smaller ones to see the boats without asking.

"We were coming back," May said, angry at the hand gripping her wrist.

"You have to tell me."

"I told Father."

Elias had not heard. He had been planing a door, and the child had spoken to the noise rather than waited for it to stop. Adelaide let go of May and went into the house. At supper Elias laid down his knife and told the children that an answer, not a statement, established that a message had been heard.

May asked whether this applied to grown people.

"Especially," he said.

In the notebook Adelaide began an account of the quarrel and crossed it out. Beneath it she returned to the bird. This time she drew the child's mouth open, receiving what the bird carried.

> *The date attached to this drawing is legible,* Shiraz records. *The age pencilled beside the child has been erased and replaced twice. Counting the household's births did not help Mrs. Small-Toates determine how much time her first son had lived.*

On a coast Robert had never seen, Adelaide set down a drawing of a black bird holding something against a child's mouth.

Her daughter May stood behind her chair.

"Is that one of ours?"

"No."

"Whose is it?"

Adelaide covered the lower part of the page with her hand. She had given the child too large a head. The bird looked as though it were attacking him.

"Someone I knew."

May considered this and asked whether there was bread. Adelaide closed the book, cut two slices, and went out to bring the washing in. The sheet nearest the gate had fallen and acquired a stripe of mud.

Later she opened the book again. She added a note beneath the drawing: *Feeding, I think.*

4

The Battle for Acting Supremacy

The Right-Hand players had been seen for a week before anyone admitted to seeing them. They camped on the far side of whatever stream the Guild had camped beside, always a little downstream, and in the evenings, when the Guild's lamps were lit and its audience filing in, a thin sound of recitation came across the water. It was never loud enough to be called a performance. It was, the Stage Manager said, a deliberate provocation disguised as an inability to afford a tent.

Robert went to look, carrying a bucket as his reason. There were perhaps forty of them, in coats that had once been costumes and were now simply coats. A man stood on a barrel and declaimed while the others sat around a fire and listened as though they had paid. Between verses a woman passed a hat. The hat went round the listeners, who were the performers themselves, and came back with exactly what it had started with, which the woman counted aloud and announced as a successful house.

"They're only doing poetry," Robert told Leparda.

"That's what the treaty says they can do."

"Then why is everyone angry?"

Leparda was rubbing oil into the handle of a club. She held it up to the lamp and examined the grain.

"Because people are stopping to listen to them. On the road. Without paying anybody." She put the club down. "The treaty says

what they're allowed to perform. It doesn't say where the audience is allowed to stand."

The Guild's lawyer, who was also its farrier, drafted a notice. It stated that unlicensed recitation within earshot of a licensed performance constituted a performance within the meaning of the treaty, and that the earshot of a Left-Hand performance extended as far as the Left-Hand management was prepared to shout. The notice was read across the stream by the loudest of the lion dancers. On the far bank, the Right-Hand players listened with great attention and applauded when it ended.

The next night they recited the notice back, in rhyming couplets.

Leparda laughed until she had to sit down on the wagon step. It was the only time Robert saw her laugh at something the management had done, and she stopped the moment the Stage Manager's lamp came round the corner of the tent. He had a list. On it were the names of every performer who had been heard laughing. Leparda's was already there.

"Night duty," he said. "All of you. In case of retaliation."

"For laughing?"

"For their notice." He showed her the list. "You found it entertaining. Entertainment is our property. You've given it away."

She took the list, read her name, and handed it back without comment. That night she sat up in the maintenance wagon with a club across her knees and Robert asleep against her side, and it was her watch, three nights later, that the raid came through.

Ma Crow woke Robert by pulling the cloth away from his face.

"Underneath."

He began to ask what she meant. She struck the sack beside him with her beak.

He crawled under the wagon. The ground was damp; a wheel rut filled slowly with water against his knee. Ma followed him and stood without lifting her bad foot.

"By right of line and measured foot," the man recited.

The crash interrupted him. Someone on the other side of the camp shouted that a line was not permission to cross a boundary.

"By right of foot," the man began again, and brought his pole down on a hand reaching for the wagon brake.

There were three reciters. Each stopped when he needed breath or room to strike, and another took up the sentence. They had worked out an arrangement under which the poem continued even while one of its speakers wrestled a man into the mud. A drummer beat the ends of lines against whatever lay nearest. The drum itself had split before the second stanza.

From beneath the wagon Robert could see the old treaty nailed to its side. It had been displayed to prove that the Guild was entitled to perform here. Now the attackers kept pointing towards it, demanding that their audience distinguish between a weapon and a metrical emphasis. A sharpened pole entered the wet ground beside Robert's ear. The man who withdrew it apologized for the faulty stress and aimed again.

Leparda's club struck his wrist. The pole fell. She caught the next club with her other hand, the motion so familiar that Robert expected her to send it upwards, but she drove it into the space between a man's ribs and the leather strap crossing them. The man stopped reciting. Another voice completed his line.

The lion wagon opened. For a moment everybody made the same calculation, and the poem lost its place. The animals had no interest in the treaty. A dancer used the interruption to pull an injured man clear while the lion turned towards the tethered goats. Robert saw Tessa dragging the man by his collar. She could not use one arm. She did not call for help, because anyone close enough to hear was already occupied.

When the reciters withdrew, they did so in irregular metre. The Left-Hand men followed until they reached the animals, then stopped to secure their property. This was subsequently described as an exercise in restraint.

When the fighting moved away, Leparda came back. She sat down abruptly. Her left arm hung oddly and there was blood darkening her skirt below the ribs.

"All right," she said, although neither Robert nor Ma had asked.

He crawled out to help her. She told him to fetch water. It was a task he could do, and for several minutes he was grateful to have it.

The victory was announced before the wounded had been counted. Leparda was named a Heroine of the Guild and moved into a wagon with windows. The Stage Manager gave a speech about the courage of performers who had never questioned the authority that bound them together. Leparda watched him through the window and asked Robert to close it.

The medal came the next day. It was a disc of brass on a ribbon of the Guild's green, stamped on one side with a juggling club and on the other with the words FOR SUPREMACY, and the Stage Manager brought it himself, with the Cashier behind him carrying a board.

Leparda could not sit up. The Stage Manager hung the ribbon over the bedpost instead of her neck, and stood back to consider the effect, and said that it looked very well.

"The Guild is grateful," he said.

"Thank you."

"The medal is struck in solid brass."

The Cashier made a mark.

Robert, standing at the foot of the bed, saw the mark and did not understand it until the following week, when Leparda's wages were paid and were smaller than usual by an amount the Cashier described as *commemorative materials*. Leparda read the slip and laughed, and the laugh hurt her, and she put her hand over the wound until it stopped.

"They charged me for it," she said.

"Can you give it back?"

"Then I'd owe them for the ribbon." She looked at the disc hanging from the bedpost, turning slightly in the draught from the window. "Leave it. It's the only thing in this wagon I've paid for."

Ma, on the chair back, looked at the medal for a long time with one eye and then the other.

"Brass," she said at last. "Not solid."

"How do you know?"

"It's too light to be solid. I could carry it." She settled her feathers. "I won't. But I could."

Leparda laughed again, more carefully, and this time she did not have to hold the wound.

For a while their circumstances improved. He carried food on a tray instead of trying to obtain it from kitchens where no one wanted him. Ma occupied the back of a chair. The Cashier paid visits in which he enquired about Leparda's return to work and regretted the cost of medicines.

Her arm healed crookedly. The other wound did not heal.

The apothecary came on the fourth day. He was a narrow man who travelled with the Guild's supply wagons and sold remedies to its performers at a discount which he described as loyalty and the Cashier described as a salary reduction. He unwrapped the dressing, smelled it, and wrapped it up again more loosely than it had been before.

"Heat," he said. "Rest. This."

He left a brown bottle. Robert read nothing on the label, because he could not yet read, but he could see that the apothecary had written something on it by hand and then crossed it out and written something shorter.

After he left, Leparda asked Robert to hold the bottle up to the window. The liquid inside moved slowly.

"That's for pain," she said. "It's not for the other thing."

"What's for the other thing?"

She did not answer. She asked him instead to tell her about the tree.

"What tree?"

"Where I found you. You've heard the story."

He had heard it many times, mostly from other performers, who told it as a joke about Leparda's luck: the baby juggler short of babies,

sitting under a charcoal tree, and one falls into her lap. In their version he always fell. In Leparda's version, the one she told him now, he had been lying in the branches as though somebody had set him there and gone away to fetch something.

"There was writing on the blanket," she said. "I couldn't read it. I thought, somebody's put their name on him. They'll come back." She shifted against the pillow and waited for the pain to settle. "So I took you before they could."

Robert did not know what he was supposed to say. He had always thought of the story as something that had happened to him. It had not occurred to him that it had also happened to her, and that she might have been frightened.

"Were you going to give me back?"

"No." She looked at him directly. "I want you to know that. I wasn't. If they'd come, I'd have said you were mine. I'd have lied."

"Why?"

"Because I needed three," she said. "Because you were good condition." She closed her eyes. "And because you looked at me as if I'd been late."

He did not understand the last part until many years afterwards, and by then there was no one left to ask about it. At the time he only understood that she was telling him something she had not told anyone, and that the telling had cost her. He put the bottle back on the shelf where she could reach it. She did not reach for it.

Ma had listened from the back of the chair. When Leparda slept, the crow hopped down to the blanket and stood beside her hand, on her good foot, the bad one folded against her breast.

"She's honest," Ma said.

"She took me."

"Both," said Ma. "Mostly people are both. It's the ones who tell you which that you can work with."

One afternoon she asked Robert to bring the small bundle beneath her bed. Inside was his old blanket, much reduced by cutting and re-

peated repairs. Its embroidered edge had been turned into the hem of a tunic.

"There," she said. "Put it on."

It reached below his knees. She had pinned some of the lining from a good performance skirt inside the back. The lower seam remained unfinished.

"Are we doing something?" he asked.

"No."

"Then why?"

"Because your other one's worn through."

He turned, looking for a place where she could see the fit. She had closed her eyes.

On the second day in the wagon with windows, Leparda asked for a needle. On the third she asked who had taken it. Robert found it on the floor beneath her good hand, attached to a length of thread she had been unable to pull through the cloth.

He held the cloth taut. She drew the needle towards herself and stopped. A bead of sweat appeared above her lip.

"Too thick," she said.

"I could do it."

"You'd sew the front to the back."

He had done this before. He folded the hem apart and showed her he remembered. She watched him make one stitch. It was large and sloping. He began to undo it.

"Leave it."

The Cashier came while Robert was working. He carried a list of medicines issued and another of medicines returned. There was a discrepancy. Leparda asked whether he expected her to give back the part she had swallowed.

"We're reconciling the account."

She turned her face towards the wall. Robert tried to explain which bottle had broken, but the Cashier did not accept explanations from children entered under apparatus.

After he left, Ma dragged the fallen thread onto the bed. She pinned it under her good foot while Robert drew the needle through. Together they finished the seam Leparda could no longer reach. The work took most of the afternoon. Leparda opened her eyes once and asked whether the lower edge was straight.

"Straight enough," Ma said.

"Not what I asked."

Robert laid it across the blanket so she could see. She examined the crooked line, touched its end, and closed her eyes again.

For three more days he fetched water. At first she drank it. Then he wet a cloth and placed it against her mouth. The last time, she did not close her lips around the drops. He stayed holding the cup until Ma moved it out of his hands.

After she died, the windows were opened and the wagon assigned to a new dancer. Robert stood outside with the bundle of cloth. No one had told him where to sleep.

The Guild buried its Heroine at the next town, in a plot bought at a price the Cashier described as a tribute. The Stage Manager gave a second speech, shorter than the first, in which the courage of performers who never questioned authority featured again, and then the executioner and two lion dancers lowered the box on ropes. The executioner was very good at it. Nobody remarked on this.

Robert was not invited to stand at the front, because he was apparatus, and apparatus did not attend. He stood at the back with Ma on his shoulder and watched between the coats of the people in front of him. He could see the top of the box. It was plain pine, and somebody had painted a juggling club on the lid in yellow, with little lines around it to show that it was moving. The paint had run.

Afterwards, when the others had gone to eat, he went back. The earth over her had been left in a hump. He did not know what people did at graves. In the Guild the dead were mostly entered and not visited. He had brought one of her clubs from the wagon, taking it before any-

one could count it, and he pushed the handle into the soft earth at the head of the hump so that it stood upright.

Ma watched from a fencepost.

"They'll take it," she said.

"I know."

"Then why?"

He thought about it. He had no answer that was an answer. He had only the sense that Leparda had spent her life keeping things in the air and that the last thing he could do for her was keep one thing standing up.

"So it's there tonight," he said.

Ma considered this and found it acceptable. They stayed until it was dark. In the morning, when the wagons rolled out past the burial ground, the club was already gone, and a new line had been added to the apparatus under *clubs, juggling, one: lost in transit*. Robert heard the Cashier enter it. He did not correct the entry.

The Stage Manager called for him after supper. A man in an immaculate coat sat beside the Cashier. His eyes were bright and his hands very still. From somewhere inside him came a regular ticking.

"A fortunate arrangement," the Stage Manager said. "You will have a proper occupation."

Ma Crow landed on Robert's shoulder.

"Mine?" she asked.

"You too."

The man in the coat smiled. A polished edge showed briefly behind his lower lip.

"Darcy-Witman Balladeer," he said. "I have been looking for an assistant."

"He hasn't been told," Ma said.

"We're telling him."

"That's not what I mean."

The Cashier pushed a paper towards Darcy. Robert watched the pen move, and tried to see whether his name might be among the marks. He did not know what it would look like.

5

A Silver Tongue and a Month of Wine

Darcy walked without apparent effort, but every few miles he stopped and opened a small panel beneath his coat. He would turn something inside, close the panel, and resume the song he had been singing at precisely the note where he had left it.

Robert carried the carpetbag. It contained a comb, a folded suit, several little instruments, and bottles wrapped in socks.

"A musician must travel light," Darcy told him.

Ma Crow travelled on the bag until Robert's arm tired, then flew to a branch ahead of them.

"Why don't you carry it?" she asked Darcy.

"My hands must be preserved."

"His are apparently disposable."

Darcy laughed and sang a reply. He could turn nearly anything into a tune. Even Ma listened when his voice opened above the road, warm and extraordinarily clear. Birds in the hedges ceased their own less accomplished efforts. Robert slowed, wanting the song to last until the next bend.

"Will we perform?" he asked.

"You will manage my engagements. Ma will open the program. We shall take the refined arts where they are most needed."

"Which is where?"

"Where they pay."

At noon Darcy sat upon a milestone and drew out a bottle. His fingers trembled while he worked the cork. After the first drink they became still.

"Medicine," he explained.

Ma looked at the bottle and said nothing. Robert offered him the cloth in which their food had been wrapped, in case he had spilt any. Darcy patted his cheek.

"An excellent assistant."

Darcy's silver tongue was not a figure of speech. Robert saw it when the balladeer opened his mouth to inspect a loose fitting with the little mirror from his bag. Beneath the tongue, where ordinary flesh should have joined it, two narrow tubes entered tissue the colour of a healed scar. Darcy touched one with a brush dipped in oil and winced.

"That part still feels?"

"Most of the inconvenient parts."

The wine steadied the living nerves which instructed the mechanisms. It also softened the seals. Darcy explained the first effect as a medical requirement and the second as a maintenance problem, although Robert noticed that both were addressed by opening another bottle. A drop ran beneath the panel. Darcy caught it with a cloth and inspected the cloth before folding it away.

"Does the person who made you know?"

"He is no longer available for improvements."

Robert looked at the balladeer's immaculately jointed fingers. One continued to shake after the others became still. Darcy held it in his opposite hand until it stopped.

On the third night they reached a waystation: a long low house at a crossroads, with a trough outside for animals and a room inside for people who could pay to be treated slightly better than animals. Darcy could not pay. He went in anyway, with Robert behind him carrying the bag and Ma on the bag, and stood in the doorway until the room noticed him.

It took a little while. The room contained a dozen drovers, a pedlar with a tray of buttons, two women travelling together who kept their shawls on, and the keeper, who was wiping a table that was already clean. They looked at Darcy's coat, and then at his face, and then at the bag, and made the calculation that people in such rooms make about a stranger who is too well dressed to be poor and too poorly accompanied to be rich.

Darcy let them finish. Then he took off his hat, placed it on the nearest table crown down, and sang.

Robert had heard him on the road. This was different. On the road Darcy had sung to pass the time, and the song had gone out over the hedges and been lost. Here the song had walls to stay in. It went up to the smoked beams and came back down with something added, and the drovers stopped talking, and the pedlar stopped arranging his buttons, and one of the women took off her shawl without appearing to know she had done it. It was a song about a man who had walked a long way to reach a house where he had once been welcome, and found the house still standing and a stranger at the door. Robert did not understand why it made the drovers look at their hands. He only understood that it did.

When it was over nobody moved for a moment. Then the pedlar put a button in the hat.

It was a good button, horn, with a carved rim. The pedlar looked at it after he had put it in, as though surprised at himself. One of the drovers put in a coin. The keeper came over with a jug and set it on the table beside the hat without saying anything, and Darcy bowed to him, very slightly, the bow of one professional to another.

The jug was wine. Darcy drank the first cup standing. His finger had stopped shaking before the cup was empty.

He sang four more songs. By the end of the evening the hat held three coins, the horn button, a twist of tobacco, and a promissory note from a drover for a meal at the next station, and the keeper had set three more jugs beside it. Darcy drank all of them. He did not sing any worse.

If anything he sang better, with a looseness at the edge of the notes that made the room lean in to catch it.

Robert ate bread from the keeper's kitchen, which had been given to him because he was a boy and the keeper had once been one. Ma ate crumbs from the floor under the table.

"He's good," Robert said.

"He is," said Ma.

"Why is he poor, then?"

Ma looked at the table where the jugs stood empty in a row.

"Count them," she said.

He did. Four.

"Now count the coins."

Three.

"He's not poor," said Ma. "He's paid. He just gets paid in the one thing that makes him need paying again."

In the morning Darcy was cheerful and quick and bought them both breakfast with one of the coins. He gave the horn button to Robert.

"A souvenir of your first engagement."

Robert kept it in the pocket of his tunic. Later, in Farthest, it was the first thing one of the Boore Brothers took off him, on the grounds that buttons were a form of currency and currency belonged to the tavern. Robert did not argue. He had understood, by then, that Darcy had given it to him because it was the one thing in the hat he could not drink.

Farthest stood in a clearing surrounded by trees so closely interwoven that Robert could not see where a person might pass between them. The road ended at a yard, and the yard at a tavern. A sign depicted a smiling man casting a sack from a large wooden engine. Something red had run from the painted sack and dried in streaks down the sign.

Inside, the same man occupied a chair built for someone of unusual breadth. A tawny animal lay beneath his table, its head upon one large paw.

"Balladeer," the man said. "You're late."

"For what?"

"Paying."

Darcy made a gracious gesture that included Robert, Ma, and the carpetbag.

"I have brought an opportunity."

Theodore Trebuchet looked at Robert. Then he leaned sideways and looked past him, as though the opportunity might be a taller person approaching from behind.

"That?"

"Sound. Industrious. Acclimatized to travel."

"Can he work?"

"He carries everything."

Robert put the bag down. He had been pleased to hear himself described favourably, but the conversation had begun to resemble one he remembered.

Trebuchet reached over and pinched his upper arm.

"Not much on him."

"Room for improvement."

The cat opened its eyes. Ma rose from Robert's shoulder and settled on the highest shelf.

"And that?" Trebuchet asked.

"Speaks. Sings. A comprehensive repertoire."

"I prefer birds quiet."

Ma made a sound so like the Cashier's cough that Robert looked towards the door. Then she bowed from the shelf and recited a verse concerning a man of heroic appetite whose modest neighbours were unable to appreciate the breadth of his requirements. Trebuchet listened, recognized a compliment in the language of magnitude, and began to laugh.

The price was a month of Deathleberry Wine, subject to the boy remaining usable and the bird continuing to entertain. Darcy tried to obtain six weeks. Trebuchet offered three. They settled on a month with accommodation excluded.

"You said I would manage your engagements," Robert said.

Darcy laid a hand on the bag.

"Circumstances alter."

"Which circumstances?"

"You'll understand when you're older."

Trebuchet rang a bell. A broad figure with coarse hair and a wet, upturned nose came from the passage behind the bar.

"Patch," Trebuchet said, pointing to Robert.

The figure took him by the shoulder. Robert looked back. Darcy had already been given a glass. For a moment, above its rim, their eyes met. Then Darcy drank.

Outside, Ma landed upon Robert's head. The man pulling him towards the field swatted at her and missed.

"Don't," Robert said.

The man stopped. He bent low enough that Robert could smell the meat between his teeth.

"What?"

Ma gripped Robert's hair.

"Don't be late," she said. "That's what he meant."

The tawny animal had followed them out of the tavern. It stood when Robert passed. The movement brought its head level with his chest. It was not the height of the animal that stopped him but the quiet distribution of weight through its four feet, each paw taking its place without haste, leaving the creature ready to cross any distance Robert might try to put between them.

The man laughed and opened the field gate. Robert went through. Behind him Darcy began a song about the pleasures of a road on which nothing obliged a man to remain.

That first evening Darcy returned to the tavern's little platform. Robert saw him through the open door while carrying water to the kitchens. He was explaining to Trebuchet that so important a career ought to be recorded by someone capable of setting its achievements in proportion.

Trebuchet asked how much proportion would cost.

"Board, modest refreshment, and access to the subject."

"You've had a month's refreshment."

"A commercial transaction. This is posterity."

"Posterity can begin next month."

They settled on evening performances against room and board, with a separate allowance to be credited as chapters of the life were completed. Trebuchet wanted his childhood improved. Darcy said that childhood was often the part which most benefited from distance. He opened a book and wrote a title large enough to occupy the entire page.

From that night the balladeer lived in a room above the bar. He performed before the serious drinking began, elicited details while Trebuchet drank, and, when the details became repetitive, played loudly enough to discourage additional recollection. Robert carried empty glasses past him. Darcy always thanked him. The courtesy required no change in the arrangement.

Outside, the painted sack on the tavern sign swung from its little chain. In daylight Robert could see that the red streaks had been renewed while the smiling man's face had faded. A visitor asked what the sack held. The split-booted brother said that people were always asking, and pointed towards the mill as though an answer could be inspected there.

The lion's name was Prince, and he belonged under the table. Robert learned this in the first week, in the way he learned most things in Farthest: by being in the wrong place. He had been sent into the tavern to collect glasses and had bent to retrieve one that had rolled beneath Trebuchet's table. Something in the dark there had opened its eyes.

He did not move. The eyes did not move either. They were yellow and patient, and they were level with his own, and behind them in the shadow he could see the long shape of the animal lying on its side with its great paws crossed, as a man crosses his hands on a full belly.

Above him, Trebuchet went on eating.

"He doesn't like his table touched," Trebuchet said, without looking down.

Robert withdrew his hand very slowly, without the glass. The eyes followed his hand all the way out. When he stood up, Trebuchet was watching him with the same patience, a piece of meat halfway to his mouth.

"Leave the glass," he said. "Prince will give it back when he's finished with it."

Robert never learned whether this was a joke. The glass stayed under the table for a month. Nobody fetched it. Every time he came into the tavern he looked at the dark beneath the table and saw, or thought he saw, the yellow eyes looking back.

* * *

Elias made a list of the things May would need in the room she had taken near her work. He began with a basin, a lamp, and something to keep the window open. May said there would be a basin. He crossed it out so thoroughly that Adelaide could not read what had been there.

"We can go and see it," she said.

May tightened the cord around her bundle. "You have seen it."

"With your things in it."

"Then you'll have to wait until I take them."

They carried the bundle together. At the new room, May put it on the bed and opened the window. The sash stayed up without a prop. Elias examined the catch and said nothing. Adelaide looked at the space beneath the bed, the cupboard, the door to the passage. May watched her.

"No one can come through that wall, Mother."

Adelaide kept her hand on the cupboard knob until she could take it away naturally. She had not said anything about the wall.

On the walk home Elias asked whether she would like to stop for bread. They did not need bread. She said yes, and they stood in the shop discussing loaves long enough for the woman behind the counter to begin looking past them at the next customer.

That night Adelaide set one place too many. She took the plate away before anyone sat down. When James came in late and asked where May was, she answered at once, with the address and the floor and the side of the passage. The precision pleased her. May was somewhere she could name.

Adelaide folded Elias's list into her notebook.

6

The Turnip Patch

The turnips grew in rows that had been drawn by someone who did not intend to weed them. Robert spent the morning moving back and forth on his knees, loosening roots with a blunt fork. When he pulled too quickly, the leaves came off and one of the Boore Brothers struck him behind the ear.

There were six brothers. He learned to distinguish them by their boots because looking higher was discouraged. The brother with the split left boot supervised the field. The one whose boots shone worked at the mill.

By noon the gnats had found him. They settled wherever sweat gathered and left a sting that continued after they had gone. He tried rubbing mud into the bites. This helped until the mud dried and cracked.

A woman carrying a sack stopped at the fence.

"Under the arms too," she said.

He looked up.

"The mud. They get in under the cloth."

She demonstrated on her own arm. Her name was Nella. She collected the leaves that were too damaged to be sold and took them to the kitchens. Robert asked whether he could have one. She looked towards the tavern before passing it through the fence.

"Don't make a habit where it can be seen."

Nella had a strip of cloth tied around one wrist, with knots spaced along it. Robert thought they marked days. She told him they marked sacks. If she lost count, the kitchens accepted the lower number; if they lost count, they still accepted the lower number. The knots made disagreement visible.

Her sister lived in the sheds beyond the mill. They pooled their food, and twice a week Nella carried a portion to a man who could no longer straighten his back. Robert asked whether the man was their father.

"He carried my sister when she couldn't walk."

This seemed enough of an answer. He offered to take a sack through the fence for her. She refused until he finished his assigned row, then let him carry one corner along the inside while she carried the other along the path. The fence remained between them. When a brother appeared, she let go and said the boy had been catching his fork in her cloth.

"Can't do a thing properly," the brother said.

Robert bent over the fork until he had passed.

The six brothers had divided authority to prevent anyone appealing successfully from one to another. Split Boot could order work; Shining Boots could refuse what the work produced. A brother with rawhide laces allotted food. Another, whose heels were cut down on the inside, dealt with injuries by deciding whether they interrupted the work. The youngest wore two right boots bought cheaply after an accident elsewhere. He delivered messages which permitted him to say that he had not given the order. The oldest wore slippers in the tavern and appeared only when the others disagreed about which of them was entitled to strike someone.

Robert learned this gradually. Names would have helped less. The brothers used one another's names when borrowing money and abandoned them when a witness might repeat a conversation.

The system was tested in his first autumn. Robert dropped a basket at the end of a row, and the turnips rolled into the ditch. Split Boot saw it and told him he would be struck for waste. Rawhide Laces, who had

come to count the basket, said that waste belonged to food and that food was his. He would do the striking. Split Boot replied that the waste had occurred in the field before the turnips became food, and that the field was his.

They stood on either side of Robert while he picked the turnips out of the ditch. Neither struck him; each believed that striking him first would concede the other's claim. Robert washed each turnip in the ditch water, which made them heavier and therefore, in some brothers' accounting, more valuable. He considered washing them a second time.

The difficulty was referred to the tavern. The oldest brother came out in his slippers, examined the turnips, examined the ditch, and asked which of them had seen the basket fall. Both had. This was unfortunate, he said, because a witness could not also be the person entitled to act on what he had witnessed. He struck Robert himself, once, lightly, as a person initials a document, and went back inside to finish his drink.

The two brothers looked at one another. Split Boot said that the matter had been settled in his favour, since the blow had fallen in the field. Rawhide Laces said it had been settled in his, since the turnips were now in a basket. That evening Robert's portion was smaller by exactly one turnip, which Rawhide Laces described as a deduction and Split Boot described, to anyone who asked, as proof that the field had been respected.

Ma listened to the account with her head on one side.

"Which of them hit you?"

"The one in slippers."

"Then you know who decides."

"He wasn't there."

"That's how you know."

She made him say it back to her. After that, whenever two brothers disagreed over him, Robert watched the tavern door rather than either of their boots. It did not prevent a single blow.

One morning a load arrived marked THIRD FARTHEST. It contained children younger than Robert and implements too heavy for

them to lift. The driver wanted directions to Next Farthest. Split Boot said he had passed it. The driver said the last sign had pointed here.

"Depends which way you read it."

"There's only one road."

"Then you shouldn't have got lost."

The load was sent round the back of the mill. Later Robert saw the same cart leave with the board reversed. The names allowed a place to be missing whenever someone asked after it, while its produce continued to arrive promptly and in the proper quantity.

Nella watched the cart until the last wheel disappeared.

"My sister came through the School for Girls," she said.

Robert waited.

"Don't ask her to tell you about it."

"I wasn't going to."

"People do."

She tightened one of the knots at her wrist and lifted the next sack.

The knots were tested that winter. The kitchens changed their tally keeper, and the new one, a boy with a slate and the sleeves of someone larger, counted Nella's sacks as eleven when she had carried fourteen. She showed him the cloth. He said that knots were not a recognized method of accounting. She asked what was. He showed her the slate.

"Then write fourteen."

"I wrote what I counted."

"You counted while you were talking to the cook."

"The count stands."

Robert was carrying scraps to the pig trough and stopped close enough to hear. Nella did not raise her voice. She untied the cloth from her wrist and laid it across the slate so that the knots covered the chalk marks. Three knots hung over the edge.

"Those," she said, "are the ones you're keeping."

The boy looked at the knots and then at the door to the tavern. Robert could see him weighing the difference between three sacks of

turnip tops and an argument that might reach the brother in slippers. Three sacks were not his. The argument would be.

He rubbed out eleven and wrote twelve.

Nella retied the cloth without comment. She had not expected fourteen. She had expected to establish that the difference would cost somebody something, and that next time the cost might be larger. The two sacks she lost that day she described to her sister as the price of the lesson, and she did not say whose lesson she meant.

Afterwards she walked along the fence while Robert walked inside it.

"He'll get it right now," Robert said.

"He'll get it closer."

"Why not right?"

"Because right costs him more than closer." She glanced back at the kitchen. "He's not bad. He has a slate and somebody he's afraid of. That's most of them."

Robert thought about the Guild's Cashier, who had also had a board and somebody he was afraid of. It had not occurred to him before that the Cashier might have been afraid. The thought did not make him like the man. It made him wonder who had stood behind the Stage Manager.

The old woman appeared shortly afterwards, stepping between the rows without the difficulty everyone else seemed to have. Her clothes had the colour and texture of things found under logs. A broad cap shaded her face.

"You're making them angry," she said.

Robert released the turnip he was pulling.

"Everything here's angry."

"Then stop helping."

She put two fingers into the soil beside the root and rocked them gently. The turnip came free with a sucking sound.

"Loosen first."

He tried it. It worked.

"What do they feed you?"

He showed her the leaf Nella had given him. She turned it over and handed it back.

"That explains the rest."

At the shaded edge of the patch she lifted a pale, springy fungus from the ground. Several red grubs contracted beneath it.

"Breadstool. Those are blood grubs. Both edible. Don't eat anything else because it resembles them."

She broke the fungus, showing the even interior, and made him identify a second one. He watched her put a grub in her mouth.

"They move," he said.

"Briefly."

She left before he had worked out how to thank her. The brother with the split boot came to the fence but did not call after her.

"Muckleby," he muttered, and ordered Robert back into the rows.

That evening Ma examined the fungus Robert had brought to his stall. She turned a piece over with her beak.

"Where did you get this?"

He told her.

"Remember which one. She won't always come."

They ate together. In the yard beyond the stable, two men brought a covered barrow to the mill. The brother with shining boots stopped them at the scales.

"Too wet," he said.

"It's rained."

"I'm paying for material, not weather."

The barrow had been weighed with its cover on because the cover was customary equipment. When the men asked to have its weight deducted, Shining Boots explained that a deduction could only be calculated from a cover presented separately. They took it off. He said the load now differed from the load entered, and would have to go round again.

One man began to push. The other kept hold of the handles.

"He's already here."

"So are you. You don't count twice."

They argued over the difference between arriving and being received. The body lay with one shoulder against the wheel. Its hand struck the side. Robert recognized the ring; he had seen it that morning on a man holding the gate for Nella. Nobody covered it during the argument because the cover had become evidence.

The scales were suspended from a frame tall enough for the pans to clear the ground. On one side went the load; on the other, stones certified at the tavern. Their lower faces had been chipped. Shining Boots would not allow anyone to turn them over. Moisture was estimated by pressing two fingers into the cloth beneath the body and examining the shine. Whatever could be attributed to water was deducted from the useful weight. The costs of transport, grinding, binding, and inspection were then entered separately, so that a man arriving with a corpse could leave owing more than he had before acquiring it.

"Then you keep him," one of the men said.

"Abandonment has a fee."

The other man released the handles. He looked towards the road rather than at the pan. For a moment Robert thought he meant to run. Instead he reached into his coat and took out a packet folded in paper. Shining Boots opened it, counted the contents, and wrote a smaller figure in the book.

Behind the frame a belt moved around a wheel. It carried the motion from the treaders inside the shed to the mill teeth, which were kept sharp by a boy turning a stone whenever there was nothing ready to grind. Robert had heard the wheel all week without knowing what made it turn. Now he saw the treaders' knees rising and falling through a gap in the wall. They could not see the scales.

After the men left, the ring was taken from the hand and placed in a drawer. Robert had expected it to be included in the material. Shining Boots closed the drawer with his hip and called for the next load.

Ma stood between Robert and the gap in the boards.

"Finish your food."

"Was he dead?"

She did not answer at once.

"That one was."

The block on the platform in the morning had straight sides. Fibre held the red paste together, and a stamp on its upper surface gave the grade. It no longer resembled the person who had held the gate for Nella. It resembled something a man might complain had become dearer.

The blocks did not stay in Farthest. Twice a season a wagon came up the only road with its sides boarded high and its driver wrapped against the gnats. The brothers loaded it themselves, because the grades had to be checked against the book at the moment of transfer and the book was not permitted to leave Shining Boots's hands. Robert was sent to hold the horses, which were old and did not need holding, and so he saw the whole of the procedure from the level of their knees.

Each block was lifted, turned once so that the stamp faced the driver, and called aloud: its grade, its weight after the moisture deduction, its origin. The origin was always Farthest, even for the loads that had come round the back of the mill from places whose boards could be read either way. The driver repeated each call. Shining Boots entered it. The driver then signed a column headed *Received in good order*.

The best grades went under a cloth marked with a circle of wheat ears. The poorer ones were stacked at the back, uncovered, beside sacks of dried turnip tops. When the wagon was full, the driver gave Shining Boots a slip of stiff paper with a hole punched through one corner. The slip could be exchanged at the Boundary for seed, salt, iron nails, and a certain quantity of Deathleberry Wine. It could not be exchanged for money, which Trebuchet regarded as a courtesy: money, he said, only encouraged people to leave.

"Where does it go?" Robert asked the driver once.

The man looked down at him with the particular weariness of someone who had been asked that question in several villages and had never found an answer which made the next village easier.

"Inward," he said.

"To eat?"

"To grow things that get eaten."

He shook the reins. The horses, which had been waiting for this since before they were harnessed, leaned into the load. The wheels bit into the ruts made by the last wagon and the one before it, so that the road into Farthest was deepest exactly where things left.

That night the kitchens served turnip tops again. Robert chewed them slowly, thinking of the wheat-ear cloth, and tried to work out how many blocks it took to become a loaf in a city he had never seen. He could not do the arithmetic.

In his second year Robert found a place beneath the field gate where the earth had been washed out. A small creature had made use of it and enlarged the opening towards the ditch. At noon, when the brothers ate, he could put one arm through and feel grass beyond the beaten ground.

He worked at it with the broken end of a root. Each handful of earth went beneath his tunic and was dropped among the rows later. He had seen prisoners in Guild plays remove enormous stones without attracting attention. The earth would not behave so conveniently. It gathered beneath his nails, fell from the hem as he stood, and made the same patch beside the gate conspicuously tidy.

Ma watched from the post. She asked him what was on the other side.

"Out."

"After that."

"The road."

"Which way?"

He did not know. He stopped digging while she was there and resumed when she went away. After several days the opening would ad-

mit his head. He lay on his side, put one arm through first, and discovered that his shoulders were wider than the part of himself by which he had judged the hole.

The gate moved. Someone on the other side had begun to open it. The lower edge pressed against the back of his neck.

"Don't pull," Nella said.

He stopped. She pushed the gate back a fraction, held it with her foot, and told him to turn his chin towards his shoulder. He came out with dirt in his mouth and one ear scraped raw.

Nella put her sack over the hole. The brother with two right boots passed along the far fence. He had a message for the kitchens and could not stop to discover another task.

"You owe me a sack," she said.

"I didn't take it."

"They'll count it missing."

Robert offered her the cloth he slept on. She looked at him as though this were a proposition whose arithmetic made her tired. Then she picked up her sack, moved a stone into the opening, and pressed earth around it with the heel of her hand.

"If you get out, don't lie beside the road deciding what to do. Decide here."

That evening he asked Ma where the road went. She told him the names of three places and what he might expect to find in each. One would send him back for a fee. One would keep him. The third was farther away than he could walk without food.

"There must be another."

"There may be."

"Then tell me that one."

She did not invent one to make him sleep.

He lay awake, listening to Prince move around the yard. The lion tested the stable door with its shoulder and went away. Robert had escaped the pressure under the gate because Nella knew how to move it.

He tried to think of the whole place as something which might be moved a fraction if a person knew where to put a foot.

In the morning he took her an empty sack from beside the mill. It had been discarded because the seam had opened. He repaired it with a strip pulled from the inside of his tunic. She inspected the seam, found a gap, and made him close it properly.

"There," she said. "Now I have one."

Through his first three years in Farthest, Robert learned where the gnats rested at noon, which shade produced breadstools, and how much work could be completed without attracting a complaint that he had failed to do it sooner. The seasons repeated their demands. His shoulders broadened. The tunic tightened across them, and Nella let out the seams when he could get it to her unnoticed.

The first winter Nella let out the tunic at the sides. In the second, she moved the hem. By the third there was hardly any allowance left. Robert learned to lift his arms separately so the cloth would not pull across both shoulders at once. His sloping stitch remained near his knee. He could find it without looking.

The days did not pass without distinction. One brother was away with a hurt foot and the others failed to agree whose work it had been. A gate broke and had to be held shut by a person, giving Robert a morning of standing upright. Rain kept the mill belt slipping. For two days the yard was almost quiet. He could hear Ma walking on the stable roof, each step followed by the small adjustment of her damaged foot.

Once he asked Nella how old she thought he was. She pressed her thumb against his shoulder bone, as though age might be determined by the same examination used to price him.

"Older than when you came."

"How much?"

"Enough to carry the other end."

She gave him the sack. He was annoyed until he realized she had let him carry half instead of pretending he had caught his fork in it. They went along the fence together, watching for the brothers.

Nella's sister was called Marta. Robert met her when the brother with rawhide laces ordered him to carry turnips into the preparation shed. She stood at a bench, taking bruised places out with a short knife. The knife was tied to the bench by a cord too short to reach the far end. She had to bring each turnip to it, cut, and put it back.

There were six stools and room for four. The workers sat with their knees turned sideways. Beneath them, skins accumulated in a shallow channel and had to be pushed along by foot whenever the pile reached the bench. A pale root growing through the wall drank from the channel. Its leaves were used in the tavern to decorate plates.

Marta took Robert's basket without looking at him. When she saw the split in one handle she turned it so the load would rest on the other side next time.

"Hold there," she said.

He held the repaired side while she unloaded. He wanted to ask about the place she had come from because he now knew its name. He remembered Nella's warning and asked instead whether the knife had always been tied.

"Since it went missing."

"Did you find it?"

She looked at the knife in her hand.

"Then why—"

"Yes," she said. "That's the question."

The woman beside her laughed without lifting her head. Marta slid one of the less bruised turnips towards Robert. He put it in the basket under the cloth. A tiny movement of her mouth told him she had seen and approved the speed of it.

Outside, he cut it into four pieces with the edge of his fork. One for himself, one for Ma, and two which he hid behind the stable post because the next day might be worse. He returned to the pieces before dark. He had decided that planning ahead would be easier after he had eaten.

The following week he helped repair a board in the shed. Marta stood over him with the knife because there was nowhere else for her to stand while the cord remained attached. For an hour she did not have to cut. She took the opportunity to teach the woman beside her a song she had learned before coming to Farthest. It was about a man attempting to buy a hat too small for his head. Each verse introduced another reason the hatter thought he should pay for it anyway.

Robert remembered the song. Later he could not remember the hat's colour, only the sound of the women trying not to laugh loudly enough to bring a brother to the door.

Prince began to wait outside the stable. He was a miniature hunting lion, a distinction that seemed to Robert unnecessarily technical when the animal could cover the width of the yard in two strides. One afternoon he sprang at Ma and struck the stable wall instead. She had moved only a little, but enough.

From the roof she addressed his ancestry in terms Robert had not heard before.

Prince walked away with his ears flat. For three days he left them alone.

Robert began to count such intervals. Three days without the cat, an afternoon without the split boot, a meal containing something besides tops. He kept no total. It was useful to know that an interval could occur again.

The years in Farthest were counted by other people in other units. The brothers counted them in harvests, each one entered as a shortfall against the harvest before, so that a good year was a year in which the shortfall had been smaller than expected. The kitchens counted them in cooks. The mill counted them in belts, since a belt lasted almost exactly as long as a treader, and both were replaced on the same day to save the trouble of a second stoppage. Trebuchet counted them in chapters of the biography, of which Darcy had now recited four from the platform, all concerning a childhood in which the young Theodore had been mis-

understood by a series of smaller men. None had yet been written down; Darcy said the performance was the draft.

Robert counted them by the tunic. When Nella could let out no more, Marta cut a panel from a condemned sack and set it into the back, below Leparda's red lining, with stitches small enough to satisfy Ma. The sackcloth was coarse and stamped with half a circle of wheat ears. Robert could feel the stamp through the lining when he lay on his back. He did not mind it. It was the first thing on him that had come from Farthest by agreement.

In the fourth spring the man who could not straighten his back died in the sheds. Nella and Marta carried him out themselves before a barrow could be sent. Robert saw them go past the scales with the body between them, wrapped in their own blanket, walking steadily towards the trees. Shining Boots called after them that unregistered material was subject to a fee. Nella did not turn her head. Marta did, once, and looked at him for so long that he found something to write in the book.

They came back without the blanket. That evening the two sisters shared their portion with Robert and would not say where they had been. Ma, who had been out all afternoon, told him that the ground beyond the second line of trees was soft and that crows had watched the digging from a respectful height.

"Is that allowed?" Robert asked.

"No," said Ma. "It's done."

7

Dying to See Her

Ma Crow sometimes went away. At first she returned by nightfall, then after a night, then after two. When Robert asked where she went, she said she was seeing to things.

"What things?"

"Things that need seeing to."

"Will you come back?"

She tapped his wrist with the side of her beak.

"That's the intention."

The song had begun before the light. Robert heard it first on a night when Ma was away, lying awake on his sacks with the wind in the stable slit: a note so far off that he took it for a trick of his own ears, the kind of sound a person makes up to fill a silence. It came again the next night, a little nearer, and a little clearer, and he found that he had been waiting for it since dusk.

It was not a tune he knew. It was more like the shape of a tune he had forgotten, and every time it came he felt he was about to remember the rest. He thought of the woman in the bright room. He thought, without knowing why, of warm milk and a hand beneath his head and the smell of soap, things he had no memory of and yet could not have invented. The song seemed to know where they were kept.

On the third night he got up and went to the slit and looked out. The field lay grey under the moon. At the far edge, near the trees, something small and pale moved along the ground, pausing and moving on,

like a person searching for a thing dropped in the grass. He watched it until it went into the trees. Then he went back to his sacks, and lay down, and was ashamed to find that he was crying, and could not say for whom.

In the morning he asked Nella whether she had heard singing in the night.

She looked at him sharply.

"What kind?"

He tried to describe it and could not. She took hold of his chin and turned his face towards her and looked into his eyes, one and then the other, the way the apothecary had looked into Leparda's wound.

"If you hear it again," she said, "put mud in your ears and think about turnips. Think about them very hard. Count them."

"Why?"

"Because there's a thing that sings in the dry season," she said, "and the ones who go and look at it don't come back the same, when they come back." She let go of his chin. "My sister's friend went. She came back. She sits by the mill wheel. She doesn't do anything else."

Robert said he would count turnips. He meant it. But he was eleven, or thereabouts, and the song had found the place where the things he did not remember were kept, and that afternoon Ma was still away.

Robert saw a light moving at the edge of the field. He had finished the last row and was rubbing dirt from his fingers. Prince lay beneath the fence, watching him.

The light had a centre he could not quite look at. Each time he turned his head aside, a little more of the song became audible: one note held over another, then a pause in which he almost remembered words. It resembled Darcy's voice at a distance, stripped of the performance that usually accompanied it. There was room inside the sound for something Robert wanted to hear.

The moth's wings were furred at their lower edges. Their movement disturbed the little hairs without appearing to move the air. Beneath the luminous abdomen hung a jointed tube which uncurled as the insect

approached him. He saw it and thought of an instrument used to feed a small creature that could not feed itself.

The end opened.

Prince had risen beneath the fence. Robert heard the claws before he saw the leap. The lion crossed the light, and the song broke into two sounds, one continuing at the edge of his hearing while the other became a thin mechanical whine. Something struck Robert's face. His mouth opened because he wanted to call Ma. The tube found it.

For a moment he could see the entire creature against the sky, attached to him by that single bright joint, its body twisting away from the lion while its wings continued making the slow, inviting movement that had brought him across the field.

Then he was in a white room.

The woman sat at a table. Her hair was dark with threads of grey. She had lifted one hand, perhaps to shield her eyes, and was looking at him with an expression that he could not bear to leave unanswered.

"I'm here," he tried to say.

Nothing came out. His mouth was full of something hot and rigid.

The woman stood so quickly that the chair fell backwards.

Robert was on the ground. Prince held the insect between his paws, taking it apart with delicate bites. Its wings trembled beside his whiskers. The light returned once, very faintly, and went out.

For a long time Robert heard voices without seeing the people who made them. Trebuchet wanted to know how much of a turnip season remained. Someone replied that the boy was unlikely to stand that week.

"Waste of feeding him."

Another voice, smaller and furious, answered from close to Robert's ear.

"Then don't. Leave that to me."

When he could open his eyes, Ma was pulling a strip of cloth through a bowl. She dragged it up the side, lost her grip, and began again. Her breast feathers were damp and matted.

"Don't move," she told him.

He moved and discovered why she had said it.

"What happened?"

"Glimkill. You looked at it."

"It was beautiful."

"That was the arrangement."

She had gone to Muckleby, who would not come but had provided a foul broth, a bundle of leaves, and instructions that assumed the recipient possessed hands. Ma had carried each portion separately. Nella had left water at the stall, but dared not stay.

Robert worked out the distance later, when he was well enough to walk it. From the stable to Muckleby's door was four hundred and twelve of his steps. The broth had come in a hollowed gourd no bigger than an egg, which was as much as a crow could carry in her beak without spilling, and the gourd had needed to be filled nine times a day for six days. He did the arithmetic on his fingers and then did it again, because the first answer seemed too large. It was not too large. She had flown back and forth over the field more times than the brothers had struck him in a year, carrying something that burned her tongue, on one good foot, with no one to set it down for her at either end.

On the seventh day, when he could sit up, she did not come back from Muckleby's until after dark. When she did, she landed short of the rail and fell, and lay on the straw with her wings half open, and he had to pick her up and put her on the rail himself. She was lighter than he expected. She let him do it.

"You should have let Nella," he said.

"Nella has two hands and a sister and a man in the sheds." Ma shook out her feathers, badly, and missed half of them. "She's full."

"You're not?"

The crow looked at him with one eye for a long time.

"I was," she said. "I emptied it on you. Now go to sleep before I have to start again."

Later, when he was strong enough to stand, Ma made him watch as she tipped powdered charcoal into a scrap of cloth and drew a cord around it.

"Water through. Slowly. Not all at once."

"Why?"

"It catches some things you'd rather not drink. Not everything. Remember that part."

He held the cloth while she poured. The first water ran black; the next ran clearer. Working beside her steadied him more than lying still had done.

He told her about the woman.

Ma listened without correcting his description. When he had finished, she asked what the woman's hands had been doing.

"Trying to touch me."

"Then remember those too."

"Do you think she's looking for me?"

The crow looked down into the bowl. Her reflection broke beneath a drop of water.

"I think you should keep looking."

* * *

Adelaide found the chair lying behind her. She was standing with her hand against the empty air above the table.

Her son James came from the hall carrying a cracked plate.

"I didn't mean to," he said.

She turned towards him. The boy in the dream had been smaller, although years had passed since she had last seen him so clearly. Something had prevented him from closing his mouth.

"Put it down," she told James. "You'll cut yourself."

He began to explain how the plate had fallen. She listened to all of it, then helped him gather the pieces into a cloth. Afterwards she wrote the date in her book and drew the shape of the thing at Robert's face. Her hand shook so much that the line went through the paper.

Within the week she told Mrs. Harrow.

She had not planned to. Mrs. Harrow was the minister's wife, a kind, square woman who visited the families of the congregation in rotation and was known for bringing preserves in jars she did not ask to have returned. She came on the Tuesday after the plate. She sat in the kitchen and admired the children and asked after Elias's chest, and Adelaide, pouring tea, heard herself say that she had seen her son.

Mrs. Harrow looked towards the yard, where James was chopping kindling.

"Not James," Adelaide said. "My first. Robert."

There was a pause of the sort that occurs when a guest realizes that the conversation has moved into a room she was not shown on arrival. Mrs. Harrow set down her cup.

"The one who was lost," she said gently. "On the prairie."

"Yes."

"Oh, my dear." She reached across the table and took Adelaide's hand. Her own was warm and dry and smelled faintly of the plums she had been bottling. "Of course you did. Of course. They come to us. My own mother saw my brother for years after the fever. At the foot of her bed, she said. Every Easter."

"I saw him in a field. There was a moth with a light in it. It put something into his mouth."

Mrs. Harrow's hand did not move, but it became, very slightly, a hand that was being held rather than one that was holding.

"A moth," she said.

"It was hurting him. There was a crow. The crow looked after him afterwards."

"A crow." Mrs. Harrow nodded slowly, the way one nods to a child who is explaining the rules of a game she has invented. "Well. The Lord sends comfort in the forms we can bear. Perhaps the crow is how he's letting you know the boy is cared for."

Adelaide looked at the hand on hers. She thought of the moth's tube uncurling, and of how she had stood up so fast that the chair fell.

"Perhaps," she said.

Mrs. Harrow squeezed once more and let go. She talked for a while about the harvest festival and whether the choir would manage the new anthem. When she left, she kissed Adelaide on the cheek and told her to rest, and left behind a jar of plum preserve with a square of gingham tied over the lid.

That evening Adelaide opened the jar and put a spoonful on each of the children's bread, and the children were delighted, and James asked who had brought it. She told him. She did not tell him anything else. After the children were in bed she sat at the table with the notebook open and the jar beside it, and she did not write anything for a long time.

Then she wrote: *Told Mrs. H. She was very kind.*

She underlined *kind* twice.

The second line is in a softer pencil than the first, Shiraz notes. *Under a lens it crosses a fold made after the page was written. Somebody returned to this sentence years later to add one stroke. I have not been able to decide whether the stroke withdraws the compliment or confirms it.*

James kept the largest piece of the plate. He wrapped it in paper and put it at the back of a drawer, intending to buy another like it when he was older and had money. Adelaide found it when looking for a lost button. She put it back where it had been.

Years later he brought it downstairs and laughed at himself. He had earned wages by then. The plate had been thrown away so long ago that neither of them could remember its pattern beyond the little blue leaf which remained on the broken piece.

"You were terribly upset," he said.

"I wasn't upset about the plate."

He set the fragment on the table. He had grown taller than Elias, whose shoulders were beginning to draw forward over his work. Ad-

elaide looked at the line of James's neck above his collar and remembered the other boy unable to shut his mouth.

"Was it Robert?" he asked.

She had not expected the name. In the house it generally belonged to a story told when the children were young enough to believe that missing people would come back if everyone remembered them properly.

She brought the notebook. James turned the pages with care. At the drawing of the light he stopped.

"You saw this?"

"I was there."

He glanced at her and looked down again. She recognized the restraint. He did not wish to say anything that would hurt her. It would have been easier if he had laughed.

"In the dream," he said.

"Where else could I go?"

He had no answer. He fetched a chair and sat beside her while she described the bird bringing water. He listened through the whole account. When he left for work she found the blue piece still on the table, turned so its sharp edge faced away from her hand.

The broken plate has not survived, Shiraz notes. *Its fragment appears in two household entries separated by years. I mention the interval because the pages describing the Glimkill occupy a single folded sheet. The lives on either side did not agree upon the time they required.*

8

An Evening Out

In the spring before, Ma had begun to sleep more. She still went away to see to things, but she came back earlier and settled on the rail above his sacks with her head sunk into her shoulders, and some mornings she was still there when he woke, which had never happened before. Her feathers had lost their shine along the back. When she preened, she missed places.

"Are you ill?" he asked.

"I'm old."

"How old?"

"Older than the brothers. Younger than the mill." She opened one eye. "Old enough that you should stop asking and learn the fungus by yourself."

He had learned the fungus by himself two years before. He did not say so. He brought her grubs instead, the fattest he could find under the breadstools, and she ate them without her usual complaint that he had picked the ones with the least flavour.

One evening, when the tavern was loud and the stable quiet, she told him about the posts.

He had noticed them in the forest edge: tall stakes with their bark stripped, each topped with a flat board. Crows sometimes sat on them. Nobody fed them there any more, but the birds came anyway, one or two at a time, and waited.

"Before your time," Ma said. "Before mine, nearly. Men put food on those boards. Crows who carried things for them came back and ate. Then the men went away, and the crows kept coming, because that was where food had been."

"What did they carry?"

She was quiet for a while.

"Seeds."

"For planting?"

"For planting where people slept." She shifted her bad foot. "I never carried any. I was too small, and then I was lame, and then the men were gone. But I knew birds who did. Some are still alive. Some of their children are. They remember where the posts are."

Robert looked out through the slit in the stable wall. He could not see the posts from there, only the dark line of the forest.

"Did you ever go to the posts?"

Ma did not answer at once. She drew her bad foot up into her feathers and held it there.

"When I was young. Everyone did. There was food." She was silent. "I went once after the men had gone. There wasn't any food. There were other crows, waiting on the boards, and they looked at me as if I'd come to take their place in the line. I flew away. I didn't go back."

"Why not?"

"Because I didn't want to be something that waits on a post for men who aren't coming," said Ma. "I'd rather be something that finds its own grubs. Even with one foot."

"Are they bad?"

"They're crows," Ma said. "They go where food is. Mostly that's all anybody does. Remember it, and remember I told you, and remember I brought you water anyway."

He did not understand why she needed him to remember all three things together. He said he would. She seemed satisfied, and slept, and in the morning she was gone before he woke, and she came back that evening, and the evening after.

The summer after the Glimkill sting, Robert was carrying a basket of roots when he saw the feathers on the tavern step. He put the basket down carefully. One feather stood caught in a crack, moving whenever the door opened.

Trebuchet sat inside with a plate before him.

"Your bird," he said.

Robert looked beneath the table, towards Prince. The cat was washing a paw.

"She was old," Trebuchet added, turning something on the plate with the point of his knife. "Tough."

Robert ran at him. He had no plan beyond reaching the hand that held the knife. Trebuchet struck him away with his forearm. The table shifted; a glass broke; Prince rose beneath it.

Robert was already through the door.

He ran past the roots spilling from the basket, past Nella, who called after him, and into a lane of leaning houses. He stopped only when he struck someone coming around a corner.

The man caught him by both shoulders. He was small and wore a beard so carefully divided into sections that it appeared to have been made separately and attached with consideration.

"Easy," he said.

Robert tried to get past him.

"No. He's behind you, isn't he?"

The question brought Robert to a halt. He could hear Trebuchet in the distance, calling for the brothers.

The man took his hand and led him towards a great toadstool that stood behind the houses. Its stem contained a door. He knocked in a peculiar pattern.

"It's Weerdsley."

"I know," a voice said. "I can see through the hole."

Inside, shelves grew from the walls. Things on them breathed, swelled, or released a faint light. Muckleby looked at Robert's face and gave him a wet cloth.

He told them what had happened in the tavern. At the end he found he was still holding Ma's feather. He had picked it from the step without remembering that he had done so.

Weerdsley pulled out a stool. Neither adult said that the bird was only a bird.

After a while Muckleby put a dish in front of him. It contained something warm and pale, with a dark sauce at the edge. He ate because it had been given to him and because his body continued to ask things of him.

"You know each other?" he asked.

"We worked together," Weerdsley said.

"Before he became difficult," said Muckleby.

"Before we both did."

They had been members of the Biologian School. Muckleby had cultivated fungi; Weerdsley had worked with fibres and living patterns. They had opposed the use of the marching vines and, later, the destruction of other kinds of knowledge. Weerdsley spoke quietly, using the names of people Muckleby interrupted him to correct from living to dead.

"The wolves were made to find us," he said.

"And did," she replied.

Weerdsley took a small case from his pocket. Inside, fitted into separate grooves, lay combs fine enough to divide a fly's hair. A licence had been stitched into the lid.

"Wigsmith," Weerdsley said, seeing Robert look at marks he could not read. "The permitted application of fibrology."

"Why that?"

"Important people go bald. Nobody has proposed outlawing the remedy."

Muckleby gave a short laugh. She brought a yellowed piece of vine from a high shelf and put it beyond Robert's reach. The thing had been cut lengthwise. Inside, a row of small hooks lay folded against a channel.

"That was permitted too," she said.

Weerdsley shut the case. "For defence."

"Against whatever was left after the last defence."

The vines had first been grown in beds no larger than the turnip patch. Teams fed them scraps and measured the speed at which they moved towards warmth. Later the beds became fields. Later still the seeds were fitted into little capsules carried by trained crows, who had learned to drop them where people slept and return to a marked post for food.

Robert looked at the feather in his hand.

"All the crows?"

"Some," Weerdsley said. "Enough."

"What happened when the people woke?"

Muckleby turned the vine over. The hooks caught the edge of the dish. She had to press them back one by one before she could lift it.

"That happened," she said.

They had seen fields afterwards in which the paths remained but nothing that had used them. The victors called these districts restored to order. Then the order required food, and the food required ground, and the same School supplied domesticated varieties which stayed where they were planted until something in their chemistry told them otherwise.

"We said it couldn't be controlled," Weerdsley told Robert.

"We said it shouldn't be done," Muckleby corrected him.

He accepted the correction. After a moment he said they had not said it soon enough.

Robert could see a pale mark on Muckleby's wrist where a band had rubbed the skin. She followed his look and pulled down her sleeve.

The Cultural Purge had left room for wigs. Fibres which remembered a pattern could hold a curl indefinitely, turn silver without dye, or arrange themselves over the thinning crown of a Merchant-King. The licence did not authorize roofs, armour, bridges, or things capable of preserving a person's pattern after the body failed. Weerdsley

showed Robert the back of the paper. More space had been given to the prohibitions than to the trade.

"Then where can you work?"

"I am making somewhere."

"A shop?"

"A Wigsmithy," he said. "That is what it will say over the door."

On the table lay a sheet marked with dark lines. Robert turned it towards him. He wanted something to look at besides their faces.

"Can you read that?" Muckleby asked.

He shook his head.

She considered him for a moment, then took a small dish from a shelf. Its surface bore a delicate grey bloom.

"Tongue."

"What is it?"

"Literacy Mold. Don't scrape it off."

He let her place it on his tongue. It tasted of a shut room. For several minutes nothing happened; then the marks on the sheet ceased to be only marks. He could not have explained the change. A word stood where a shape had been.

Agreement.

Muckleby took the paper away.

Robert looked down. The embroidered edge of his tunic lay against his knee.

Robert Small. Saskatchewan.

He read it again with his finger following the thread.

"Robert," he said.

Weerdsley leaned forward.

"Your name?"

He could only nod.

Neither of them knew Saskatchewan. Muckleby looked at the stitching for some time and said that someone had taken care over it. Robert thought of the hands reaching towards him in the white room.

Outside, a door was kicked open.

"He'll search the houses," Muckleby said.

"I can stay here."

"He'll come here last. And when he finds you, he'll bring fire and half the village."

"Then with you," Robert said to Weerdsley.

The little man did not look away.

"I'm going into the Last Forest. I don't yet have shelter. There are people looking for me who will kill anyone travelling with me."

"There are people looking for me here."

Muckleby shut her eyes briefly. Then she went to the door and called into the lane.

She did not speak kindly to Trebuchet. She told him that the boy had become ill in her house, that she had treated him, and that if Trebuchet damaged the treatment she would make a personal inspection of the cultures in his drinking vats. He shouted. She repeated the last part. Eventually his footsteps receded.

"Tonight," she told Robert. "I've bought you tonight."

Weerdsley took two fibres from a narrow case. One was silver-grey, the other reddish and soft.

"The grey one will find its way through a simple lock. Don't force it. Let it work. The red one follows my pattern. Rub it with rough cloth and it will pull towards me."

He demonstrated. The red strand rose towards his hand.

"Keep them separate in your mind even if you tie them together."

Robert took them. They weighed nothing he could feel.

Weerdsley made him practise. Muckleby had a cupboard with a lock, a small brass one with a keyhole shaped like a narrow door, and she brought it to the table, grumbling that it held nothing worth stealing and that if the boy broke it she would expect a replacement. Weerdsley showed Robert how to hold the grey fibre: not pinched, as he had been holding it, but laid across the pad of his finger so that it could move.

"It knows what a lock is," the little man said. "You don't have to teach it. You only have to put it where a lock is and stop interfering."

Robert put the end of the fibre to the keyhole. Nothing happened. He pushed it a little, and it bent.

"Stop interfering."

He held still. He held so still that his hand began to ache. The lamp hissed. Muckleby, at the stove, said something under her breath about patience being a virtue principally recommended by people who had nothing urgent to do.

The fibre moved.

It was the smallest movement, like a hair lifting in a draught. Then the end of it found the keyhole and went in, and Robert felt it through his fingertip, a faint busy tugging, as though something very small were walking along the inside of the lock and trying each part to see which one would give. It found one. There was a click. The cupboard door swung open an inch.

Inside, on a single shelf, sat a jar of honey with a spoon in it.

"There," said Muckleby. "Now you know my secret." She took the jar out and put it on the table. "You'd better have some. It's the last."

He had it on bread. It was the sweetest thing he had ever eaten, and afterwards, whenever he used the grey fibre, he found that his mouth remembered the honey before his hand remembered the lock.

"It won't open everything," Weerdsley warned him while he ate. "A simple lock. A catch, a bolt, a buckle. Not a lock with a person standing beside it. Not a lock that's been made to think. And not—" he hesitated, and glanced at Muckleby, "—not anything that's been sealed with living material. It doesn't argue with other fibres."

"How will I know?"

"It'll tell you. It stops." Weerdsley closed Robert's fingers over both strands. "When it stops, don't force it. Forcing it is how you break the only thing you have."

Robert nodded. He wound the two strands round his finger, grey over red, and then unwound them and wound them again the other

way, because he wanted to be sure he could tell them apart in the dark. He could. The grey was cool and slightly rough. The red was warm, and when he held it still it pulled, very gently, towards the little man across the table.

Before he left, he put Ma's feather inside the tunic, beside the stitching. He had a name now. He said it under his breath all the way back.

Trebuchet did not come for him that night, or the next. Muckleby's threat had reached the vats. Robert heard the brothers discussing it in the yard: a cloudy growth had appeared on the surface of the oldest wine barrel, and nobody could agree whether it had been there before. Trebuchet had the barrel emptied into the ditch. The frogs in the ditch were very lively for a day and then not lively at all, and after that the subject of the boy was allowed to rest.

In the morning Nella found him at the field gate. She had heard. Everyone had heard; the tavern had talked of nothing else, and the talk had grown in the telling until Robert, in some versions, had struck Trebuchet with a chair.

She did not ask him about it. She stood at the fence with her sack and looked at him, and then she untied the cloth from her wrist, the cloth with the knots, and picked open the last knot with her teeth.

"What are you doing?"

"Taking one off."

"You'll lose count."

"No." She retied the cloth. "That one wasn't a sack. I put it on the day the crow brought you water through the fence. I didn't know what for. Now I do."

She went on down the path with the sack over her shoulder. Robert watched her go. He had not known that anybody but himself had been counting Ma.

The rail above his sacks was empty. He had known it would be. He had not known that he would look at it every time he came into the stall, before looking at anything else, the way a tongue goes to the gap left by a tooth. On the third night he took the feather out and laid it

along the rail where she had perched, and in the morning it had blown down among the straw, and he put it back inside his tunic and did not try again.

What he had instead was reading.

It came into everything. He had not expected that. He had imagined that learning to read would be like learning the fungus: a thing he could do when he chose to, useful in a particular place. Instead the marks came at him from every surface without being asked. The sacks in the mill yard, which had been simply sacks, now said ASSEMBLAGE SUPPLY — HEARTLAND DISTRICT — RETURN WHEN EMPTY. The sign over the tavern, which had been a smiling man and a sack, now also said THE TREBUCHET: HOSPITALITY BY THE LOAD. The scales had a brass plate on their frame that read CERTIFIED FOR MATERIAL, and beneath it, smaller, NOT FOR COMMERCIAL USE, which puzzled him for a week.

The worst was the book. Shining Boots left it open on the bench by the scales while he ate, weighted with one of the chipped stones. Robert, passing with a basket, read the top of the page before he could stop himself. It was a column of names. Beside each name was a weight. Beside each weight was a deduction, and beside each deduction a sum, and at the bottom of the page the sums had been added and the total carried over to the next. He found the man with the ring. His name had been Hobb. He had weighed less than Robert would have guessed.

He put the basket down and read the page again. He could not help reading it. Every name became a person as he read it, and then became a figure, and then became part of a total that was carried forward to a page he could not see. The brothers had never hidden the book. They had not needed to. Until a few days before, it had been only marks.

Robert understood then something about what Muckleby had given him that she had perhaps not intended. The Literacy Mold had not only let him read his name. It had let him read everyone else's.

He picked up the basket. Shining Boots came back from his meal, lifted the chipped stone, and closed the book. He looked at Robert for a moment, not suspiciously.

"Field," he said.

Robert went to the field.

In the evenings he read what he could find. There was not much. A torn bill for a Guild performance, years old, that had been used to stop a gap in the stable wall: LAST NIGHTS BEFORE THE MOUNTAINS. BABIES! LIONS! A GENUINE CONCLUSION. A label from a wine bottle. A notice nailed to the mill door concerning the correct procedure for reporting an absence, which required the absent person to sign. And, on the night he went into the tavern to collect glasses, the book on the little platform beside Darcy's chair.

Darcy was singing. The book lay open to its title page. The title occupied the whole of it, in letters so large that some of them had had to be continued on the next line.

THE LIFE AND CONQUESTS OF THEODORE TREBUCHET, TOLD AS HE WOULD WISH IT: A HISTORY IN EIGHTEEN VOLUMES, OF WHICH THIS IS THE FIRST.

Robert turned the page while Darcy's back was turned. The next page was blank. So was the one after that. He turned several more and found, at last, a single sentence in Darcy's elegant hand.

He was born large.

Darcy finished the verse and saw him. For a moment the balladeer did not move. Then he smiled, took the book gently from Robert's hands, and closed it.

"A work in progress," he said. "Posterity requires patience."

"It says he was born large."

"It does."

"Is that true?"

Darcy laughed, not unkindly, and lifted his glass.

"My dear boy," he said, "it is the only thing in the book that anyone has paid for."

9

An Occurrence of Crows

The first crow arrived on a fence post. The next morning there were three. Within a week Robert could look up from almost any part of the field and see a black head inclined towards him.

One of them wore a ring. Robert saw it on the third day, when the bird landed close to take a grub from the flat stone: a band of something pale, bone or horn, fitted snugly round its left leg above the foot. The bird took the grub and flew to the fence post and ate it there, holding it down with the ringed foot, and while it ate it watched him with one eye and then the other, in exactly the way Ma had watched him when she was deciding whether he had told her everything.

He asked Nella whether crows ever wore rings.

"Somebody's crows do," she said. "Mine don't."

"Whose?"

She shrugged the sack higher on her shoulder. "Somebody who wanted to know which ones came back."

After that Robert watched for the rings. Most of the birds had none. Two did. The ringed ones came closer than the others, and waited longer on the stone, and were the first to leave when a brother came to the fence, flying off not towards the forest but along the line of it, towards the old stripped posts. The others went into the trees. He could not tell whether this meant anything. He thought of Ma saying *remember I told you*, and he remembered.

They ate the gnats. He kept leaving small pieces of grub upon the flat stone, although the birds did not appear to require payment. None spoke. When one landed near him with its right foot lifted, he felt a hope so sharp that he had to turn away. It changed feet, scratched its head, and flew off.

The Bookish Man arrived at the tavern near the end of the dry season. His coat was clean in a way Robert had come to associate with people whose belongings were cleaned by someone else. Dark spectacles concealed his eyes. He asked questions about the village's health and stood at the stable door while Trebuchet discussed prices with a visitor.

He had come, he told the tavern, to conduct a survey. He produced a folder of printed forms and a pencil sharpened at both ends, and he went from house to house through the whole of the first day, knocking politely and waiting to be let in. He asked each household how many lived there, how many had coughed in the last month, how many had come from elsewhere, and from where. He wrote the answers in small, square figures. When a household did not know where one of its members had come from, he wrote a small circle and asked no further questions.

Robert watched him from the field. The man worked methodically, and he was courteous, and nobody could find anything to object to in a question about coughing. By evening he had filled half the folder. The circles, Robert noticed, were all on the same page.

At supper the Bookish Man sat alone at the table nearest the fire and asked Trebuchet for a room.

"Rooms are extra."

"The survey is conducted under commission. Accommodation is chargeable to the commission."

"Then the commission can pay."

"The commission pays on presentation of an account." The man laid a printed slip beside his plate. "If you will enter the charge here, it will be settled at the Boundary office within the quarter."

Trebuchet picked up the slip and read it with the particular attention he gave to documents which promised him money later. It was, Robert thought from the kitchen doorway, a good slip. It had a seal. It had a line for the amount and a line for the signature and a line, very small at the bottom, which said *subject to verification of services rendered*.

"And who verifies?"

"The commission."

"And if the commission says I didn't render?"

The Bookish Man considered this. "Then the account would not be settled."

"And I'd have given you the room."

"You would have rendered the service. The service would not have been verified. These are separate matters." He took a small sip of soup. "You would, of course, be entitled to appeal."

"To whom?"

"The commission."

Trebuchet put the slip in his pocket, which the Bookish Man appeared to take as agreement, and told the youngest brother to put a blanket in the room over the kitchen. It was the room with the leak. The Bookish Man thanked him and did not ask about the leak, and in the morning he came down with a wet shoulder and entered, on a fresh form, that the accommodation provided had been in satisfactory condition.

The second day he did not go to the houses. He went to the field.

He stood at the fence with his folder open and asked Robert the same questions he had asked everyone. Robert gave the same answers he had given Nella and Ma and the brothers, the ones that were true. The man wrote. Then he turned to a page Robert had not seen, a page with a single long question printed at the top, and read it aloud in the same courteous voice.

"Has the subject at any time experienced displacement not attributable to known conveyance?"

Robert did not understand the question. He said so. The Bookish Man rephrased it.

"Have you ever been somewhere," he said, "without being taken there by anyone you could see?"

Robert thought of the charcoal grove, and of black branches against blue sky, and of the hunger which had required attention sooner.

He said he did not know.

The man drew a small circle and closed the folder.

"Where were you born?" he asked Robert.

Robert thought of his name inside the tunic.

"I don't know."

"The Guild, then?"

"Before that."

The man reached towards his shoulder. A crow struck the fence post beside them with a sound like a stone dropped on a box. The man withdrew his hand.

That night Robert woke with cloth over his face. An arm pressed his chest; another pulled the mouth of a sack beneath his back. He tried to call out and drew the cloth into his mouth instead.

The roof erupted. Wings struck the walls, the man, Robert. The arm left his chest. Someone swore, and then Trebuchet was in the stall with a lamp.

The birds vanished through the same hole they had used to enter. The Bookish Man had crouched against the wall, holding his spectacles.

"This is a misunderstanding," he said.

Trebuchet looked at the sack, then at Robert.

"Not much of one."

"You cannot obstruct a retrieval," the Bookish Man told Trebuchet.

"I'm obstructing a theft."

"The description depends on the prior title."

Trebuchet held out his hand. The man tried to explain that producing the authority did not permit Trebuchet to retain it. Trebuchet

continued holding out his hand. After a while the man put the document into it.

Robert could read the heading from where he stood. SPECIAL RECOVERY: LIVING SURVEY MATERIAL. His name did not appear. Beneath the heading a blank rectangle had been filled with a rough drawing of a child and three marks which might have been attempts. The third had been circled.

"Who's paid you?" Trebuchet asked.

"My appointment is not relevant."

"Then it won't trouble you to name him."

"The School acts under an Assemblage commission."

"The Assemblage owes my brother money."

The Bookish Man adjusted the broken arm of his spectacles. He asked to be permitted to report the obstruction before anything further was done. Trebuchet asked whether the report would include the purchase price of the boy and the revenue lost while he was unavailable for work.

"He isn't your boy."

"Then why have I been feeding him?"

The question frightened Robert more than the sack. A reasonable answer seemed likely to make his remaining in Farthest harder to justify.

"The material was displaced," the man said. "Possession acquired after displacement creates no entitlement."

"There's a word for someone explaining why he doesn't have to pay."

"Authorized."

Trebuchet folded the paper. He took great care to bring its corners together, as though the manner of handling it established that he was a person capable of dealing properly with documents. Then he put it in the fire.

The man watched the seal lift from the surface before he spoke again. Without the paper, his voice had lost a quality Robert had taken for certainty.

"There are copies."

Trebuchet called for the brothers. When the brothers started the mill, Robert closed his eyes. Trebuchet struck him and told him to keep them open.

In the morning there was a new red block on the loading platform. The papers had become pale flakes in the ash. Robert took the sack back to the stable because he had been told to, and hid it under the straw where he would not have to see it.

The next visitor came while Trebuchet was away. Robert heard a disturbance near the trees and then a long foreleg closed around his throat.

The wolf's fur was coming away in patches. One hind foot dragged. Its other paw held a knife with an edge that reflected the sky.

"The mushroom woman," it said.

No one moved.

The knife pressed against Robert's tunic. Nella pointed towards the far lane. The wolf made Robert walk ahead of it.

At Muckleby's door it called itself the King and demanded the return of what had been stolen. It spoke of Newton, a weakling who had learned to take the contents of another creature's head, a traitor who had made the strong bow to him. Robert could feel the wolf shaking as it spoke.

"She gave him the means," it said into Robert's ear. "For her own skin."

Muckleby did not open the door.

The wolf threw Robert aside and struck the wall with its knife. A milky liquid seeped from the cut. It swung again. Then the knife fell, and the wolf stood staring at its paw.

Its legs folded beneath it.

Robert got up. He took one step towards the door before Nella caught his sleeve.

"Away from the wall."

They bound the wolf with hauling rope. It could still move its eyes. Robert saw it watching as the men tied the knots, but could not tell whether it was asking for something or merely taking note.

Trebuchet returned before dark. He was pleased to find the captive and displeased that no one had charged admission.

Robert went to Muckleby's door that night. He did not knock. He sat on the step, where the wolf's knife had cut the wall, and watched the milky sap harden in the cut until it looked like a scar. After a while the door opened a hand's width.

"You're letting the cold in," Muckleby said.

"It said you gave him the means."

She did not answer. The gap stayed open.

"Newton," Robert said. "The one who takes things out of heads. It said you gave him the powder."

The door opened further. She stood in it with a lamp behind her, and in the lamplight her face looked older than he had ever seen it, older than Ma's feathers.

"Come in," she said. "If we're going to have this conversation, I'm not having it on a step."

He went in. She sat him at the table where he had first read his name and did not give him anything to eat, which he understood to mean that she did not intend the conversation to be comfortable for either of them.

"When the wolves came for us," she said, "after the School, there were four of us. Weerdsley and I and two others. The wolves had been made to find people who knew things. They were very good at it." She turned the lamp down a little. "One of the others was caught. He was a good man. He knew a great deal about grafting. They opened his head at a dinner and gave the pieces to the pack leader, and the pack leader learned nothing, because a brain without the right preparation is only meat. I knew what the right preparation was. I had grown it. It was the thing I was proudest of in the whole of my work."

Robert said nothing. Muckleby looked at the lamp.

"Newton wasn't the leader then. He was a young wolf who stood at the edge and watched. He came to me afterwards, alone. He said the leader would find me in a month. He said he could make the leader stop looking, if he had a way to be cleverer than the leader. And I gave it to him." She spread her hands on the table. They were stained at the fingertips, as they always were. "I gave him the fungus and the method. In exchange, he killed the old leader and called off the hunt. Weerdsley and I lived. We've lived twenty years on it."

"Does he still do it?" Robert asked.

"Yes."

"And the other wolves?"

"Yes."

"And that one." He nodded towards the door, beyond which the old wolf lay bound in the yard, still moving its eyes.

"That one was the leader I paid Newton to remove," Muckleby said. "He didn't kill him after all. He took his mind a piece at a time. It was cheaper." She closed her eyes. "I told myself I hadn't known he would do it that way. It's true. I didn't ask."

The lamp hissed. Robert thought of the Guild, of the stranger on the platform saying he had arrived that morning, and of Ma's instruction: *when they ask you what you saw, you saw the show. When you tell me, tell me what you saw.*

"Why are you telling me?"

"Because you asked me properly." Muckleby opened her eyes. "And because you're going to leave here one day, and somebody will offer you a way of staying alive that costs other people, and you'll need to know what it looks like from the inside. It looks like being sensible. It looks exactly like that."

She got up and gave him a piece of breadstool after all, and a cup of water filtered through charcoal, and they sat together without speaking until the lamp needed filling. When he left she stood in the doorway and watched him down the lane. He did not look back, but he knew

she was there, because the light did not move until he reached the stable.

In his stall Robert took out the two fibres. He rubbed the red one against his sleeve and watched it lift towards the forest. He knew where one person could be found. The fibre gave a direction, not a passage through the living wall of the forest. He had tried to follow it once beyond the fence and returned with his legs cut and the sound of the brothers searching behind him. He could open the stable. He had not yet found a way through what lay outside.

* * *

The youngest child left in rain. He had packed the night before and forgotten his other boots. Adelaide found them by the stove after the cart had gone. She stood holding them while Elias tied up the string he had used on the luggage and put it in a drawer for another occasion.

"He'll write for them," he said.

"He'll need them before that."

They sent the boots the following morning. The house contained ten children in its marks and none in its rooms. Scratches remained on the table. The lowest peg in the hall had been fitted for a child now taller than the man who had fixed it. Adelaide went from one task to the next without anyone interrupting, and found herself stopping in the middle because the interruption had become part of knowing what to do.

Elias brought his repairs into the kitchen. His hands were slower now. He dropped a screw and they both bent to find it, then remained bent for longer than either had intended.

"Under your chair," she said.

"I can see it."

"I know. I'm telling myself."

He laughed, and she sat down because she had begun to laugh too and could no longer keep her balance.

That evening she dreamed of a boy opening a lock with something too fine to draw. In the morning she tried a pencil, then a pen. The line looked like a crack in the page. Elias held the notebook towards the window and suggested leaving white space on either side so it would show.

"What is it?"

"Something he has."

"Good," he said.

She looked again. She had been thinking of the locked door. He had noticed the means of opening it.

This leaf can be dated by the address of the boot parcel on its reverse, Shiraz notes. *The dates in the dream sequence itself remain inconsistent.*

10

Even the Devil Burns

The rumour began with a cough and spread more quickly than the illness it described. By midday shutters had closed. By evening the tavern was empty except for Trebuchet and a half-finished glass at the table where Darcy usually sat.

Darcy had gone. He had left no payment and none of the biography he had promised to write. Trebuchet threw the glass against a wall, then sent three brothers to look for him. They returned with news of a black figure near the road.

"Scout," Trebuchet said.

He sent all six out. Near sunset Robert heard a single short cry from the trees. No one came back.

Trebuchet locked the stable himself. His hands were steady, but he checked the fastening twice.

Before dawn the wasps arrived.

Their sound passed over the roof in a rising whine. A door opened across the yard and slammed shut. Then someone began hammering on another door, calling to be let in. The sound stopped before the door opened.

Through a slit Robert saw black-cloaked men standing at the edge of the clearing. They moved in pairs. When a man ran from one of the houses, they did not pursue him. A small movement beneath a cloak sent something across the yard; he fell before he reached the fence.

"Remain in your dwellings," a voice called. "The district is under sanitary correction."

The wasps worked for the voice. Robert could see them now against the grey of the sky, each as long as his hand, their bodies banded black and yellow, like the trim on the Guard's cloaks, as though the colours had been agreed in advance. They did not swarm. They flew in lines, turning at the ends of the yard with the precision of men on a parade ground, and when one broke from its line it was to hover at a door or a window, examining it, before returning to its place. They were counting. Robert had watched enough counting to know it.

A man came out of the cooper's house with his hands raised. He had understood the instruction to remain in his dwelling and had decided, reasonably, that he would be safer if the Guard could see he was unarmed. Three wasps left the line. He lowered his hands to protect his face, which was also reasonable, and was taken for resistance. He fell in the doorway he had just left. The wasps returned to the line and resumed their turns.

The voice repeated the instruction. It had not changed its tone.

At the far side of the yard, where the kitchen sheds backed onto the ditch, Robert saw Nella. She had come out of the shed with a sack over her head and shoulders, bent low as though carrying turnip tops, and she was not carrying turnip tops. Behind her, under the same kind of sack, came Marta, and behind Marta three smaller shapes, and behind those two more, each bent, each moving with the slow and burdened walk of someone doing ordinary work that nobody would think to count. They went along the side of the shed where the eaves hung lowest. At the corner Nella stopped, turned her head, and waited while a line of wasps passed overhead. Then she led them down into the ditch where the old culvert ran beneath the road.

Robert had crawled into that culvert once, years before, and found it blocked with silt a body's length in. He did not know whether it had been cleared since. He thought of the gate, and the stone pressed into the gap, and Nella saying *decide here*. She had decided. The last of the

small shapes went under the road, and the sack that covered it snagged on a root and came away, and for a moment he saw the face of a girl from the Third Farthest wagons, and then she was gone into the dark and the sack lay empty on the ditch bank.

A wasp turned at the end of its line and hung above the sack. It examined the sack for a long time. Then it went on counting doors.

The house nearest the road began to burn.

Robert unwound the fibres from the piece of cloth in which he kept them. He tried the grey one in the lock. His hand shook so badly that he missed the opening. He steadied his wrist against the wood and tried again.

The fibre entered. He felt it moving without his assistance, like a fine root finding a crack. The fastening lifted.

Outside, smoke concealed part of the yard. A crow landed on the stable wall and struck the boards with its beak. Robert followed it towards the rear fence.

Muckleby's house stood beyond the lane. Men were pouring black liquid around its base. At first the liquid burned without touching the walls, which swelled and wept moisture. The men fetched more.

The house fought them. Robert had known it was alive, as a person knows a neighbour's dog is alive without having thought about its opinions, but he had not known it could want anything. Now the pale skin of the stem darkened and swelled, and beads of moisture rose over its whole surface like sweat on a labourer's back, and ran down, and hissed where they met the burning liquid. The flames climbed a hand's breadth and fell back. The men poured again. The house sweated again. For a while the contest had the rhythm of work, two parties each doing the one thing they knew and neither prepared to stop first.

A Guardsman in a longer cloak came to examine the difficulty. He had a book. He touched the wet wall with a gloved finger, looked at the glove, and wrote something down. Then he gave an instruction Robert could not hear, and two men went back to the cart and returned carrying between them a small cask painted red.

The new liquid did not burn at once. It crept. It went into the wet places and spread there, a thin dark sheen over the moisture, and the house seemed to feel it and swelled further, pushing out more water, and the water only spread the sheen. When the Guardsman struck a light, the whole lower part of the stem caught together, not in flames but in a single flat sheet of brightness that clung to the wall like a second skin.

The toadstool drew in. Robert heard it: a long, dry sound, like breath through teeth. The swelling went out of the walls. The moisture stopped. Where it had been, the surface shrank and split, and through the splits he could see the pale ribs of the interior, the shelves growing from them, the jars on the shelves beginning to crack in the heat.

The Guardsman wrote something else in his book. It was, Robert thought afterwards, very probably a note that the new preparation had proved effective against resistant structures, and a recommendation regarding quantity.

Robert stopped. He could hear her inside.

The crow flew against his face. He covered his eyes with one hand. At his feet, a white mushroom pushed through the earth, its cap opening so quickly that bits of soil slid from it while he watched.

He plucked it and put it inside his tunic. The crows were calling from the forest now. He ran to them.

At the edge of the trees he looked back.

Trebuchet had come out armed with a heavy blade and a short launching weapon. He drove the first Guardsman into the tavern wall. Another fell in the doorway. Then black cloaks converged from the yard and swallowed him.

When Robert next saw him, he was bound to his own great chair. The Guardsmen carried him inside and poured their liquid across the floor. They withdrew and watched.

The tavern windows brightened. Something heavy struck the door from within. It broke outwards, and Trebuchet came through it with the burning chair fastened to his back.

The chair had always concealed how far Trebuchet's bulk extended behind him. Now, with its cushions burning and the binding drawn through its frame, it seemed to have become part of his body: a second back, larger and less willing to turn. He could not put his arms where he wanted them. He could move his legs. The Guardsmen had mistaken the first fact for the more important one.

He came down the steps sideways. The chair caught against the doorpost. For a moment he was held there while flame travelled up the good cloth along its back. He struck the post with his shoulder, once and again. Robert heard the sound of the wood before he saw it split.

Outside, the air took the fire. The burning cloth lifted behind Trebuchet's head. One of the Guardsmen stepped back. Another levelled a weapon which discharged into the chair with a wet, heavy sound. Trebuchet kept coming. The chair had been made to withstand years of him dropping into it after meals; the shot tore out padding without bringing down the frame.

"Come here," Trebuchet said.

He had used the words before. Robert had sometimes imagined them spoken from a distance at which he would not have to obey. Now he heard them and moved back among the trees, though Trebuchet was looking at the Guardsmen.

The man with the axe chose the exposed side. He raised it to cut the bindings. Perhaps he intended to release the burning man. Perhaps he intended to cut through whatever the bindings held. Trebuchet turned before the blade descended. The broken arm of the chair entered beneath the man's cloak and caught. His feet left the ground.

Trebuchet shook himself. The Guardsman remained fastened to the wood, making the burden lean to one side. They stood together for an instant, neither able to achieve the separation he wanted. The axe fell. Trebuchet tried to kick it towards his hand.

The other men moved in behind him. One caught his ankle with a hooked pole. Another braced the chair. The burning cloth reached the binding across his shoulder and gave way, but by then the pole had

pulled his leg from under him and the chair turned as he fell, pinning him against the steps with the dead man between the frame and the ground.

Robert could see his mouth. Trebuchet was still giving orders. The men worked without answering. Smoke hid them, thinned, and hid them again. The tavern sign dropped from one chain and swung above the door, its painted sack pointed into the yard.

The crow nearest him moved deeper into the forest. He followed, keeping one hand over the mushroom and the other closed around the fibres. Behind them a Guardsman called out. There was a splash against the dry brush and a sudden increase in light.

The trees began to burn.

Robert did not return to see what happened next. He put the fibres securely into the inner fold of his tunic and pushed after the crow through branches that dragged at his sleeves.

* * *

Adelaide woke with the smell of smoke in the room and went through the whole house before she believed that nothing was burning. She checked the stove, the lamps, the grate in the parlour. She checked the rooms where the children had slept, although the children were grown and gone, and found them empty in the ordinary way. She stood in the kitchen in her nightgown with a candle, and Elias came down behind her in his stockings and stood beside her without asking anything.

"A village," she said at last. "Where he was. They burned it."

"Is he—"

"He got out. There was a bird." She put the candle down because her hand was not steady. "There was a man tied to a chair. The chair was on fire. He was still fighting."

Elias looked at her. He had learned over the years that he would not always understand what she saw, and he had stopped needing to. He took the kettle from the hob and filled it and set it on the stove, and

opened the damper, and the ordinary sound of the fire drawing seemed to her the loudest thing she had ever heard.

"Sit down," he said.

She sat. She did not want tea. She drank it anyway, because he had made it, and when she had finished she took the notebook from the dresser and drew the chair. She drew it very carefully, the high back, the broad seat, the arms carved in the shape of something she could not identify. She drew the flames last, and lightly, so that the chair could still be seen through them.

She did not draw the man. She had seen his face and would not keep it.

The drawing of the burning chair is among the most finished in the collection, Shiraz notes. *The chair itself is rendered with a joiner's care: the joints are shown, and the grain. I showed the page to a furniture dealer, who told me that no chair of that pattern was ever made in this country, and asked where I had got it. I said that I had it from a woman who had never seen one. He did not believe me, and offered me a good price.*

* * *

The crow waited whenever Robert fell behind. It would settle on a branch, open its beak without making a sound, then fly further when he reached it. The paths it found were not paths a boy could easily follow. He crawled beneath roots, turned sideways between trunks, and once passed through a curtain of vines that closed behind his heel.

The fire made its own way. It was slower than they were, but did not have to stop to pull thorns from its hands.

He went on through the rest of that night and the next day in a single movement that he could never afterwards divide into parts, and when he tried to remember it later he remembered only the order of things and not the time between them, the roots and then the mud and then the dry stream bed with its stones rolling under his feet and the

crow above him and the light behind, and the smell of the smoke which was the smell of the turnip tops burning and the sheds burning and the mill burning and the book burning with all its names and weights, and the heat coming through the trees in waves that he felt on the back of his neck before he heard the fire that sent them, and the animals that passed him going the same way, a fox with a burnt tail and a line of beetles moving over the ground like spilled ink and a deer which stopped and looked at him with its sides heaving and then went on, all of them travelling away and none of them troubling to explain where, and the vines closing behind him and opening again ahead as though the forest were deciding at every step whether to let him through, and deciding, and deciding again. He did not sleep. He drank from a pool with ash on its surface and did not filter it and was sorry later. He pulled a thorn from his palm with his teeth. He fell and got up and fell and did not get up for a while and then got up. The crow waited. The fire came on. He thought that if he stopped thinking he would stop, and so he thought about small things in turn, the knots on Nella's wrist, the stitch below his knee, the drop of water on the broken reflection of Ma in the bowl, one after another, the way a person crossing a river puts a foot on each stone without looking at the far bank.

Somewhere in that long passage he understood that the forest was not trying to stop him. It was a thing grown to keep people in, but it did not know who was inside and who was out, and when the fire came it opened for everything that ran from the fire, as a door opens for whoever is pushing hardest. He was pushing. So was everything else. The forest let them all through together and closed behind them onto the heat, and it did not seem to Robert that it had chosen a side, only that it had been made to hold and could not hold this.

Near dawn Robert lay down in a hollow. He meant only to rest his head against the ground. The whine woke him before he had properly decided to sleep.

The wasp came between two branches. It hung for a moment, moving its abdomen from side to side. Robert could see a drop suspended from the point beneath it.

The crow struck it from above.

They fell together. Wings and feathers beat against the leaves. Robert took a branch and brought it down upon the insect, once, then again. The crow pulled clear and stood with one wing dragging. The wasp's abdomen still contracted, but its head lay separately in the leaves.

Robert knelt beside the bird. Its beak opened. He put his hand beneath its breast, feeling the rapid movement there, then the space after the movement ceased.

He dug with the broken branch until he had made a shallow hollow. He put the crow inside and covered it with leaves and loose soil. The smoke had become thicker while he worked. He could no longer see the branch on which it had waited for him.

He found the road late that day. It was scarcely wider than the distance between his outstretched hands, cut with precision through the growth. He slept beside it beneath damp moss and woke to the creak of wheels.

A narrow cart passed. Its driver wore dark spectacles. Robert's mouth filled with the taste of the sack, and he pressed himself into the bank.

The driver had a pointed beard the other man had not possessed. He was muttering at the animal pulling the cart, although the creature had no head and no apparent means of hearing him. Its shoulders ended in a rounded, hairless surface. A cord ran from the harness into a small socket there.

Robert let the cart disappear before following. He could not go back towards the fire, and the driver, for all his resemblance to the dead man, at least knew a way forward.

The road climbed. At a fork a sign read VENERY ABBEY — FALLINGOFF CLIFFS. Robert took the branch that rose. The other vanished into smoke.

He found the ass first, broken on a shelf below the path. Further up lay the driver. One spectacle lens had survived; through it the closed eye appeared unusually large.

Robert made himself look at the man properly. This man was not the Bookish Man. The Bookish Man had been clean-shaven and narrow, and this one was broad, with the pointed beard, and hands that had done work. But the spectacles were the same, and the coat was cut the same, and in the inner pocket, when Robert made himself reach into it, there was a folded paper with the same heading.

Special recovery: living survey material.

It was a copy. The child in the drawing had the same round face. The three marks were there, and the circle round the third. Beneath them someone had added a new line, in a hurry: *Last reported Farthest district. Proceed with caution; local obstruction.* And beneath that, in a different hand again: *Correction: Farthest district scheduled for sanitary correction. Proceed to Abbey and await.*

Robert read it twice. He understood *scheduled*. He understood that the fire behind him had been written down before it was lit, and that somebody had crossed out Farthest on this piece of paper as calmly as Shining Boots crossed out a load that had not been received. He thought of Nella in the culvert, and the cooper, and the man with his hands raised.

He did not put the paper back. He did not keep it either. He tore it into pieces as small as he could make them and dropped them over the edge of the path into the smoke, where they turned over and over, pale against the dark, like moths.

Then he climbed down to the shelf to look at the ass.

The fall had broken it, but the fall was not what had stopped it. Robert could see that before he was close enough to be certain. The cord that ran into the socket on its shoulders had pulled free when the cart tipped, and the end lay on the stone, still wet, with a thin clear fluid beading at its tip. Where the cord had entered, the socket was open, a

neat round hole with a metal rim, and inside it Robert could see something pale that moved very slightly and then did not move.

The animal had not been fed through its mouth because it had no mouth. It had been fed through the cord, from a reservoir in the cart, and it had walked because the cord told it to, and when the cord came out it had simply stopped, as the mill belt stopped when the treaders were changed. There was no expression on it because there was nothing on it that could have held an expression. It lay on its side on the shelf with its legs together, as tidy as a sack.

Robert found he was more upset about the ass than about the driver.

He said he was sorry. It sounded foolish. He said it again anyway, and then climbed back up to the cart.

The cart stood across the next bend, its shafts pointing towards the drop. A heavy brake tooth had caught in a groove. Between its wheel and the cliff there was no space for Robert to pass. The outer edge had crumbled beneath the animal's fall.

He could turn back. Below him, sparks rose through the smoke.

Robert braced his shoulder against the cart and lifted the brake lever. It moved an inch. The load shifted towards him. He let the lever fall and crouched until his legs stopped trembling.

On the second attempt he pushed from below the axle. The wheel passed the groove. He advanced it a hand's breadth, dropped the brake, rested, and began again.

Night came while he was still moving it. Sometimes he thought he could hear water. Sometimes he heard the driver speaking beneath the sound of the wheels, but when he stopped there was only wind.

At a widening in the path he locked the brake and crawled around the cart. The stone building ahead of him was too far away to reach by standing. He went towards it on his hands and knees, then lay down with his cheek against the threshold.

11

Welcome to Venery Abbey

The Matron opened the door inwards. Robert, who had been leaning against it in his sleep, fell across her feet.

"Delivery?" she asked.

He tried to explain the driver. What emerged was a description of the cart.

She looked past him, took in the sacks visible at the bend, and softened.

"You poor thing."

Inside, the floor was level. He noticed this before anything else. He could put a foot down without first deciding whether the ground would hold it.

The Matron brought broth, bread, and a basin of warm water. He ate too quickly and had to stop because his stomach hurt. She took his tunic to mend it and left him with a towel around his shoulders.

"Someone's made a job of you," she said.

He watched the door through which she had gone. The fibres were still in his hand. He wound them around the second toe of his left foot, grey over red, and pulled the knot tight enough to stay without cutting the skin.

When the tunic came back, she had patched the shoulder and cut away a hanging strip of cloth. She handed him the strip too. It contained the embroidered name.

"Nearly threw that out."

He held it against his chest until she looked away.

She led him to a stone room with a cot. At the door he asked whether she knew a wigsmith.

"The Abbot knows everybody," she said. "Ask him tomorrow."

The key turned after she left.

Robert sat on the bed. He took the white mushroom from inside his tunic. Its cap had folded during the climb, but a faint pattern shone along the stem. He turned it towards the dim window.

Eat me.

He remembered Muckleby making him identify the breadstool. This was not a breadstool. It bore an instruction, but so had many things in the Guild, and some of those instructions had been intended to benefit people other than the person reading them.

He held it for a long time. Then he broke off the smallest piece and put it on his tongue.

"Robert," Muckleby said.

He looked behind him. The room remained empty.

"If this has reached you, I have run out of arrangements. I am sorry. I should have made different ones."

"Where are you?" he asked.

Her voice continued at the same pace.

"Find Weerdsley. He is the one person I know who will not make a calculation of you first. Tell him I loved him. I was going to tell him myself. There always seemed to be another matter requiring attention."

Robert pressed his hand to his mouth.

"Don't go towards anyone who promises a shortcut simply because it is shorter. I cannot tell you which road will be safe. I can tell you what I prepared. A tower, grown beneath the ground, where water and the trace you carry can wake it. It will stand on the lower bank beyond the falls. If it rises for you, go in."

The voice became faint and returned.

"It works with what is already in you. Don't confuse that with a report of the world. What frightens you may have happened. It may not

happen again. Remember where you entered. Remember what you want to ask."

"I want to go home," he said.

"There is a connection at the top. I have not been able to test it. I wish I could tell you otherwise."

He waited. The next words repeated the beginning exactly.

"Robert. If this has reached you—"

He understood then that she could not hear him.

When the voice faded, he tried the door. The fastening did not move. He could use the fibre, but beyond the door were corridors he did not know, and outside them the cliffs and fire. He would ask for a route in the morning. If they would not give him one, he would find it himself.

He put the strip of embroidery beneath his cheek and lay down. Beyond the door, footsteps receded along the corridor.

He could not sleep at first. The window was a narrow slot high in the wall, too high to look through without standing on the cot, and when he stood on the cot he could see the yard below and the dark shape of the cliff beyond it and, low down at the foot of the Abbey wall, a row of small lit windows he had not noticed when he arrived.

They were below the level of the kitchen. Shapes moved behind them. Once a door opened in the lowest part of the wall and a figure came out carrying a bucket, emptied it into a channel, and went back in. The door closed. The light behind the windows went on moving.

Robert watched for a long time. He thought of the Guild, where the maintenance wagon always travelled last so that its dust would not settle on the performers. He thought of the kitchens in Farthest, and Marta's knife on its short cord. He did not yet know that the Abbey had a lower kitchen, or that the people in it did not come up while there were guests. He knew only that there were lit windows below the place where he had eaten, and that nobody had mentioned them.

He got down off the cot and lay down again.

* * *

When sleep came, it came deeply. He had eaten until his belly hurt, and the bed had been made for him before he arrived in the room. These were persuasive arrangements.

During the night he dreamed of the woman again. She stood in a light that concealed whatever was behind her. He could not remember what she said, if she said anything, but when he woke he knew she had been trying to reach him.

Then his bladder required him to consider the room.

It was cold. There was a cot, a borrowed blanket, a door, and no vessel suitable for the purpose. His old embroidered cloth lay folded beside his clothes. He tried the door. It was locked. The fibres were still wound round his toe. He thought of the unknown corridors, of the cliff, and of explaining to the Abbot why a guest had been found wandering at night, and left them where they were.

He knocked, first politely and then with enough force to hurt his knuckles. Nothing moved in the corridor. He shifted from one foot to the other and tried not to think about the water he had heard falling outside the Abbey.

At last he went in the far corner.

The floor sloped towards the door. Robert watched the stream advance across the stones and considered what the Matron would think of the guest she had washed and fed. He took the blanket from the cot and knelt with it on the floor.

When he had finished, the stones were wet and the blanket was unusable. He folded it as well as he could, put it beneath the bed, and sat shivering in his clothes.

He had counted most of the visible stones when footsteps sounded outside. A key turned. The door opened and an old man with disordered white hair came into the room.

"My boy. Welcome to Venery Abbey, home of the Scientifican Order."

Robert stood.

"It has been a long time since we received a traveller. A visitor. A guest." The old man looked about the chamber as though Robert had brought these additional people with him. "Praise Discovery."

He paused. Robert did not know the reply.

"I am Abbot Grundly. Head of the Order. You must allow me to show you everything."

Robert followed him out before the Abbot could inspect the bedding.

The corridor contained many doors. Grundly stopped before each one to explain the importance of the person who no longer occupied the room behind it.

"Brother Doctor Phillip Oggel. Optometricist extraordinaire. Advising the Merchant-King of the Warehouse Mountains." He moved on. "Brother Professor Clovin Toomus. Mortology. Dean of Death Studies at the Institute of Various Things, in Megalopolis. Navel City, as those of us who know it sometimes say."

Robert had not known it by either name.

"Brother Master Bacchistes Dowt. Apothecary and chemicalist. At present with the Supreme Commander of the Plague Guard."

Robert stopped walking.

"A difficult appointment," Grundly continued. "Such demands. Such little appreciation of the work that makes their demands possible."

He had reached another door and was obliged to wait for Robert to catch up.

"Sister Doctor Anahypatia Longnight. Pain Theory. The Thinker Tinkering Techniques are hers. The Ministry of Control and Consequences has found them invaluable."

The door had been carefully polished around its handle. Below it, Robert noticed a pale groove where something heavy had repeatedly crossed the threshold.

"And the Sister Doctors Cotton and Candylace Peachplum. Master egotichians. They manage the Culturally Epochal Palace of Amusement and sit at the court of the Chief Executive Merchant-King of Chief Executive Merchant-Kings, His Excellency Stephen-Kevin McDoug."

Grundly drew breath with the satisfaction of a man who had reached the end of an exacting task without assistance.

"All Biologians," he said. "All began here."

Robert wondered how many had wanted to leave.

The next part of the tour concerned the Abbey's waste system, which Grundly had designed himself. Its principles occupied most of the morning and were referred to several times as an elegant solution.

No branch of it appeared to reach the guest chamber.

The settling tank occupied a chamber large enough to have housed several families, which, Grundly said, would have interrupted its useful function. A crust moved slowly across the surface. Beneath it, pale creatures opened and closed like hands whose owners had forgotten what they meant to grasp.

"First separation," the Abbot said.

He turned a wheel. A channel opened. The crust advanced towards a comb of teeth, where solid matter caught and fluid passed beneath. A boy could have cleaned the teeth with a rake, but no boy was employed. Beetles the length of Robert's thumb travelled along the frame, eating what lodged there and dropping their own smaller waste through holes provided for it.

"A saving at every stage."

"Do they get anything else?"

"They receive a balanced diet."

Robert watched one beetle struggle to detach a strip of cloth. It pulled until the thread unwound, then carried the end into a recess where others were waiting. The strip passed after it, inch by inch.

There was a plan of the system on the wall. Every occupied cell joined a line; every line ended at a tank; from the tanks other lines re-

turned as hot water, fuel, or something labelled *recoverable residue*. Robert found the guest room by counting corners. Its little square had no line leaving it.

"That one's where I slept."

"An old branch. We have very few guests."

"There isn't a pot."

"The branch predates the present improvements."

"I couldn't get out."

Grundly made a mark beside the square. "A matter for the Matron."

For the first time that morning Robert hoped the tour would continue somewhere else. The Abbot had heard him, made a mark, and placed the problem with the person whose opinion he most feared. It seemed possible that the whole great chamber, with its tanks and living teeth, had brought him back to the wet blanket beneath his bed.

In the yard a headless draught animal walked around a post. The cord in its neck entered a rotating socket above the grindstone it drove. A man in an apron adjusted the pace by moving a weight along a lever. The animal's hide twitched under a fly. Robert remembered the broken ass below the cliff and stepped closer to see whether anything remained where the head should have been.

"No wasted feeding," Grundly said. "The supply enters directly. The great expense of an animal is persuading it to spend its life doing what you require."

Beyond the yard, the cliff had been cut into terraces. On the upper terraces grew plants Robert had never seen. They were tall and thick-stemmed, with leaves like grey felt, and at their tops hung swollen pods that shone as though oiled. A boy moved among them with a basket, cutting the pods and dropping them in. His hands were wrapped in cloth to the elbow.

"Fuel," Grundly said. "The pods are rendered for oil. The stalks are dried and burned. The ash goes back into the soil, and the soil grows more fuel. A closed cycle." He sounded pleased, as he had over the waste system. "Nothing leaves."

"He's leaving," Robert said. The boy had finished his row and was carrying the basket down the steps towards a shed, from which a thin blue smoke rose.

"He returns," said Grundly. "They always return. There is nowhere else on the cliff."

The boy passed near them. His face was red and swollen along one side, where the cloth had slipped, and he did not look at the Abbot. He looked at Robert, briefly, with the same flat attention Nella had given the tally boy's slate. Then he went on down to the shed.

"Does the oil hurt him?" Robert asked.

"The oil is a very valuable product." Grundly had already turned towards the sluices. "We lose a certain amount of it to skin contact. The wrappings reduce the loss."

Robert's stomach interrupted a description of the lower sluices. Grundly stopped, listened, and began the sentence again. Before he could complete it, the Matron arrived to take Robert to the kitchen.

There was food on the table. Robert ate while his hosts opened the sacks from the cart he had pushed up the cliff path. Some held letters. Others contained packages that the Matron carried away without opening.

He finished his meal more slowly than he had begun it. The Abbot and Matron had left the room. He waited for someone to tell him what happened next.

Nobody did. After a while he got up and carried his bowl to the basin, because in every place he had lived that was the thing a person did after eating, and he washed it and set it upside down to dry. The kitchen was empty. The sacks from the cart lay open on the long table where the Matron had sorted them.

Most of the letters had already been taken. A few remained, fallen between the sacks, and Robert picked one up to put it with the others. He had not meant to read it. He was still not used to the way reading came at him without being asked.

It was addressed, in a clerk's even hand, to *The Abbot, Venery Abbey, Scientifican Order, by the Fallingoff Road*. The return address, printed in the corner, read *Assemblage Office of Peripheral Supply, Megalopolis*. The seal had been broken. Inside was a single sheet.

The Office acknowledges receipt of the Abbey's quarterly report and notes with concern the continued failure of the Survey to produce a viable relation. The Office is obliged to remind the Abbey that the allocation for the current period was made on the understanding that recovery of survey material would be completed within the period. The Office has been unable to identify the survey material in the Abbey's inventory. It is requested that the material be located, or its loss accounted for, before the allocation for the following period can be considered. The Office further notes that three previous attempts at recovery have been charged to the allocation without result, and requests that any fourth attempt be submitted for approval in advance, with costs.

At the bottom, in a different hand, someone had added: *Stephen-Kevin is asking.*

Robert read it twice. He did not understand *viable relation* or *allocation*, but he understood *three previous attempts*, and *survey material*, and *located*. He put the letter back on the table exactly where it had been. Then he moved it a little, so that it looked as though it had fallen between the sacks, because that was where he had found it.

The Matron came in with a tray and saw him standing by the table.

"Finished?"

"Yes, thank you."

She looked at the washed bowl on the drainboard.

"You needn't have done that," she said. "We have people for that."

"I didn't see anyone."

"They're in the lower kitchen." She set the tray down and began gathering the letters into a pile, not looking at them, the way a person gathers things she has already read. "They don't come up while there are guests."

"Why not?"

The Matron squared the pile against the table edge. For a moment she seemed about to answer honestly. Then she smiled, the warm and competent smile with which she had said *you poor thing* on the doorstep.

"Because guests should feel at home," she said. "The Abbot's coming back for you. He wants to show you his instrument."

When Grundly returned, Robert stood.

"I need to get down to the river."

"Certainly. An admirable river."

"Is there another path?"

"There are always other paths. Whether one should take them is a separate matter."

He beckoned Robert towards a door at the far end of the kitchen.

A row of potted vines stood beneath the passage windows. As Robert passed, their nearest shoots inclined towards him. Grundly stopped to observe the movement.

"Responsive cultivars," he said. "They follow changes in the local field. The guards wear a repellent preparation. It provokes the vines when the concentration is wrong."

He moved a pot aside without touching the leaves. Robert gave the others more room.

"First, the observatory. You cannot leave without seeing it."

"Why?"

Grundly stopped with his hand upon the latch.

"Because you haven't."

The instrument stood in a circular chamber whose ceiling opened into the laboratory above. A tall column of fluid rose through the opening. Beside it, a chair faced a bench covered in marked controls. Grundly lifted a pair of goggles with a thick cord trailing from them.

"The Milloptiscope. Don't touch the distant adjustment."

Robert held the goggles to his eyes. At first he saw the room. Then the Abbot moved a control and the edge of the bench swelled into a

landscape of ridges and hollows. Another adjustment broke it into a movement of tiny, separate things.

"That is what the bench is doing while you imagine it sitting still," Grundly said.

He continued to adjust. Robert saw something darker moving behind the shapes, appearing and disappearing without crossing the space between.

"Negreons," the Abbot said. His voice had changed. "Not quite here. Not in the way you or I are here."

"Who calls them that?" Robert asked.

"I named them. Someone had to."

"Did they tell you?"

"A discovery does not normally introduce itself."

On the bench lay a bound book. Its cover bore the same beginning, continued into a word Robert had to read twice: NEGRECUMULOUS. The Abbot moved it beneath a sheet when he noticed Robert looking. He could do nothing about the notice above his desk, where the same word had been lettered large enough to be read from the door, its N descending from a flourish so generous that it crowded the line beneath.

"A working designation. One must distinguish the aggregate from its manifestations."

"Is it alive?"

"We are determining what that would mean."

"How?"

The Abbot looked pleased, as he had looked in front of the waste system, a man invited at last to explain the thing he most wanted to explain.

"By naming its parts," he said. "One cannot study what one cannot name. The small traces are Negreons. Their aggregate behaviour, where they gather, I call the Negrecumulous. The instrument that will attract a sufficient aggregate to hold an opening I call the Negrecumulator.

The particle that makes a body attractive to them I call Omnitonic. The field that particle produces—"

"Did you name all of it?"

"Every part."

"Before you knew what it was?"

Grundly paused with his finger on the corner of the covered book.

"In order to know what it was," he said, after a moment, patiently, as to a child who had asked why the sky was up. "A name is a hypothesis. When the thing answers to it, the hypothesis is confirmed."

Robert thought of the Guild calling him whatever the bill required for six years, and of the brothers calling one another by their boots, and of the Cashier reading *acquired by finding* in front of everybody. He thought that he had answered to all of those names, because there had been nothing else to answer to, and that none of them had been confirmed by his answering.

He did not say this. He had not yet found the words. But he looked at the covered book with the new word on it, and he felt, for the first time, something like sympathy for whatever it was that the Abbot had named.

The book remained beneath the sheet. Grundly kept one finger on the corner while he adjusted the instrument with his other hand.

Robert moved the goggles towards Grundly. The dark traces thinned around him. When Robert lowered his own hand into view, they gathered so thickly that he could no longer see its outline.

"They're coming round me."

The Abbot took the goggles from him.

For a while he said nothing. Robert watched his mouth. It was the only part of his face not concealed by the instrument.

"Where did you say you were born?"

Robert did not answer.

"The Guild?"

He remembered another man asking the same question.

Grundly lowered the goggles. He was smiling, but no longer with the wandering pleasure of the tour.

"A remarkable coincidence. You must be tired."

"I wanted the path."

"Tomorrow. We should not make plans before we understand the situation."

He returned Robert to the room. In the corridor they passed a door labelled LABORATORY.

"Is that part of the instrument?" Robert asked.

"You will see everything you need to."

The Abbot locked the door. This time Robert listened to the steps until he could no longer hear them. He looked at his hands, which appeared exactly as they had before, and thought of the man's question about the Guild.

He took off his left shoe.

12

Seeming's Black Opposite

The grey fibre opened the lock. Robert rewound it around his toe before stepping into the corridor. He did not know how long the Abbot would stay away, and he was afraid of losing the only thing that had made leaving possible.

The laboratory door was unfastened. A lamp burned beside a basin. Beyond it stood the upper part of the Milloptiscope, with a second viewing chair and a cluster of controls.

In the centre of the laboratory stood a spherical cage made of gold wire. Inside it, a plant leaned beneath a flower too large for its stem. Its leaves were yellowing. Below the flower hung a single swollen pod.

Robert moved closer. The plant gave off a smell he could not place. The fine hairs on his arm rose as he approached the cage.

He looked for a label. There were labels on nearly everything else.

A hollow growth beside the wall bore the label PSEUDOMETAL GINKGO. Dark liquid gathered in its centre and ran down a lip into a mould. The mould already held a rigid shape, black and faintly reflective.

Further along, something resembling a mouth had been joined to a transparent belly. A pair of tongs lay beside it. Robert saw scraps of wire and a fragment of what might once have been a tooth dissolving in the fluid below. The label read MOUTHBELLY — CONTAMINATED MATERIAL ONLY.

He stood in front of it longer than he meant to. The mouth was the size of a cupped pair of hands, lipped and pale, and it moved slowly even when there was nothing in it, working at the air as an old man works at a seed caught in his teeth. The belly beneath it held perhaps two buckets of liquid, faintly green, and through the glass he could watch the wire. It had been fine gold wire, and it was coming apart. Not dissolving, as sugar dissolves, but unmaking itself strand by strand, each strand splitting into finer strands until they were too fine to see and the liquid around them brightened very slightly, as though something had been added to the light.

On the bench beside it lay a sheet of instructions, pinned so that it could not be moved. *Feed with tongs only. Do not feed organic material except by written authorization. Mouthbelly does not distinguish between patterned and unpatterned material and will reduce both.* Below this, in a hand that pressed hard, someone had added: *Includes fingers.*

Robert put his hands behind his back.

The rest of the room became clearer to him slowly, the way a room does when a person stops looking for the door. The laboratory was a long, high chamber with the Milloptiscope's column rising through a round hole in its floor and continuing through a round hole in its ceiling. Around the column the benches were arranged in a ring, so that whoever worked at them faced inwards. The golden cage stood between the column and the door. The pseudometal tree stood against the far wall, beside a tall cabinet with glass doors. Mouthbelly and a padded frame he had not yet examined were at the end nearest the window, as though the room had been arranged so that the two things most likely to be disturbed by visitors were the furthest from where visitors came in.

The cabinet held books. They were bound in the same dark cloth as the book Grundly had covered with a sheet, and each had a label on its spine in the same careful hand. Robert read them along the shelf without opening the doors.

Survey. Receiving Conditions. Vol. I. Survey. Receiving Conditions. Vol. II. Survey. Retrieval Attempts, with Costs. Survey. Soil and Water, Projected. Survey. Population, Projected (incomplete). Correspondence with the Office. And at the end of the shelf, thinner than the rest, a book whose label had been written, scraped away, and written again: *Mapkey. Specifications.*

He opened the cabinet. The glass door stuck and then swung free with a small sound, and he stood very still until he was sure nobody had heard. Then he took down the volume labelled *Population, Projected*, because the word *population* seemed to him to mean people, and people were what he wanted to know about.

It was mostly empty. The first pages contained tables with headings: *Density per square mile*. *Probable resistance*. *Labour suitability*. *Estimated yield per capita, first generation*. The columns under the headings had been left blank, except for a single entry at the top of the first page, which read *Unknown*, and beside it, in a different ink, *Survey material to be interrogated on recovery*.

Robert understood that he was the survey material. He had understood it, in a way, since the letter in the kitchen. But the letter had been about him as a thing that was missing. This was about him as a thing that would be asked questions. He looked at the empty columns and thought of the Bookish Man's folder, and of the small circles, all on one page.

He put the book back exactly where it had been. He did not take down *Mapkey*. He was afraid of what the specifications would say, and he had begun to hear, below the hum of the instrument, a small patient tapping.

It came from behind him. He turned.

On a padded frame lay a small body beneath an enormous folded mass. Two thin arms emerged from under the folds. One hand rested against the edge of the frame, its fingers moving patiently towards him.

Robert looked at the label and then at the hand.

"Cerebro Magnus?"

The hand opened. He touched it.

"It doesn't know which is contaminated."

The words seemed to occur inside Robert's head. He looked towards Mouthbelly, then back at the small hand holding his finger.

A room appeared in his mind. He was still in the laboratory, holding the small hand, but he could also see snow striking a door. A man bent towards a bundle. There was a tearing movement, like cloth dragged sideways, and the man was gone.

Robert pulled away.

"What was that?"

He could hear only the instrument humming. He touched the hand again.

Records, came the answer. Not quite a voice now, but a meaning he received whole. *They make me keep them.*

He saw a parcel open. Moths burst upwards. A small shape lifted and struck something invisible, dropping near a wooden wall. Words accompanied it: SECOND RETRIEVAL. LOCAL DISPLACEMENT ONLY.

The third image contained darkness, a sleeping woman, and the movement of a blanket. Then black branches. The record ended with an empty receiving table.

He touched Cerebro again. This time the small hand guided the order of the images rather than letting them strike him together.

The receiving room had a barred window and an empty circular frame suspended over a table. In the first record, a bright seam opened above it. A child appeared at the edge of the seam and vanished. Elsewhere a man had picked up the child. The recoil travelled through what he held and took him instead, carrying him across a distance the men at the receiving table had neither requested nor measured.

Robert saw snow over black trees. He tried to stop looking. The record continued only while he held the hand.

He let go, then took it again.

They wrote: interference, Cerebro told him.

"My father?"

I don't know his name.

Neither did Robert. He knew what the man had done. He kept hold of the little hand.

The second room contained an arrangement of eyes around the circle. The moths had carried a local opening, too weak to hold across worlds. The child moved and fell back near the building from which he had been taken. On the receiving table nothing arrived. A man struck its edge and hurt his own fingers.

The third attempt used more power. Robert saw the sleeping woman draw her arm inward after the blanket began to lift. The circle over the table filled with a darkness through which black branches were visible. The receiving frame tilted; a restraint sprang loose; the bundle crossed the room without landing and passed through another brief opening at the far wall. Someone shouted that the range had gone beyond the setting.

Then the table stood empty again.

OVERSHOOT. RECOVERY AREA UNCONFIRMED.

Robert looked towards the window. He had lain beneath charcoal trees because someone had missed a table. Leparda had found him because an axle broke. The events had fitted together without anybody in them intending that arrangement, and all the years in which he had tried to discover what he was meant to be doing had begun with men arguing over the distance by which their equipment had failed.

"Did they keep looking?"

Images of dark spectacles. Paper passed from one hand to another. The same outline of a child copied until the face became only a circle.

"Why me?"

The opening held near you. They wanted what would hold.

For a time Robert heard the faint hum of the laboratory and felt the damp, warm pressure of Cerebro's palm. He had expected an answer which would make him more like other people. This one gave him no work he could do except continue holding on.

"That was me."

I think so.

"They took me?"

The hand closed upon his finger. New images came: the chair below, a human outline crossed by dark lines, the golden pod opened over it. Robert let go.

"Can I get back?"

When he touched the hand again, the answer took longer.

They look there.

The marked control on the upper viewing bench appeared in his mind.

"Can I take you?"

He tried to lift the edge of the frame. Its legs were bolted to the floor. Tubes entered the small body from the wall.

Not like that.

Robert looked for a way to detach them. He could open a lock; he did not know what would happen if he pulled out a tube.

"I'll find out."

He did not say he would come back. He had heard enough promises to know that wanting to keep one was not a means of keeping it.

Before he let go, he asked the question he had been asked so often himself.

"Where were you born?"

The hand in his went still. For a moment nothing came, and Robert thought he had asked something that could not be answered, the way the Bookish Man's question about displacement had not been answerable. Then the images began again, slower, and softer at their edges, as though they were older and had been handled more.

A room with many small beds. Each bed with a frame over it, and under each frame a fold of grey. Hands in white sleeves moving from bed to bed, lifting the folds, measuring them, writing on boards hung at the foot of each bed. A window with snow outside it, or ash. A sound

that Robert felt as warmth: many small voices, not in words, touching one another through the frames the way fingers touch through a fence.

Here, Cerebro told him. *Below. Before the laboratory.*

"Were there others?"

The beds again. Some of them empty now, the frames taken down. Then fewer beds. Then a single frame, this one, carried up a stair by four men while the small hand held onto its edge.

Some. They keep the ones who remember.

Robert did not know what to say. He held the hand. He thought of Peep, *surplus infant, placed*, and of the children on the Third Farthest cart, and of the empty column in the book on the shelf.

"Are they still below?"

Three. A pause. *They are small. They don't remember yet. I talk to them through the wall.*

"What do you tell them?"

For the first time something came from Cerebro that was not an image or a meaning but a feeling, and it was so plainly embarrassment that Robert almost laughed.

Stories, Cerebro told him. *Yours, lately. The records. I leave out the tearing.*

Robert looked at the small figure under its enormous fold. He thought of Ollo, slowing the handle of the cabinet so that the painted woman could step down instead of falling. He did not know whether it was worse or better to be somebody's story. He found that he did not mind, if the teller left out the tearing.

"Tell them I got up," he said. "After. Tell them that part."

The hand pressed his finger once and let go.

The chair stood beneath a glass column that extended towards the ceiling. A clear fluid filled the column. Suspended within it were hundreds of curved, pale surfaces, arranged one above another.

Eyes, Robert realized. Or the useful parts of eyes.

He sat down and lifted the viewing piece. A thick cord joined it to the column, and smaller cords disappeared among the instruments on

the bench. He wondered whether the eyes were real, and whether the people who had possessed them could still see anything.

The marked control was where Cerebro had shown him it would be. Robert moved it towards the distant setting and put the viewing piece to his face.

His hands remained on the chair. Everything he could see moved away from them.

He passed the Abbey roof, the smoke over the forest, the moon. There were lights that widened into structures he could not name and narrowed again as his sight continued beyond them. He saw something flare and break apart. He wanted to stop and look, but the instrument carried his attention further.

Before the image settled, the instrument passed through something which Robert mistook for a wall. Its surface filled his sight. He waited for the little flaws by which he could estimate it, a crack, a grain, a place where one piece had been joined to another. None came. Instead the surface opened into distances, and the distances contained moving bodies which cast light upon other bodies too far away for the light to have reached them while anything he knew had been alive.

He tried to think of the mill yard. He could cross it in twelve steps if Prince was not there. The field took longer. The Guild's wagons, seen from a hill, fitted along a line he could cover with a finger. He enlarged the line, put the field beside it, put the whole road beside the field, and still the smallest division in the instrument's view was too large to receive them as anything but an absence.

His eye watered against the lens. The wetness was familiar. He was grateful for something that could be wiped away.

He tried the Abbot's method. He named things. *Light*, he thought, at a brightness that was not a star. *Wall*, at a darkness that stopped his sight. *Door*, at a place where the darkness seemed thinner. Each name held for a moment and then slid off what it had been put on, the way the Glimkill's song had slid off whatever he tried to remember with it.

The only name that did not slide off was his own. He thought *Robert*, without meaning to, the way a person says his own name under his breath in a strange place to be sure of it, and the dark traces nearest the lens turned towards the thought as the vines in the passage had turned towards him. Not because they knew the name. Because something had been said by somebody who was actually there.

Robert searched for a porch, a door, the woman in white. He had come to the instrument with an ordinary question. He kept it ordinary by saying it aloud.

"Can you see where she is?"

The apparatus warmed beneath his fingers. Somewhere behind him the little hand tapped against the edge of its frame. He could not hear a reply without touching it, and for several seconds he could not persuade himself to look away from what seemed about to answer.

At the end there was a dark cloud.

He watched it. Wherever his attention settled, its surface withdrew a little, as if something had touched it from the other side.

Robert looked away and then back.

The cloud gathered itself. At first he could not tell whether it was moving. Then it grew larger, and he could.

He heard a sound in the room.

The Abbot and Matron stood behind him. Both were smiling.

Robert lifted the viewing piece from his face. He had meant to ask a question, but Grundly was already coming towards him with a folded cloth in his hand.

"There you are," the Abbot said.

The cloth smelled sharp and unpleasant. Robert turned his head. The Matron held it still.

For a moment he was angry that they would not let him explain. Then the room lost its edges, and he could no longer remember what he needed to say.

* * *

The page that follows in the notebook is blank except for a date, Shiraz notes, *and beneath the date a single horizontal line drawn with a ruler. Mrs. Small-Toates did not otherwise use a ruler; the household possessed one, a folding carpenter's rule of Elias Toates's, which is mentioned twice in the accounts and was presumably kept in his box. I take the line to mean that she had seen something she could neither draw nor describe and wanted, nevertheless, to mark that it had happened. On the reverse, three weeks later, she drew the table.*

13

Of Mustard Seeds and Men

Robert woke to the Abbot's voice.

His wrists were fastened to the table. So were his ankles. Something held his head in place. He tested one hand and felt the strap tighten without his hand moving.

"Robert. Good. You are a suitable host."

Grundly moved into the narrow space Robert could see.

"The response was unmistakable. You should be honoured."

Robert tried to speak. His tongue would not do what he wanted.

"Conserve your strength. There will be time to discuss the honour afterwards."

Other men stood beyond the Abbot. Robert could hear one of them turning pages.

"We prepared the apparatus," Grundly said. "We cultivated the containment. We arranged the retrieval. There were difficulties, naturally. Work of this significance is seldom appreciated by the people who assess its costs."

He raised the seed pod from the plant in the cage.

"They accused us of trying to fit the Kingdom of Heaven into a mustard seed."

Someone beyond Robert's sight gave a small laugh.

"A figure of speech," the Abbot said. "Heaven was never my department. Containment was."

He held the pod close enough for Robert to see the fine seam running along it.

"Inside this is what I have called the Omnitonic Particle. Years of controlled pollination. Years of botanical work. It is the only specimen we have been able to produce."

The page-turning stopped.

"And, I believe, the only one that can be produced. Its response remains constant through every variation we have tested. This is the basis of Grundly's Omnitonic Certainty Principle."

Robert could not see the faces of the other men. None asked a question.

"The difficulty is not locating it," Grundly continued. "The difficulty is keeping it here. The plant maintains the necessary condition, but the plant is dying. We require a more durable host and an appropriate harness."

He lowered the pod. Another man brought him a tray.

"We had nearly given up hope," he said.

Grundly put the pod into a shallow dish and accepted a second instrument. Robert felt pressure across his chest. He could see a screen being raised between his face and the work.

"Not so high," the Abbot said. "The observers must be able to follow."

The screen was lowered. Robert could see the ceiling reflected in the rim of a bowl, then a line of his own skin and something dark moving beneath it. He tried again to speak. A sound emerged, but it was too small to interrupt the explanation.

"The harness is a containment structure. It is not the amplifier. Confusing the two has led to a great deal of ill-informed criticism."

An observer asked whether the subject would continue to require ordinary maintenance.

"Not for respiration or caloric support while coupling is sustained. Mechanical fatigue remains. Tissue damage remains. We are not manufacturing an indestructible object."

"Could the lungs be removed?"

"They could. So could yours. We are not doing it."

Robert looked towards the man who had asked. He was making a note.

The observers used narrow books which fitted in one hand. They had been given a place to stand and an instruction not to cross the line beside the table. One kept moving his foot over the line to see better, withdrawing it whenever Grundly glanced towards him.

"Conscious response?" he asked.

"Preserved."

"Intentionally?"

"We require a record of the response."

The pencil moved. Robert watched its blunt end, which had tooth marks in the wood. He tried to put his whole request into a movement of his eyes. The man looked at the eye, looked down, and recorded something else.

Someone brought a clean cloth and tucked it under Robert's chin. The kindness of the gesture made him try again to speak. The person adjusted the cloth so that fluid would drain towards the basin rather than over the edge of the table, and returned to the instruments.

Grundly named each instrument before using it. At first Robert tried to remember the names. Then he used the intervals between them to count how long the pain lasted. Neither method made the next name less likely to come.

The observer who had asked about consciousness wanted to know whether the subject might later describe the procedure.

"Possibly," Grundly said.

"Would that create difficulties?"

"Only if his description were confused with an account of the work."

A man who had not yet spoken cleared his throat. He stood a little apart from the others, beside the door, and unlike them he had no book. He wore a grey coat with a narrow collar and a badge on the lapel

which Robert could not read from the table, and when he spoke the observers turned towards him the way the Guild had turned towards the Cashier.

"The Office would like to understand the unit cost."

Grundly did not look up. "The unit is unique."

"Then the Office would like to understand the cost of the unit."

"The particle required eleven years of cultivation. The harness required—"

"The Office has those figures." The man in grey did not raise his voice. "The Office would like to understand the cost of the host. Recovery was charged at three attempts. A fourth was not approved. The host appears to have arrived by other means."

"By cart," said Grundly. "Up the cliff path. He pushed it himself."

There was a pause.

"Then the recovery cost is nil," said the man in grey.

"In a sense."

"The Office will enter it as nil." He made no movement, but Robert had the impression that somewhere a number had been written. "And replacement? Should the host fail."

Now Grundly looked up. His hands were red to the wrist.

"There is no replacement. The opening held near him because he came through it. There is no second child from that side."

"There is a whole population on that side," said the man in grey, "according to the Survey. The Office has funded the Survey precisely on that understanding." He looked at Robert on the table with no particular expression. "The Office would be reassured to know that this one is the first rather than the only."

Grundly bent to his work again.

"The Office may enter him," he said, "as the first."

The man in grey nodded, satisfied, and did not speak again during the procedure. He did not look away during the worst of it either. Robert noticed that. The observers with books looked down at their books when the smell came. The man in grey watched throughout,

with the steady attention of someone checking that he had received what he had paid for.

The smell came before the pain. At first he thought something in the room was burning. Then a bright thread seemed to pass beneath his skin, through his shoulder and into his jaw. He could not turn his head away from it.

One of the observers stepped back and bent over a basin.

"Out, if you must," Grundly said. "Don't contaminate the working area."

The Abbot removed a small piece of bone and laid it in a dish. Robert stared at it. It had been inside him. It lay there now as though this were an ordinary place for it to be.

When the pod was cut open, light struck the faces above the table. Grundly's expression became almost tender. He lowered the opened half out of Robert's sight.

Something in Robert answered. The pressure throughout his body gathered towards his chest. For one instant he felt he was falling without moving. Then the movement ceased.

"There," the Abbot said.

The observers leaned closer. Their shadows moved over Robert's face.

Someone wanted to connect the amplifier immediately. Grundly refused. He explained that the harness had to settle and the tissue around it begin to close. A voice asked how long. Another voice said that the wine should at least be opened.

They left him on the table.

Hours passed, or something that seemed like hours. He could move one finger. Later he could move two. His chest hurt when he tried to lift his head, so he watched the strip of light beneath the door instead.

He had been told to be honoured. He tried to discover whether there was anything he could do with the instruction.

Late in the night the Matron came. She brought a lamp, a basin, and a clean cloth, and she washed him. She did it well. She had been wash-

ing people for a long time and her hands knew where the pain would be before she reached it, and went round it, and came back to it gently when there was no way round. She washed the dried blood from his neck and from the inside of his elbows where the straps had rubbed. She did not wash his chest. She looked at it for some time with the lamp held close, and then she put a clean dressing over it without touching the skin underneath.

"There," she said. "That's better."

He could move his mouth a little now. He asked her for water.

She held the cup to his lips and tipped it. He drank a mouthful and then could not drink any more. It was not that he was full. It was that the thirst, which he had felt when he asked, had gone as soon as the water arrived, as though it had only been a habit of asking.

The Matron watched him with interest.

"Good," she said. "That's very good. The Abbot will be pleased."

She sat with him while the lamp burned down. She talked, as people talk to invalids, about small things: the weather on the cliff, the price of lamp oil, a cousin of hers in the capital who had married above herself and now sent letters that were mostly about furniture. Robert listened. He understood that she was being kind.

"Are you afraid?" she asked him once.

He looked at her.

"You needn't be. You'll be very important. More important than any of us." She smoothed the dressing. "People will want to meet you."

He thought of the Guild bill: *BABIES! LIONS! A GENUINE CONCLUSION.* He thought of the man in grey who wanted him entered as the first.

"Which people?" he asked.

The Matron smiled and turned down the lamp, and did not answer, and after a while she went away. She did not lock the door. There was no need. He could still not lift his head.

* * *

Adelaide drew the table, then the hands above it. She could not draw what the hands were doing. She pressed the pencil down and made a black mark where the boy's chest should have been.

Elias had been asleep in the chair. He had taken to sleeping there when his chest troubled him, though he still called it resting his eyes. Adelaide went to him before dawn and touched the back of his hand. He woke without asking whether the house was on fire.

"It's the boy," she said.

He nodded and tried to stand. His first attempt did not succeed. She helped him on the second, impatient with his weight and ashamed of the impatience before they had crossed the room.

At the table he put on his spectacles. The drawing was clear enough that he took them off again.

"How old is he now?"

"I don't know."

Elias looked towards the marks along the kitchen doorframe where their own children's heights had been entered. The highest stood beyond Adelaide's reach. Three of those children had households of their own; one had a child old enough to point at the lower marks and demand to know why grown people had ever been so short.

"Then don't write an age," he said.

"I should know."

He drew his chair closer. She told him about the bowl, the white sleeves, the way Robert had been unable to move while the men discussed what they would leave inside him. Elias put his hand over hers. He did not tell her it had been a dream. She would have known what to do with a dream.

Later May came with bread. She looked at her parents sitting beside the cold tea and went quietly to the stove. Adelaide heard the ordinary sounds of a fire being made: the rattle of the grate, the little pause while

a match failed, the second match catching. The room warmed around the unfinished drawing.

> *The pencil has cut the paper at the child's shoulder,* Shiraz writes. *A later hand mended the reverse with a strip from a seed packet. The words on the packet describe when to plant. They do not supply a date for the operation.*

Beneath the unfinished drawing she wrote only: *He was awake.*

She did not show the drawing to anyone else for many years. When she did, it was to James's eldest, a serious girl of fourteen who had been sent to sit with her grandmother on a wet afternoon and had found the notebooks while looking for paper to draw on.

The girl turned the pages slowly. She stopped at the table.

"Is this a doctor?"

Adelaide considered lying, and found that she was too old to be good at it.

"They called themselves doctors."

"What are they doing to him?"

"Something he didn't agree to."

The girl looked at the page for a long time. She was at the age when a person begins to discover that grown people can do things to children without asking, and she had not yet decided what to do with the discovery. Adelaide watched her not decide.

"Did it hurt him?"

"Yes."

"Did he cry?"

Adelaide thought of the words she had written under the drawing. *He was awake.*

"He watched them," she said. "The whole time. He watched them so they'd know."

The girl closed the book very carefully, as though it might be broken.

"I'd have watched too," she said.

"I know you would," said Adelaide, and took the book back, and put it on the high shelf where the girl could reach it if she stood on the chair, and did not tell her not to.

14

Regard the Toadstool

The first tap might have been something cooling in the walls. The second came from the shutter. Robert turned his head a little and saw a beak enter the gap.

"Here," he whispered.

The crow worked at the broken wood. Another appeared outside, then another. They pulled and struck until a strip came away. One squeezed through, landed upon the table, and stood on Robert's bandaged chest.

The weight hurt. He asked it to move. It stepped towards his feet, pausing after each movement as though awaiting further instructions.

"Left foot. The string."

He could not tell whether it understood the words or merely followed his attention. It bent and pulled at the knot around his toe. Both fibres came free. The bird dropped them near his hand, too far away for his fingers to reach.

"Closer."

It picked them up again. This time the grey strand fell across his wrist. He caught it against the edge of the strap and worked it towards the buckle's little lock.

When his hand was free, he unfastened the rest himself. The red fibre clung to a damp patch on the table. He lifted it carefully and tucked both strands inside the strip of embroidered cloth the Matron had left with his clothes on a stool.

Getting upright made the room narrow and dark. He waited, one hand against the table, until it opened again.

The door moved.

The Matron saw him standing. For a moment neither moved. Then she drew breath and called for the Abbot.

Robert pulled on his tunic and ran towards the window. It was the only opening that did not contain her. He pushed through the broken shutter and found himself on a ledge wet with spray.

Below him water came out of the mountain in a white sheet, striking a broad pool before spilling over its far edge. Beyond that were further shelves and falls, each half-hidden by the vapour rising from the one below.

He pressed his back against the stone. The Matron reached through the window and caught his sleeve.

"Come here."

He pulled away. Cloth tore. His heel slid off the ledge.

The first fall ended in a pool which struck Robert cold across the face and drove him beneath its surface. He rose sideways in white water, still clutching the cloth.

Between the first and second pools there was a moment in which Robert's feet found stone. He bent his knees to keep them beneath him. The stone moved past, taking the skin from one heel, and he understood that finding a surface was not the same as being able to remain upon it.

He struck the second pool on his side. Water entered his open mouth. He tried to cough and found himself pressed against something smooth while the current folded his legs beneath him. The smooth thing was the lip of the next fall. He clawed at it, found a groove, and lost it when his fingers straightened under the weight of the water behind him.

For a short distance he fell facing the cliff. He saw bands in the rock, roots entering a crack, a plant with four leaves holding perfectly still be-

hind the sheet of falling water. There was enough time to see these things and no time in which seeing them could help.

The third pool turned him over. His chest struck a submerged shelf. The world contracted into the wound beneath the bandage. He had been unable to move during the operation; now every part of him moved and he could control none of it. He held the cloth because losing it would leave him without the last thing he knew how to keep.

When the branches caught him, he waited for another impact. The water pulled at his tunic but did not take him. A stem lay across his throat. One leg was trapped beneath a fork. He opened his eyes into brown-green light and saw bubbles travelling upwards through a place too narrow for his shoulders.

He waited for the urgent need to breathe. It did not come.

His shoulder hurt. Something sharp pressed against his thigh. He could feel the current moving the branches above him. He was underwater, injured, and alive.

He remembered the Abbot's answer to the observer. He tried not to think about the dish containing the piece of his rib.

It took a long time to pull himself free. He walked and crawled along the bottom until the current took him again. This time it carried him into shallower water, where he could get a hand around a root and hold on.

On the bank he lay beside his clothes. A purple swelling had begun along one leg. The bandage around his chest had loosened; beneath it dark lines passed in and out of the skin.

He rubbed the red fibre against the rough cloth. It lifted downstream.

Robert got up. He could not put full weight on the bruised leg, but he could move. It began to rain as he followed the river, first lightly, then in drops large enough to show him the shape of each leaf they struck.

On a low shelf above the bank, the ground split. A pale dome pressed upwards, lifting stones. It rose on a thickening stem, unfolded

ledges and a dark opening, and stood above him while rain ran down its sides.

Robert looked at the entrance. He remembered what he wanted to ask.

* * *

The opening was low. Robert entered on his hands and knees, taking care not to scrape his chest against the edge. Inside, the walls gave off a pale light. A staircase curled around a central hollow. He looked back and fixed the entrance in his mind: three shallow steps, a split in the right-hand wall, rainwater passing beneath the threshold.

On the first landing he found himself in Trebuchet's mill.

His wrists were bound. The wooden teeth moved below him with a steady, dry clatter. Trebuchet stood beside the lever, discussing the weather with the brother whose boots shone.

Robert tried to say that he was in the Tower. His mouth filled with the sack from the Bookish Man's visit. He could feel it against his teeth.

It works with what is already in you.

The lever moved. He closed his eyes, then opened them. He looked for the detail that belonged to another place.

The mill smelled right. That was worse than its appearance. Robert could have doubted a wheel whose teeth were too large or a rope tied in the wrong place. He could not argue with the sour warmth rising from the trough or the little change in the air each time a load moved past an opening.

Shining Boots stood on the other side of the scales. He was weighing a ring. The ring remained attached to the hand Robert remembered. The hand moved when he looked at it, lifting one finger as though about to make a correction.

"That's not how it was," Robert said.

Trebuchet asked whether he had kept an account.

"I saw it."

"Then you can see it again."

The belt began moving. Robert's feet rested on a board which carried him towards the teeth. He tried to brace himself against the sides. His hands would not close. They had been bound behind him, although a moment earlier he had been able to see them.

He remembered entering the Tower. The memory seemed weaker than the boards beneath his feet. Three steps. A split to the right. Rain coming in. He repeated these things without understanding how remembering an entrance could stop a machine.

The water crossed the floor again. It passed beneath the mill without carrying blood or waste. Trebuchet stepped over it without noticing. Robert concentrated on the place where the water entered. It had to come from somewhere. The mill wanted him to look at the teeth. He kept looking at the water.

One step away from it, the boards ceased moving. They still appeared to move. He could hear the belt, feel the vibration, and see each tooth arrive in precisely the place the previous tooth had left. But the distance between his feet and the wet line no longer changed.

He shifted his weight.

Trebuchet told him to stand still. It was an instruction Robert had obeyed while being struck, examined, sold, and made to watch another man's death. His knees tightened before he had decided what to do. He waited for them to release. Then he moved the smallest distance he could.

The water touched his foot.

Rainwater crossed the floor.

He followed it with his eyes. Three steps led out of the mill and into a wall. He moved towards them though the rope remained around his wrists. The rope passed through his arm without resistance.

On the next landing he sat in Trebuchet's chair.

It fitted him. His feet rested comfortably on the floor, and people waited for him to decide whether they might eat. Nella stood with an empty dish. Behind her, men he had never seen looked at the table rather than his face.

He could have given the food away. Instead he found himself asking what they had done to deserve it. The pleasure of making them wait frightened him more than the mill had done.

There was a bowl of turnip tops beside the chair. Nella held her empty dish below it. Robert could have tipped the bowl and ended the waiting. He found instead that he wanted her to look at him before he did it.

She kept her eyes lowered.

"Say please," he heard himself say.

The voice was his. The pleasure was his too: the room held quiet because he had required something of it, and nobody would strike him for failing to meet the requirement before they had understood what it was. He could repeat the request. He could alter it. Nella would still be standing there when he finished.

He thought of the knots around her wrist. In the chair he could not remember why she had needed them. He could only see how easy it would be to require an additional knot.

"Please," she said.

Robert put both hands under the bowl. It was heavier than he expected. He had to get out of the chair to carry it to her. For a moment the chair seemed to hold the backs of his knees, offering him the simpler arrangement in which another person moved and he decided whether the movement was enough.

He stood. The bowl shook against the edge of the table. Food fell. He kept walking.

"Take it," he said. As the bowl left his hands, the room broke into strips of pale light.

The strips became canvas. He was high in the Guild tent, higher than he had ever been thrown, and below him Leparda's face was turned up with her arms spread to catch him, and he was falling.

He knew this room. He had fallen through it a thousand times, and every time her hands had been there. He waited for them. He saw them come up to meet him, the calluses on the palms, the crooked finger she

had broken on a lion dancer's hoop, and he saw them close on nothing, a hand's breadth to his left, and the ground come up past them.

He struck the ground. It hurt the way the falls had hurt. He lay on the sawdust with the tent spinning above him, and Leparda knelt beside him, and her face was not frightened. It was tired.

"You moved," she said. "I told you. A bent baby goes where it likes."

He had not moved. He knew he had not. He had held himself straight and looked at the tent seam, as she taught him. But the Tower had put the fault in him, and it fitted there so easily that he half believed it. He had been dropped. Somebody had to have been wrong. It was simpler if it was him.

The Stage Manager stood at the ring's edge with the Cashier, who was making a mark.

"An admission," said the Stage Manager.

Robert looked past him, the way he had looked past the teeth to the water in the mill. He was looking for something. He did not know what until he found that it was not there.

The padding sheet was not beside the ring.

In the room he remembered, the sheet had lain folded beside the ring through every performance after that frosty morning. He had watched it the whole time he was in the air. Leparda had never been permitted to put it under him, and she had never been permitted to throw it away, so it had lain there, doubled, where he could see it: a thing that would have helped and was not allowed to. He had looked at it on every throw. That was how he had known, each time, which way was down.

This room had no sheet. It had the tent, and the sawdust, and the hands closing on nothing. It did not have the one thing he had actually looked at.

"There was a sheet," he said.

Leparda's tired face did not change. The Tower had not given her anything to say about a sheet.

"There was a sheet beside the ring," Robert said again, louder, "and you weren't allowed to use it, and you never dropped me. Not once."

The sawdust under his back became soft and white, and then it was fungus, and he was lying on a landing of the Tower with his cheek against the pale wall and his chest aching where the submerged shelf had struck it. He lay there for some time. He did not want to get up and find the next room. He wanted, very badly, for one of the rooms to have been true in the way that would have let him stay.

Before the birds came, the false Ma said his name. She had never known it when she was alive. The sound should have warned him, but he wanted it so badly that he supplied a reason for her to know: perhaps the things he had learned after her death had reached her too. He stepped towards the rail.

"You took your time," she said.

"I couldn't get away."

"You ran quickly enough after."

The voice had the little dry scrape at the end which he remembered from nights when she had brought water and exhausted herself carrying it. He tried to explain the table, Prince, the knife. The explanation required him to describe what had been done to her. He could not make himself finish it.

"There you are," she said again, and struck him.

The blow put him on the floor. The other birds came at once, dropping over him until the room was wings. Beaks opened his clothes and the body beneath. Feet held his arms when he tried to cover himself. They worked downwards, and each part vanished before the pain did.

After the birds left, the bones lay where his legs should have been. He could move his eyes. He looked towards the rail and found the crow still there, her left foot lifted, the toes neatly folded. She was waiting for him to believe what she had made of him.

He remembered Ma's right foot because it had made things difficult. She had to hold food on one side. When a wagon jolted, she shifted before the rest of the load. Once the bad toes caught in a loose thread and

he had freed them while she pretended nothing had happened. Her body had required help. The creature on the rail had made its damaged foot into a sign that it was Ma and had put the sign on the wrong side.

He did not tell it. He imagined the thread instead: a small brown loop around two claws, his finger moving underneath it, Ma keeping still despite the indignity of needing him. His hand came back to perform the task. He could feel the slight roughness at the side of the finger where work had thickened the skin.

From the hand he went to the elbow. From the elbow to the shoulder. Each part required a thing it had actually done. Carrying Nella's sack gave him his back. Kneeling in the patch gave him both knees. He did not build a stronger body. He assembled the inconvenient one he knew.

The crow asked whether he would leave her again.

Robert pictured the stable rail empty after the evening in the tavern. He had wished so often to put her back upon it that the wish had become a room he could enter without meaning to. He looked at the false bird and felt the wish continue. Knowing what it was did not stop it hurting.

"She didn't speak to me like that," he said.

The rail fell through the floor without a sound. When he stood, he was shaking and still injured. The Tower had not repaired the fall. It had returned what he had brought inside.

At the top a woman sat beside a window. She was much older than the woman he had seen in the field. Her hands lay upon a book.

"Robert," she said.

He touched the embroidered cloth.

"Robert Small."

"Yes."

"You made this?"

She reached towards it. Her fingers passed through the edge, but the cloth moved a little in the air between them.

"Before you were born."

"I've been looking for you."

She covered her mouth with one hand. He waited, afraid that if he spoke again the room would change.

"Your father had a marble," she said.

Robert waited. He knew what a marble was from the Guild. They had been used in a game whose keeper could make the table slope when he wished.

"He put it on the shelves to see if they were level. Blue glass. There was a white mark inside it, like a little curl of smoke. I thought it was a child's thing to keep with his tools."

"Was he an actor?"

"No. He made things. Sold things. Repaired whatever people brought him."

"Did he repair the shelf?"

"He'd made it. He took it down because it wasn't right."

Robert imagined a man taking apart his own work while no one ordered him to. He tried to fit the man to the shape he had seen in Cerebro's record, running through snow with a bundle.

"He picked me up," he said.

Adelaide pressed her hand against the book.

"Yes."

"They didn't mean to take him."

She looked up. He told her what he had seen. The sentences came badly. He knew the receiving table, the circle, the dark room, but the place where his father had vanished was a tear in those things and he could not explain it without moving his hands. Adelaide watched his hands. When he finished she looked towards her own window as though thirty-two miles of prairie might have appeared beyond it.

"He couldn't have got there," she said.

"No."

She had said it to men in boots and a woman with a covered dish, to Elias before they married, to herself while doing work which allowed the words to continue beneath it. Now a boy with a wet bandage across

his chest said no, and the distance remained impossible, but for the first time somebody had come from the other end of it.

"The store was behind the creek?" Robert asked.

"No. The creek was further off. You couldn't see it from the door."

"Was it big?"

"Small. Brown. In summer there wasn't enough in it."

"I saw a river today."

Her eyes moved to his wet clothes. "Were you in it?"

"I fell."

He wanted to tell her that he had not drowned because someone had changed him. He did not want to show her the change. She looked at the place his hand covered and waited.

"Can you mend things?" he asked.

"Some things."

"Clothes?"

"Yes."

He lifted the loose edge of the tunic. She reached towards it, and he held it still while her fingers passed through the cloth. Neither pretended the attempt had worked. She drew her hand back onto the book.

"Who did that stitching?"

"Leparda. Ma helped."

He told her about the woman who threw him into the air and later could not pull a needle through cloth. He told her about the crow's right foot. Adelaide did not interrupt when his account ceased to describe the things they had done and became a list of where they had sat, what they had brought him, how he knew they were still there in the dark.

Outside her window a voice called. She answered without turning. Robert heard the word *Mother* used by somebody whose voice was much older than his.

"You have other children."

"Yes."

"Do they know where they are?"

She covered her eyes. He thought he had hurt her and began to explain that it was a real question. She lowered her hands before he finished.

"Most of the time," she said.

"Good."

The room around her had begun to lose its corners. He could see a strip of rain through the wall behind the chair. He told her the names again, Leparda and Ma, in case the other room took him away before she had heard them properly.

"Can I come there?"

Adelaide looked towards the window.

"I don't know how."

He had heard people say that when they meant they would not help. Her hands had begun to tremble above the book.

"You tried," he said.

"I am still trying."

The wall behind her darkened. She looked back, and he saw that she could hear something in another room.

"Someone needs you," he said.

"Wait."

He put out his hand. She placed hers against it. He could not feel its weight, but for a moment the space between them was warm.

The window folded into itself. Robert stood alone beneath a sagging roof.

He went down the stairs as quickly as his leg permitted. The lower flights were collapsing into soft layers. He found the split beside the entrance by following the water and pushed through it as the stem gave way. Outside, he lay in rain and pieces of white fungus.

He did not begin walking at once. The rain had thinned to a drizzle that hung in the air instead of falling through it, and his leg had stiffened while he climbed. He sat with his back against a boulder, the white pieces of the Tower softening around him into something like

wet bread, and for the first time since the Abbey he had no one to watch and no door to listen for.

He noticed then what his body was not doing.

At the Guild he had learned hunger as a set of times: the hour before the goats were milked, the long afternoon when the kitchens had closed and the performers had not yet eaten. In Farthest hunger had become a place in the body, low and constant, which he carried about as he carried the fork. It was not there. He pressed his hand beneath his ribs to find it and found only the edge of the bandage and the hard lines beneath.

He put a breadstool in his mouth, picked from the bank from habit. It tasted as it always had. He chewed and swallowed it, and it went down, and nothing in him asked for another. He ate a second to see whether the first had been a mistake. The second sat in his stomach like a stone put into a pocket.

Then he tested the other thing. He drew a breath, which was easy, and let it out, which was easy too. He held the next one. He counted as Ma had taught him to count between beatings, and when the count reached the place where his chest should have begun to pull, it did not pull. He kept counting. The drizzle collected in his eyelashes. At a number he had never needed before, he let the breath go, not because he wanted air but because the stillness had begun to frighten him more than the need would have.

He breathed deliberately after that, in and out, a little too loudly. It was something he could do with his own body that nobody had arranged for him.

The dark lines had spread since the table. They ran from the wound under his arm across the front of his chest and over one shoulder, dividing and rejoining like the cracks in a dry field. When he pressed one, it did not hurt. When he pressed beside it, it did.

Somewhere above, beyond the falls, men would already be discussing him. He tried to imagine the Abbot explaining the broken shutter to the observers and found he could imagine it very clearly. The explan-

ation would contain the words *regrettable* and *recoverable*. It would not contain the word *boy*.

He wondered whether the thing in his chest could be found by the eyes in the glass column. He wondered whether it was already calling to them, the way the vines in the Abbey passage had leaned towards him. He looked at the plants along the bank. A few of the nearest seemed to him to be leaning, but the wind was leaning them too, and he could not separate one explanation from the other.

It was the first time he had wanted to know how something worked for a reason other than escaping it.

The red fibre still pulled downstream. He wrapped the cloth around it and began walking again.

* * *

Adelaide came back to the kitchen with her hand still raised. Her palm was warm. She held it away from her body, carefully, as one carries a plate filled to the rim.

James stood in the doorway with his hat in his hand. It was his voice that had called. He had come to borrow Elias's long saw and had found his mother at the window, speaking.

"Who was that?" he asked.

She sat down before she answered. The chair was where it always was; she found it without looking.

"Get your father."

Elias came slowly from the back room. He had been lying down in the afternoons that spring and had not yet admitted that this was anything more than a sensible use of an afternoon. He looked at her hand, which she was still holding a little away from herself, and then at her face.

"He came," she said.

Elias sat opposite her. James remained in the doorway, turning the hat.

"He knew the marble," Adelaide said. "I told him about the marble and he knew what it was for. He asked about the creek. He asked whether it was big."

"What did you tell him?"

"That it wasn't."

Elias nodded as though this were the correct answer to a difficult question. James looked from one to the other. He had grown up in a house in which this conversation might happen at any time, and he had learned to keep still until he knew whether it required anything of him.

"He's hurt," Adelaide said. "Across here." She drew a line on her own chest with two fingers. "He fell into a river and didn't drown. He wanted to know whether you children know where you are."

James made a small sound. It might have been a laugh. He was a grown man with a household of his own, and his mother was reporting on him to a boy who did not exist.

"Tell him yes," he said.

"I did."

"Most of the time," Elias said.

She looked at him. He had not been in the room. He had not heard her say it.

"That would have been the honest answer," he said.

She began to cry then, with her hand still held away from her, and Elias moved his chair around the table so that he could sit beside her without her having to lower it. James put his hat on the dresser and went to fill the kettle. When he came back, he took the long saw from its hook and then hung it up again, having decided he could borrow it another day.

That night Adelaide wrote the conversation down in ink. She wrote everything she could remember, in the order she remembered it, and did not stop to draw. When she had finished she read it back and found

that she had given Robert fewer words than herself. She did not add any.

This is the only extended passage in the notebooks written continuously in ink, Shiraz notes. *There are no crossings-out. Beside the word* marble *she has drawn a small circle with a curl inside it, the only illustration on four pages. I have examined a great many household accounts from the period. People did not, as a rule, keep marbles among their tools. I have been unable to decide whether this makes the detail more or less likely to be true.*

15

Dining with the Wolves

The island had escaped the worst of the fire. A narrow channel divided it from the bank, and beyond the channel a small building stood among dark green trees. The compass fibre pulled towards it with a steadiness Robert found comforting.

He crossed where the water was shallow, keeping his injured leg downstream. On the far side he saw tracks pressed deep into the mud. They resembled neither boots nor the paws of Prince. Several had long marks ahead of them where claws had entered the ground.

The door of the house hung from one hinge.

Above the door a narrow board read WIGSMITHY. Somebody had driven a claw through the final letter. Underneath it, smaller lettering gave the licence number. The number had been left intact.

The front room held rows of wooden heads. Some had chins longer than their foreheads. Others were no more than polished knobs with measurement marks around them. Each supported an unfinished arrangement of hair, labelled with a client's requirements. Robert read *dignity without severity*, *youth appropriate to office*, and *no resemblance to predecessor*. The last head wore two different halves of a wig. A pin held a note between them: *Client undecided.*

At a little bench stood brushes, combs, and a pot whose hardened contents had once smelled sweet. Beside the brushes a loose thread ran through a series of tiny crystals. Robert followed it with his eyes into the next room. The work changed there. The heads were gone. The

threads entered frames which held them under unequal tension, crossing and recrossing in patterns too exact to be decoration.

The overturned loom had a pedal worn smooth by a heel. Its upper rail was crowded with little clamps. Some still held strands. Others had been forced open, leaving curled metal where fingers would once have turned the screws. A crystal lay crushed beneath a wolf's print.

Robert began picking the crystals up before he knew why. The fragments cut his thumb. He put them down on the bench in a row, as though someone might need to count what was missing.

Threads had been pulled from racks and scattered across the floor. Robert stepped over a broken stool and followed a dark trail to the back room.

He knew enough now not to mistake the remains for something else.

For a while he stood with one hand against the doorway. The fibre continued to pull. He looked at it angrily.

"You said."

A faint scraping came from the next room.

"Who is there?"

Robert returned to the overturned loom. Something moved beneath it, catching and releasing itself among the threads.

"Robert."

"Ah. Help me with this, would you?"

He lifted one edge of the frame. A beard emerged, dragging itself by several long fibres. It stood upright, or as nearly upright as a beard could, and shook dust from its outer strands.

"Weerdsley?"

"Most of what remains."

Robert sat down on the floor.

The beard explained. The work upon the loom had been intended to hold a living pattern through the exact relation of its fibres, wires, and crystals. Weerdsley had completed only the lower part of the face before the wolves arrived. The transfer had worked. The rest had not.

"I had hoped for hands," he said.

Robert looked towards the back room.

"Does it hurt?"

"Not as it did."

He did not say that it did not hurt at all.

The roots prevented a straight grave. Robert tried another place and struck them again. The beard asked him to keep the first hole. It was close to the tree and shaded in the afternoon.

"Can you tell?" Robert asked.

"I planted it."

He dug between the roots. The spade had been intended for small work. Each load contained very little earth, and his bruised leg objected whenever he shifted his weight to lift it. He stopped often. The beard did not urge him on.

They used a curtain from the back room. Robert had to cut it from its rings because he could not reach high enough to unfasten them. The rings fell into the folds. He shook them out onto the floor, keeping the cloth between himself and the remains while he worked.

When the covered shape lay in the grave, the beard asked him to wait.

"Is there something else?"

"No. Just a moment."

Robert stood with the spade. He could hear water moving in the channel behind the trees and a persistent knock from a shutter touching the house. The beard remained on its branch. Whatever had survived in it did not make the covered body easier to leave.

At last Robert put back the first spadeful. It sounded loud against the curtain. He lowered the next more carefully.

Afterwards he washed the spade in the channel and leaned it inside the door. He swept the broken crystals into a bowl. Neither act repaired anything, but both left a place where his hands could stop.

When he came back inside, the beard asked to be called Beardsley. Robert accepted the change without being asked to find it funny.

He delivered Muckleby's message.

The beard remained still for so long that Robert wondered whether he had failed to hear.

"Yes," Beardsley said at last. "I should have gone back sooner."

He did not say anything else for a long time. Robert sat on the floor of the workshop among the scattered threads and waited, as Ma had waited for him on the night of the stranger at Low Result. Outside, the channel went on moving. The shutter went on knocking.

When the beard spoke again it was not about Muckleby.

"She kept a jar of honey," he said. "In a locked cupboard. Did she show you?"

"She gave me the last of it."

"The last?" The weave tightened. "She told me it was the last twenty years ago. Every time I visited there was one jar, and it was always the last, and she always made me eat it." A strand lifted and fell. "I used to think she was economical. I think now that she bought one every time she heard I was coming."

Robert did not know what to say to that. He picked up a thread from the floor, a fine grey one like the lock fibre, and wound it round his finger and unwound it.

"She said she loved you," he said. "In the message. She said she was going to tell you herself."

"Yes. You said." The beard was quiet. "I heard you the first time. I wanted to hear you say it again."

So Robert said it again. And then, because Beardsley did not stop him, he told the rest of the message a third time, all of it, word for word, from *Robert, if this has reached you* to *I wish I could tell you otherwise*, the way he had carried messages between wagons in the Guild, exactly, without improving any of it.

When he had finished, the beard lay very still on the bench.

"Thank you," it said. "That was correct."

In the house, Robert showed him the harness. Beardsley moved close, separating strands around a tiny lens worked into his weave.

"Containment. And something to couple it to an external device."

"He said it was the only one."

"He would."

"Is it?"

"I don't know."

This answer, offered without irritation, made Robert tell him the rest: the records, the operation, the fall, the Tower, his mother.

Beardsley listened while guiding a loose thread through the torn shoulder of Robert's tunic. The first knot pulled the cloth into a hard point. He loosened it and spread the tension across several smaller stitches.

"There," he said. "A thing can carry more when you stop asking one point to carry all of it."

Robert put on the tunic. The repaired shoulder lay flat.

He folded Ma's feather and the two fibres Weerdsley had given him into the embroidered cloth and tucked it inside the tunic.

Before they could discuss a route back to the Abbey, a shadow crossed the open doorway. The wolf standing there wore a belt from which several tools hung. Behind it, another sniffed the air.

"The King said there was something missing."

Beardsley moved towards Robert's hand.

"He ate the wrong part," the first wolf said.

Robert closed his fingers around the beard. He could feel the fine wires pressing against his skin.

The wolves did not bind him. They did not need to. There were five of them, and they walked around him in a loose ring as the brothers had walked around the field, never close enough to touch and never far enough to be outrun. The one with the belt of tools led. He stopped Robert once to examine the seams of his tunic, lifting Beardsley's repair towards the light.

"Good work," he said to nobody.

"Thank you," said Beardsley, from Robert's fist.

The wolf looked at the fist, then at Robert, then walked on without comment. Robert had the impression that talking beards were not outside his experience, only outside his responsibilities.

They crossed the channel at its shallowest point and went inland through country the fire had not reached. Here the ground was grey and hard, and the few trees were low and twisted, and everything had the look of land that had been used and then left. Twice they passed the remains of settlements. There were foundation stones, a well with its rope rotted, a field boundary marked by a line of greener grass. The wolves did not look at these places. Robert did, and after the second one Beardsley spoke quietly from his hand.

"Soil Harvest," he said. "They took the topsoil for the Heartland. The people went with it, or after it."

"Where did the wolves come from?"

"The Biologians made them. For the Science Wars, and after. To find people." The beard was silent for a moment. "They were very good at it. Then there were not enough people left out here to find, and nobody wanted to feed them."

The wolf with the tools had heard. He did not turn round.

"We fed ourselves," he said.

They reached the camp at dusk. Robert smelled it first, woodsmoke and cooking fat and something underneath that he knew from the mill yard and did not want to name. Then he heard music.

It came from a clearing among hide shelters, and it was a fiddle, and it was being played very well. Robert stopped walking. The ring of wolves stopped with him.

Darcy sat on an upturned crate at the edge of the firelight. His coat was the same coat. His hair had been combed. A collar of braided leather had been fastened round his neck and tied to a stake behind him with a length of rope, and he was playing as though the rope were part of the arrangement, like the lamps and the audience. When he saw Robert, the bow faltered on the string and made a sound like a small animal stepping on a thorn.

He recovered at once. He finished the phrase, bowed from the waist to the wolves nearest him, and set the fiddle across his knees.

"Robert," he said. "How very fortunate."

"You left."

"I did." Darcy touched the collar. "I was not, as it turned out, the only party leaving Farthest that week. I met these gentlemen on the road. They were interested in my construction. I persuaded them that a working musician was worth more than his parts." He smiled. "So far, I have been persuasive."

"Did you know the Guard was coming?"

The smile stayed where it was, but something behind it went very still.

"I knew there was a cough," Darcy said. "I knew a man with a cough in a village like that is a reason. I did not wait to find out what for."

"You didn't tell anyone."

"No."

Robert thought of Nella going into the culvert with the sacks over the children. He thought of the cooper with his hands raised. He opened his mouth to say something about them and found that he did not want Darcy to have them, not even as an accusation.

"Muckleby's dead," he said instead. "And the brothers. And Trebuchet."

Darcy absorbed this. He turned the fiddle a little on his knees.

"Trebuchet," he said. "Then I shan't have to finish the book."

It was a joke. It was also, Robert saw, a thing Darcy was relieved about, and the relief was so small and so plain that it seemed to embarrass the balladeer more than any accusation could have. He looked away into the fire.

"I'm sorry about your bird," he said. "I don't think I said."

"You didn't."

"No." Darcy picked up the bow again. "Well. I'm told there's to be a dinner. You'll want to sit where you can't see the head table. I'd recommend the left."

The wolf with the tools took Robert's arm and led him towards the head table.

* * *

The wolves had built a dining hall without walls. Tables stood beneath stretched hides, and lamps hung from poles driven into the ground. Robert saw iron knives beside the plates. In the Nation, possessing one of those knives would have required either an exemption or a convincing explanation at the moment of arrest. Here a young wolf was using one to pry dirt from a claw.

At the centre sat Newton Mindeater. His fur had been brushed into a shape that increased his apparent size. A napkin lay across his chest. Around him, less comfortably dressed wolves adjusted collars, pulled at sleeves, and watched the food. A pup too small for any table had pressed itself against the back of his chair, watching the dishes pass above it.

The prisoners were brought out before Robert could decide whether the chairs were intended for people to sit upon or be tied to. They wore the remains of black cloaks. Beneath them the Guardsmen's skin was puckered and scarred. Some had no visible ears. One looked no older than a performer Robert had known in the Guild.

A large wolf carrying an axe stepped into the open space.

"My right-hand man," Newton said.

The wolf's ears moved backwards.

"Gurtis Slaughterjaw. You will find him reliable in matters requiring a final answer."

The executions were quick. What followed was not. The heads went to Newton's table, where an attendant opened them with a tool fitted for the purpose. Newton placed the contents in a steaming pot. Pieces from the rest were distributed according to rank.

The attendant's tool looked at first like a pair of kitchen shears. When he opened it, a curved brace unfolded between the blades. It fitted over the crown and held the cut at a constant depth. He adjusted it

for each head, turning a little screw while the diners passed dishes along the table.

Newton interrupted the attendant to ask whether the instruments had been cleaned. The attendant showed him the basin. The King nodded. Cleanliness mattered because the contents were to be retained.

The grey powder was measured with a spoon smaller than Robert's thumbnail. The attendant levelled it against the mouth of the bag, returning what he had scraped away. Newton watched this part closely. When a wolf at the lower table called for more seasoning, the attendant folded the bag and put it behind the King's chair.

"A royal preparation," Newton said.

The lower table received salt.

The distribution had been worked out with care, and it was explained to Robert, whether he wished it or not, by the wolf with the belt of tools, who sat beside him and appeared to feel that a guest should understand the customs of the house.

The King took the heads. That was simple. The King's table, which consisted of the King, Gurtis, and three wolves with ribbons on their collars, took the hearts and the livers, divided by a rule so old that nobody could remember it and so exact that disputes were rare. The second table took the shoulders. The third table, which was long and crowded and made mostly of planks laid across barrels, took what remained of the trunk, and the pups under the third table took what fell. Bones went back to the attendant, who boiled them for the next day's stock. Hides went to the tanner.

"It's very fair," the wolf said. "Everybody knows what they'll get."

"The pups get what falls."

"The pups get what falls," the wolf agreed. "So they learn to stand close to a clumsy eater." He showed his teeth, which was, Robert had begun to understand, how he smiled. "I stood under the third table for two years. Then I stood beside it. Then I sat at it. Now I sit here." He tapped the plank in front of him. It was the second table. "In a few years, if I'm useful, I'll sit up there."

"What if you're not useful?"

The wolf considered this with the same seriousness he had brought to Beardsley's stitching.

"Then I'll stand under it," he said, "and learn which of them is clumsy."

He went back to his shoulder. Robert did not eat. Nobody pressed him to; the wolves had seen the dark lines on his neck and seemed to have decided that whatever he was, he was not a guest who needed feeding. Beardsley lay very still in his hand. Across the clearing Darcy sat on his crate with the fiddle across his knees, waiting to be told when the music should begin, and never once looked towards the head table.

Before the executions, the King had asked one of the condemned men where the Guard kept its second store of gas. The man had looked at the bowl, then at the axe, and said nothing. Newton had appeared almost pleased. He had told the attendant to keep that head separate.

Robert had seen Trebuchet demand a useful weight from a dead body. Here the useful part had become more specific. The wolves needed routes, stores, gates, the things a man learned while serving a power that had altered his flesh and taught him to remain silent.

Robert kept watching the folded bag behind the King's chair. He had not seen its label.

Music began. Darcy had been moved to one of the poles, his rope retied to it, his coat brushed, his shoes polished. He did not look towards Robert while he played. He played the way a man walks past a house where he owes money, with great attention to the road.

After eating, Newton had them brought forward.

"The missing knowledge," he said, looking at Beardsley.

"Knowledge is not necessarily where you expect to find it," the beard replied.

Newton picked him up and put him in his mouth.

Robert lunged. A paw caught the back of his tunic and lifted him off the ground. Newton's expression altered. He coughed, swallowed,

coughed again, and brought the beard out upon the table with a scattering of broth.

Beardsley dragged himself away. Several fine strands remained caught between the King's teeth.

"Unpleasant for both of us," he said.

Robert was put down.

Newton wiped his mouth. "There are other ways of taking you apart."

Beyond the King's shoulder, Robert saw a heap of masks. They were made from hide, with a hard shell over the muzzle. One had been split open. Black staining covered the inside.

"Those don't work," he said.

The King looked at him.

"The gas goes through."

"We are aware of the result."

Robert thought of Ma holding the cloth above the bowl.

"Have you tried charcoal?"

Gurtis moved closer. Newton's paw came down over the bowl as though someone might take it.

"What do you know of it?"

"It catches some things. Not everything."

"A seal and a suitable filter," Beardsley said. "We would have to test the gas you intend to resist. The boy has suggested a beginning, not a guarantee."

Newton looked towards Gurtis, then back at them.

"You will make one."

"And leave when we have," Robert said.

The King smiled. It was difficult to determine how much of the expression came from the arrangement of his teeth.

"A successful contribution will be rewarded."

"Leave," Robert repeated.

"Yes, yes."

Darcy came forward with a small bow. “My wind apparatus might be of assistance.”

Newton gestured towards Gurtis. “A week. Give them the workshop. Keep them there.”

As they were led away, Robert lifted Beardsley from the table. His weave felt thinner on one side. The missing strands remained in Newton’s bowl.

16

Who Is the Wolfking?

The first mask leaked around the cheeks. The second held at the cheeks and admitted gas through the seam beneath the jaw. Gurtis watched both tests without comment, then asked whether the third would be as useful.

"More useful than being eaten," Beardsley said. "We hope to progress beyond that."

Darcy supplied airflow through a flexible tube attached beneath his ribs. A scrap of indicator leaf changed colour when the captured Guard gas reached it. The leaf was a wolf invention. The seams were Beardsley's work. Robert packed the filter chambers and repeated the tests, marking each failed arrangement on a board.

When one container broke, everyone left the workshop except Darcy, who was connected to the apparatus, Robert, who had not understood what had happened, and Beardsley, who could not move quickly enough.

They looked at one another through the spreading haze.

"Breathe?" Darcy asked Robert.

"I don't have to."

"Convenient."

"It wasn't."

Darcy lowered his eyes. He opened a vent in his side, isolated the line from the damaged container, and helped Robert carry Beardsley out. They still had to wash the irritant from Robert's skin.

Gurtis grew tired of standing at the door and began to talk. Beyond the workshops lay a fenced field filled with small, white creatures so round that Robert initially took them for discarded cushions. They grazed without apparent haste. Beneath them grew a fine green grass.

"Puffbits," Gurtis said. "We found a pair in a rich man's garden. He liked the colour."

"And the grass?"

"Went with them. They keep it fed. It keeps them fat."

He looked beyond the fence towards the grey land further out. Patches of green had spread across it, broken by stretches where nothing had taken.

"We move them where there's water. Leave enough grass. Don't take everything. You'd think that last part difficult, from watching men."

Robert watched a young wolf repair the fence.

Beyond the fence, another young wolf had laid boards across a muddy channel. He was moving the Puffbits one at a time, carrying each creature against his chest with its four short legs pointing out. Gurtis watched him put the sixth on the far bank.

"Enough there," he called.

The youngster pointed to the grass still standing.

"Enough," Gurtis repeated. "It has to seed."

Robert could see three plots: one grazed short, one almost bare, and one with stalks high enough to hide the little animals. Water entered through a ditch which had been blocked by a sliding board. The youngster moved the board, waited until the flow reached a mark on a stake, then closed it halfway.

"Why not put them everywhere?" Robert asked.

"Because everywhere doesn't have this ditch."

Gurtis took him to the bare patch. The soil crumbled beneath his claws. A few grass roots had survived near a stone; further out there were none. The first pair of Puffbits had been allowed to eat all the new growth there. The wolves had learned from the result. They now moved the animals before appetite finished what the soil had begun.

"Men could do that," Robert said.

"They could."

"Have you shown them?"

Gurtis looked towards the royal tent.

"They took what grew here. They can find something of their own."

Robert pointed to the empty land beyond the plots. "There are people there who didn't take it."

"They live in the Nation."

"Not all of them get to choose."

The wolf pushed a clod apart with the end of one claw. He seemed, for a moment, likely to answer the thing Robert had said. Instead he told the youngster to mend the lower fence before dark.

"Why conquer the city, then?"

Gurtis's jaw tightened.

"The King has acquired ideas."

He spoke of clothes, titles, punishments for insufficient deference, and the new order that male pups outside the royal household should be prevented from breeding. He did not describe the life before Newton as gentle. He described it as one in which he had known how to stand.

"He knows things we need," Gurtis said. "He makes certain we continue to need him."

Robert looked towards the King's tent. Smoke rose from the cooking place behind it.

"Does he always cook the brains?"

"Always."

Beardsley stopped moving the thread he had been drawing through a seam.

That night the three of them sat in the workshop with the door barred from outside and a single lamp between them. Darcy had been given a blanket and did not use it. He sat very upright on a stool, oiling the joints of his fingers one by one with a feather dipped in a saucer,

and the ticking in his chest was slower than Robert had heard it in daylight.

Beardsley lay across Robert's knee and taught him about tension.

"A seam is a promise between two pieces of cloth," he said. "Each stitch carries a little of the promise. If one stitch carries too much, it breaks, and then the stitches next to it carry more, and they break, and the seam opens along its whole length. Everyone thinks a seam fails at its weakest point. It fails at its most loaded one."

"How do you know which that is?"

"You pull." Beardsley lifted a strand and drew it gently across Robert's palm. "Gently. Everywhere. And you feel where it resists."

Robert pulled at the edge of the mask, gently, everywhere. He found the place under the jaw where the leather gathered. He had found it before by making the leaf darken. Now he found it with his fingers, and it seemed to him a better way of knowing, because it did not require anyone to breathe through the mistake.

A scratching came at the door. Darcy looked up. Robert got up and put his eye to the crack between the planks.

A pup sat outside in the dark. It was the one he had seen pressed against the back of the King's chair, small enough to fit between the legs of a stool, its ears too large for its head. It looked at the crack with enormous seriousness.

"Are you the boy who doesn't breathe?"

"I can breathe," Robert said. "I don't have to."

The pup considered this.

"The King says you're a thing."

"What do you think?"

"I think things don't answer." The pup lay down with its chin on its paws, close to the crack. "My father's in the pen with the Guardsmen. He said the King was keeping something in a bag that should be for everybody. The King said that was the same as being a Guardsman and put him in the pen."

Robert did not know what to say. Behind him, Darcy had stopped oiling his fingers.

"Will the masks work?" the pup asked.

"I think so."

"Then the King won't need to know what the Guardsmen know." The pup's voice was very matter-of-fact. "Then he won't need to open anybody's head. Then he can let my father out."

It got up and trotted away before Robert could answer, which was fortunate, because he had no answer that would have been true.

He sat down again. Darcy had picked up the feather, but he was not using it.

"That," the balladeer said, after a long time, "is a very bad song."

"It's not a song."

"Everything is a song if you tell it often enough." Darcy dipped the feather in the oil. "I would not like to be the one who has to tell that one."

Beardsley said nothing at all. He lay across Robert's knee, and Robert could feel the fine wires in his weave drawn tight, carrying something that had nowhere else to go.

They put the first mask on a wooden form rather than on a prisoner. Gurtis objected that a wooden form did not breathe. Darcy connected the tube beneath his ribs and drew air through the opening where the mouth would have been. The indicator leaf darkened at once.

"Now it does," Beardsley said. "Badly."

The charcoal had been packed too tightly in one chamber and too loosely in the other. Robert emptied both, sifted out the dust, and filled them again by equal measures. This time the leaf remained pale until Darcy increased the flow. Then one edge darkened.

They marked the seam. They remade it. Beardsley pressed each fold against the form while Robert held the thread in place. When the same test failed again, Gurtis demanded to know why they had repeated a failure.

"Because otherwise we would have called it a success," Beardsley said.

On the fourth day Newton's steward came to the workshop with a proposal. He was a lean grey wolf who wore spectacles without lenses, having heard that spectacles were worn by people who read. He held a slate.

"The King wishes to know why the masks are being tested on wood."

"Because wood doesn't die if we're wrong," Robert said.

"Wood does not breathe." The steward consulted the slate. "The King observes that a test on something which does not breathe cannot establish whether the mask permits breathing."

"Darcy breathes for it."

"Mr. Balladeer is mechanical. The King observes that a test on something mechanical cannot establish whether the mask protects the living." He made a mark. "There are eleven Guardsmen in the holding pen. They breathe. They are also, the King observes, the enemy, and therefore entitled to no protection. A test on them would harm nobody whose harm was of concern."

Beardsley had gone very still on the bench.

"If the mask fails," he said, "the man dies."

"Then the mask will have been proven to fail. That is information."

"And if it works?"

The steward looked at the slate as though the answer might be written there. It was not.

"Then he will be returned to the pen," he said, "until he is needed for the dinner."

Robert put down the charcoal he had been sifting. His hands were black to the wrist.

"No," he said.

The steward made another mark. "The King anticipated a refusal. He asks me to point out that the agreement was to produce a working mask. A mask cannot be known to work until it is tested on a living

subject. Refusing the test is therefore refusing to complete the agreement. Refusing to complete the agreement is a breach, and a breach releases the King from his undertaking to let you leave."

"He wasn't going to let us leave," Robert said.

"That," said the steward, "is not a matter on which I have been instructed."

It was Gurtis, in the end, who broke the circle, though not for Robert's reasons. He had been leaning in the doorway, listening, and he pushed himself upright and took the half-finished mask off the wooden form.

"I'll wear it," he said.

The steward looked alarmed. "The King's right-hand—"

"Is the one who'll be wearing it through the Guard's gas. I'd rather know now." Gurtis turned the mask over in his paws. "A dead Guardsman tells you it failed. He can't tell you where it leaked. I can."

The steward wrote this down with evident relief, since it transferred the decision to someone whose name could be written beside it. He left. Gurtis handed the mask back to Robert.

"Finish it properly," he said. "I'm not doing this twice."

Robert took the mask. He understood that he had not won anything. The eleven men were still in the pen. They would still be needed for the dinner. All his refusal had done was remove one reason for killing one of them sooner.

He went back to sifting charcoal. It was the only thing he could do that he was sure of.

On the fifth day they deliberately made a bad mask. Robert left a little gap beneath the jaw and watched the leaf darken along its lower edge. Then they tested the repaired mask with a fresh leaf from the same stem. It stayed pale. Only that comparison persuaded Beardsley to let the wolf try it.

Gurtis required the method on a board. Robert could read the finished words, but his attempt to copy them produced cramped shapes which made the quantities hard to distinguish. Literacy Mold had given

him no practice with a pen. Darcy wrote while Robert recited the steps. When the balladeer omitted the second test, Robert made him scrape the last line away and put it back.

On the sixth day they completed a mask that fitted Gurtis. Darcy passed air through the filter while the indicator leaf remained unchanged. Beardsley made them repeat the test with a fresh leaf.

Only after that did Gurtis wear it in the chamber.

The chamber was a hide tent sealed at its seams with pitch, with a small window of scraped membrane in one side. The captured gas had been kept in a clay jar stoppered with wax. Robert broke the wax himself, because nobody else wanted to, and set the jar in the middle of the floor, and came out, and the flap was tied behind him.

Through the membrane they watched the gas rise. It was pale green and moved like water poured into water, curling up from the jar and spreading along the roof and coming down the walls. Gurtis stood in the middle of it with the mask over his muzzle. He did not move. He had been told to count to three hundred, slowly, and then to walk to each corner and back, and then to count to three hundred again.

At the first corner he stumbled. Robert's hands went to the ties of the flap. Beardsley said *wait*, very sharply, and Robert waited, and Gurtis straightened, and they saw that he had stumbled on the edge of the jar and not on anything in his lungs. He walked to the second corner. The third. The fourth.

At two hundred and forty of the second count, the wolf raised one paw and pressed it against the membrane from the inside, flat, the claws drawn in. Robert did not know what it meant. Neither did anyone else. The wolves outside the tent went very still.

Then Gurtis took the paw away and went on counting. They could see his jaw moving under the mask.

When they untied the flap and he came out, he walked ten paces into clean air before he took the mask off. His eyes were streaming, but the gas had not done it. He sat down on the ground. The young wolves around him waited for him to speak.

"Why the paw?" Robert asked.

Gurtis looked at him, and for once the look did not contain a calculation.

"I wanted to see if I could feel you through it," he said. "Standing out there. Waiting to open it." He wiped his eyes with the back of his wrist. "I could."

When he had dried his eyes, his first question concerned how many could be made by the following week.

Robert pointed to the board. "They'll have to follow all the steps."

"They will."

"Even the tests."

Gurtis looked at the stained masks piled in the corner.

"Especially those."

For a moment Robert felt the pleasure of having helped someone make something that worked. Then the wolf took the board to the King, and the door was locked behind him.

* * *

Newton admired the mask. He put it on, removed it, and asked an attendant whether it made him look smaller. The attendant said it emphasized the breadth of the head.

"Excellent," Newton said. "Begin production."

Robert held Beardsley in both hands.

"We can go now."

"You may leave the workshop."

"You said we could leave."

"And you are leaving it."

The guards took Darcy by the arms. Newton instructed them to open the mechanical man carefully and preserve any components that might be copied. Beardsley was to be separated into his constituent materials. Robert would remain in the royal tent until the King had decided how best to make use of him.

Darcy drew a breath from an apparatus that did not require breath, and spoke in a voice that filled the clearing.

"Gurtis. Ask him about the powder."

Newton stood.

Beardsley's voice, thin but clear, followed. "Skullreader Fungus. Without it the brains are only meat."

Gurtis looked from the beard to the King.

"You've been keeping it."

"An imbecile would destroy himself with it," Newton said.

He had meant to assert a general principle. Gurtis received a personal judgement.

While the wolves turned towards the argument, Robert slipped behind an attendant and entered the royal tent. The cooking pot stood upon a low stove. Beside it lay a bag marked SKULLREADER — MEASURE WITH CARE.

He brought it outside.

Newton reached for it. Gurtis moved between them.

"This is what makes a king?"

"No," Beardsley said. "That is precisely—"

But the wolves had begun to move. Some withdrew from Newton. Others stood closer. A small pup pressed against the back of the King's chair, looking for a way past the gathering legs.

Robert understood too late what the evidence had become.

Gurtis struck first. The wolves around him followed. Robert pulled at the arm of the guard holding Darcy; the guard shoved him aside and ran towards the royal table. Darcy caught Robert before he fell and took Beardsley from the ground.

At the stove, Gurtis lifted Newton by the neck. Robert turned away when he heard the bone break. He saw only the next part: the bag emptied into the pot, the pot raised, the broth disappearing into the new King's mouth.

"Now who is the right-hand man?" Gurtis demanded.

The clearing answered in howls.

Darcy pushed Robert towards the trees. They ran until they reached the river. The balladeer opened a compartment in his side and drew out a length of cord.

"Tie him to you."

Robert fastened Beardsley beneath the collar of his tunic. Darcy opened two lower valves. Water began filling chambers inside him when he stepped into the shallows.

"I was built to float," he said. "One can adjust."

They sank below the surface together. Darcy's hand remained closed around Robert's sleeve. Above them the river shook with the passage of light. For a while they moved along the bottom, then Darcy closed one valve and released a weight from a pocket. The current lifted them and took them downstream.

Through the water Robert heard a long, broken sound from the camp. Beardsley's fibres tightened against his neck.

They came up beneath an overhanging bank far from the workshops. Darcy climbed out and lay with water running from his coat.

"We did that," Robert said.

Beardsley was silent for a moment.

"We exposed what he was doing. Gurtis chose what to do with it."

"I brought the bag."

"Yes."

Neither of them found anything else to say. Darcy opened his valves and let the remaining water drain into the grass.

* * *

Elias stopped going to the back room in the afternoons because the back room was too far. He lay instead on the daybed in the kitchen, where Adelaide could see him from the stove, and she moved the screw dish to the windowsill beside him so that he would have something to look at that was his.

He did not complain. He had never complained about anything except badly seasoned timber and people who did not return tools. He

asked, once, whether the latch on the front window had been oiled, and she said it had, and he said good, and then asked again an hour later. She said it had. He said good.

The doctor came on Thursdays. He was a young man who had been to a college in the East and used words that he then translated, kindly, into other words that meant the same thing. Adelaide listened to both versions and understood that neither contained a date.

On the Sunday, James came with his wife and their three children, and the children were sent into the yard, and the adults sat round the daybed in the kitchen talking about the price of flour. Elias listened with his eyes closed. When the talk turned to whether the railway would extend the branch line, he opened them.

"It won't," he said.

"Why not, Dad?"

"Nobody's asked it to who can pay."

James laughed, and his wife laughed, and Elias closed his eyes again, pleased. Adelaide saw the pleasure and kept it. It was the last thing he said that anyone laughed at.

That night, when the house was quiet, he asked her about the boy.

She was surprised. In thirty years he had never once raised it. He had listened, always, and looked at the drawings when she offered them, and noticed the lock pick when she had only seen the lock. But he had never begun the conversation.

"Is he all right?"

She sat on the edge of the daybed. She thought of the last pages: a workshop, a beard on a boy's knee, a small animal speaking at a crack in a door.

"He's with people," she said. "Some of them are kind."

"Good." Elias moved his hand on the blanket until it found hers. "I'd have liked to meet him."

"He'd have liked you."

"You don't know that."

"He likes people who fix things properly."

Elias thought about this for a while. His breathing was slow, with a small catch at the top of each breath, like a latch not quite meeting its keeper.

"Tell him," he said, "to count the screws afterwards. Including the ones he didn't use."

She said she would. She did not know how she would ever tell Robert anything. She said it anyway.

He died on the Tuesday, in the afternoon, with the window open.

17

The Recruitment Song

Darcy's left knee seized before they reached dry shelter. He sat beneath a tree and opened the joint, revealing a small mechanism in which grit had collected. Robert held a lamp made from a twist of cloth in a shallow dish of oil while the balladeer worked.

"An excellent construction," Beardsley said.

"I have outlasted the person who did it."

"You knew them?" Robert asked.

"Very well, briefly. Less well than I believed."

Darcy shook the last drops from his flask, put it on the ground, and began to sing. At first Robert thought he meant to evade the question. The tune was quieter than his public songs, and the first line ended before the place where an audience would have expected it to.

I lent my name to a woman's song,
She lent hers to a room.
I thought a door that opened once
Would open when I came.

He stopped to clear grit from the joint.

"That's not the right rhyme," Robert said.

"No."

Darcy turned the little tool. Something clicked within the knee.

A man had orders for that door,
Another held the light.
They left me what could still be sold
And called the measure right.

He did not describe the woman as faithless. He sang of a room where she had been told he would not come, of a man who had been told he had been replaced, and of the satisfaction other people took in putting the two accounts to use. Robert could not tell which parts Darcy had witnessed and which had been added afterwards to make the song continue.

"Did she know what they'd do?"

"I never asked her."

"Why?"

Darcy looked down at the open knee.

The surgeon said the parts were sound,
The singer could be saved.
He asked me where I wished to stand.
I said beside her grave.

"Was she dead?" Robert asked.

"By then."

The balladeer held the next note so softly it almost disappeared beneath the stream. Beardsley waited. Robert had never heard Darcy leave enough silence for a listener to decide whether he wanted more.

He gave me gold to hold a note,
And silver for a tongue.
The years went on outside the shop.
Inside, I stayed unsung.

There had been kindness in the reconstruction, Darcy said, and curiosity, and payment from someone who wanted a demonstration. He had mistaken all three for a promise that survival would restore the life he

had lost. The maker could repair a mechanism indefinitely. He could not repair what Darcy did with it.

"You could change the last verse," Robert said.

Darcy put the cover back over his knee. He tried to stand, sat down again, and waited for the joint to settle.

"Yes."

"That doesn't explain selling us," Robert said.

Darcy held the flask without putting it away.

"No."

"Or what you'll do next time."

"No."

Beardsley asked him to close the knee before more dirt entered. Robert lowered the lamp.

* * *

After Elias died, Adelaide kept his screw dish beside the window. The dish was chipped along one edge. He had always turned that edge towards the wall, and she continued doing so when she dusted.

May asked whether she wanted the tools put away. Adelaide said later. A month afterwards May asked again, more carefully, and Adelaide told her where the box belonged. They packed it together. At the bottom lay the string from the youngest child's luggage, wound around a piece of card on which Elias had written its length.

"He kept everything," May said.

"Only what he thought would be useful."

They looked at the string. Neither put it aside.

Adelaide moved to a smaller room when the stairs became troublesome. She took the notebooks, the dish, a chair, and the table at which she could sit facing the window. Other people decided what to do with the larger furniture. She was grateful not to have to watch the beds leave.

Her grandchildren visited in batches which grew taller between visits. They knew that the books contained drawings and asked to see the

animals. She showed them a bird, a lion, a tree. At a page she did not want them to see, she put her hand across the paper and said that one was unfinished.

The oldest asked why the boy in the drawings never got much bigger.

"He does," she said.

"Not like us."

"No."

The child waited for the explanation. Adelaide turned to the next drawing, which showed a field and several round white creatures. She did not know their name. The children supplied names until she laughed. Afterwards, when they had gone, she wrote *Robert* beside the small figure at the fence and left the creatures unnamed.

She had become tired enough to sleep in the afternoon. The dreams did not respect this new arrangement any more than they had respected the old one. Sometimes she woke knowing that she had missed part of something while a visitor spoke to her. Sometimes she missed the visitor instead. She began leaving the pencil tied to the notebook so that finding it would not consume what she still remembered.

* * *

In the morning they discussed the Abbey. Robert wanted the records and the device that had taken him. Beardsley warned that the people there would be looking for him, but he could offer no other route to the knowledge Robert needed.

They followed a tributary away from the main river, then climbed a ridge that brought them above the burnt ground. Robert's leg improved slowly. His chest did not cease to hurt merely because he had learned to ignore it while walking.

From the ridge they could see how far the fire had gone. It had gone further than Robert had imagined a fire could go. The Last Forest lay below them as a black country, smoking still in places, crossed by the silver line of the river and marked here and there by trees that had some-

how survived and stood up out of the ash like people who had not heard the order to lie down. Farthest was somewhere in it. He looked for the clearing and could not find it. Everything had become the same colour.

"Don't," said Beardsley, from his shoulder.

"Don't what?"

"Try to work out which smoke is which. You'll pick one and decide it's the mill, and you'll never know if you were right, and you'll look at it anyway."

Robert looked away. Darcy was walking a little ahead of them, very upright, his coat buttoned to the throat. He had not sung since the river. On the second day, Robert noticed, he began to walk with one hand in his pocket, and on the third day he took it out only to steady himself on rocks, and when he did the fingers were moving on their own.

"Is he ill?" Robert asked Beardsley quietly.

"He's out."

"Of what?"

The beard did not answer at once. Ahead of them Darcy stopped at a stream, knelt, and drank from his cupped hands for a long time, although he did not need water any more than Robert did.

"Of the thing that makes his hands stop," Beardsley said. "Wine softens the seals. Without it they harden, and the living parts behind them start to ache. He'll be like this for days. Then he'll be worse. Then, if he gets through it, he'll be better for a while."

"And if he doesn't get through it?"

"Then he'll find wine," said Beardsley, "and that's a way of getting through it too."

Robert watched Darcy's fingers working against the stones of the streambed.

"Do you miss them?" he asked. "Hands."

"I miss turning a screw." A strand lifted from Robert's shoulder and drew a small shape in the air, a curve, a joint. "Not a whole hand. One

finger would do. A finger that could turn a screw on a clamp. Then I could make the next finger with it."

"Could you?"

"In principle." The strand lay down again. "Principle is the part that doesn't need wire."

On the third night Darcy sat apart from them with his back against a boulder and his knees drawn up, and Robert took him a cup of water filtered through a scrap of charcoal from his pocket. Darcy looked at the cup and laughed. The laugh was not a good sound.

"Charcoal," he said. "My dear boy. It catches some things."

"Not everything," said Robert.

"No." Darcy took the cup. His hand shook so badly that half of it went down his coat. He drank the other half and held the empty cup against his chest. "Not everything. You remember that. You're going to meet a great many people who will tell you they've found the thing that catches everything. They'll be selling it."

He closed his eyes. Robert sat down beside him, not close, and after a while Darcy began to hum very quietly, not a song but only the notes of one, and Robert fell asleep listening to it and did not know whether it had finished.

On the fourth day the Abbey appeared across a narrow ravine.

The doors stood open. Cart tracks marked the yard. In the kitchen, a pot had dried upon the stove. Robert found his old room empty, its borrowed blanket gone.

The laboratory contained the frame where Cerebro had lain, but no body. Tubes had been cut and sealed. Mouthbelly's enclosure was empty too. The Milloptiscope had been dismantled down to the sockets in the floor.

Robert stood by the frame for a long time. The padding still held a shallow hollow in the shape of the small body, and in the hollow lay a single thin tube, sealed at both ends with wax. Somebody had been careful. Whoever had cut the tubes had sealed them rather than let

them drain, which meant that whoever had moved Cerebro had intended him to go on living somewhere else.

He put his hand flat in the hollow. It was cold.

"I said I'd find out," he told it.

Beardsley, on his shoulder, said nothing. Darcy had wandered to the other end of the room and was looking into the cage where the plant had stood. The plant was gone. The gold wire had been left, because gold wire was cheap to the Order, and a few yellow leaves lay on its floor.

In the corridor outside, where the guest room was, Robert found stacks of empty crates. They had been left because they were the wrong size, or because nobody had time to carry them down the cliff. The stencilling on them was the same careful hand he would later see in the capital, every letter the same width. VENERY ABBEY TO ROOF STATION. SURVEY INSTRUMENTS. SPECIMEN JARS, EMPTY: 400. And on the last one, lying on its side where somebody had dropped it: SPECIMEN JARS, FILLED: 0.

He did not know what the jars were for. He noticed that someone had expected to fill four hundred of them, and that someone had written down, in the same careful hand, that none had yet been filled, and that the crate had been prepared anyway.

Darcy found a dispatch beneath the kitchen table. Its heading authorized transfer of personnel and special apparatus to the roof station in Megalopolis.

"A larger machine," Beardsley said, studying the quantities listed.

Robert searched the papers left beside the laboratory bench. Most concerned deliveries, but one sheet contained an outline he recognized: a body crossed by dark lines, connected to a ring of separate points.

He could read the labels without understanding the mathematics. Peak load. Distributed coupling. Rejected: fabrication burden.

Beardsley asked him to turn the page.

"They considered spreading it," he said. "Then decided it was easier to put the burden through you."

Robert looked at the drawing again. The ring of separate points stood around the central figure like people standing round a table, each connected to the figure and to its neighbours by fine lines. In the corner someone had worked out a sum. He could read the figures without understanding what they counted. The first sum was long and ended in a very large number. The second, beside the single figure in the centre, was short and ended in a very small one.

"What's that?"

Beardsley drew a strand along the first sum.

"The cost of building twelve points instead of one. Twelve harnesses. Twelve people who can carry a share." The strand moved to the second. "And that's the cost of one boy who's already been found."

"It's less."

"It's much less." The beard was quiet. "It's always less, to put everything through one. Until the one breaks. Then you find out what the other sum was for."

Robert thought of the seam under the jaw of the mask. He thought of Beardsley pulling gently everywhere, and saying that a seam fails at its most loaded point.

"They knew," he said.

"They knew it would be harder for you. They wrote it down. Then they wrote *rejected*." Beardsley let the strand fall. "Keep it."

"Could it take me back?"

"It tells us something about the connection. It doesn't tell us how to choose a destination."

Robert folded the sheet and put it inside the embroidered cloth.

They left by a service path Darcy found behind the kitchens. It joined the lower road well beyond the broken cliff track.

"Megalopolis," the balladeer said. "I know people."

Robert looked at him.

"People who can get us inside," Darcy added. "That's all I'm promising."

* * *

Darcy possessed a suit of cream silk folded into a compartment that Robert would have expected to contain part of a lung. It emerged dry, scarcely creased, and unsuitable for the road along which they were walking.

Plague Guardsmen saluted it. Refugees looked at it with a different kind of attention.

By midday Beardsley advised a change. Darcy reversed the coat, exposing a plain lining. Robert wore the beard, which concealed the dark lines along his jaw and gave him the appearance, provided nobody looked for long, of a very small elderly man whose constitution had survived unusual demands. Beardsley said that people looked at a beard and not at what was under it; his trade had been licensed on that principle.

"Dr. Lotushand," Beardsley said when a woman asked whether they could look at her husband's foot.

They could not cure the injury, but Beardsley knew how to clean it and Robert could make a better support from the materials available. The husband insisted they visit the gathering ahead, where there were others who needed attention.

The gathering filled a roadside field. Families slept beneath sheets strung between carts. At its centre several young men argued in a hut too small for their offices.

"Liberation Organization," one said.

"Revolutionary Army," said another.

"Mudmuckers have been excluded again."

"No one has excluded—"

"The name does."

They welcomed the doctor as an impartial person whose agreement would establish which of them was right. Beardsley listened to the competing descriptions, then asked whether all of them harvested soil.

"Obviously."

"Then the Soil Harvester Liberation Organization Revolutionary Army appears to include your stated requirements."

Silence followed. It was the longest interval of agreement the hut had experienced that day.

Darcy, who had been humming to himself, supplied a tune. By evening the entire camp could sing its refrain:

Carry the earth that carried you,
Bring every willing hand.
We have dug enough for other men;
Now dig for those who stand.

Robert listened to a woman sing while wrapping a child's blistered feet. There was more in her voice than the absurdity of the committee. Her cart held a sack of soil she had been required to deliver from land on which nothing now grew.

When she had finished with the child's feet, she let Robert look at the sack. It was stamped with the same half-circle of wheat ears he had worn on the back of his tunic in Farthest. Beneath the stamp, a tag gave a district, a quota, and a date by which the quota was due. The date had passed.

"What happens now?" he asked.

"Now it's arrears." She tied the sack shut again. "Arrears are carried. Next year's quota is this year's and last year's together. When there's nothing left to dig, they carry you."

She explained it without heat, the way Nella had explained the knots. Her family had held a strip by the Boundary River for four generations. The soil there was dark and deep, and the quota was assessed on its depth, so that a family with good soil owed more of it. They had dug a spade's depth every year and sent it inward in carts. The carts

came back empty. After twenty years the spade struck clay, and after thirty it struck stone, and the assessment had not changed, because the assessment was made from a survey taken before anyone began to dig.

"Did you ask them to change it?"

"We sent a petition."

"What did they say?"

"That the survey was accurate at the time of surveying." She smiled, very slightly, in a way that did not involve her eyes. "Which it was."

The child on her knee had fallen asleep. She shifted him so that his bandaged feet hung free.

"So now we dig for ourselves," she said, and nodded towards the hut where the committee was still debating its name. "Or we will, once they've decided what to call it."

Beardsley, from Robert's chin, asked whether she believed they would.

She considered the question honestly. Robert liked her for that.

"I believe we can't go back to the other thing," she said. "That's not the same as believing in the committee. But it's enough to get up for."

* * *

In the morning the camp held elections. There were three candidates for the post of Chief Commissioner of Soil, and four for Deputy, and the voting was done by standing in lines behind the candidates' banners. This worked well until it became apparent that the longest line stood behind a banner which had been painted the previous night by a man who could not spell, and which, read literally, nominated nobody for the post of Chief Commissioner of Soul.

There was a long discussion. Some held that the voters had clearly intended the candidate beside whom the banner had been placed. Others held that the voters had voted for the banner, and that if a spelling error could invalidate a vote, the Revolution had adopted the Assemblage's own methods. A third faction proposed that the post of

Chief Commissioner of Soul should be created, since it had obviously commanded a majority, and filled by lot.

Robert watched from the edge of the field with Darcy, who had begun to shake again, and Beardsley, who had stopped commenting.

"They'll kill each other," Robert said.

"Some of them," said Beardsley. "Probably over something smaller than this."

"Then why are they doing it?"

"Because they've never been allowed to decide anything, and they're not very good at it yet, and the only way to get good at it is to do it badly first." The beard was quiet. "The people who taught them otherwise are the people who'll tell you this proves they shouldn't be allowed."

"Is he right?" Robert asked Darcy.

Darcy looked at the lines, the banners, the man with the painted badge shouting that the Revolution would not be dictated to by grammar. His hands were in his pockets. He did not take them out.

"He's right," the balladeer said. "And they will kill each other. Both."

When they tried to leave, a man with a newly painted badge stopped them.

"Every willing hand," he said.

"A song," Darcy replied.

"Our song."

"Certainly."

"Then you believe in it."

"As a composition."

The officer placed himself across the path.

"No one unwilling to assist the liberation may pass through the liberated area."

"Then willing is an unusual word for it," Robert said.

The officer looked closely at him. Beardsley tightened along his chin, reminding him whose voice he was meant to be using.

A woman carrying a bucket approached. Robert recognized her as the wife of the man whose foot they had dressed.

"The committee wants you," she told the officer.

"Which committee?"

"That's the difficulty. They've named another one."

He left at once.

She pointed towards a break in the hedge.

"That takes you round the back. Don't use the road until you're clear."

"Thank you," Robert said.

"My husband can stand. That's thanks enough."

They passed through the hedge. Behind them the song continued, altered by people who had learned it from other people rather than from its author. Darcy listened with visible distress when a note went wrong. For once he did not go back to correct it.

* * *

The first carts they met carried soil. It was piled above their sides and covered with cloth. The men pulling them walked in grooves worn into the road by other men doing the same work.

Beyond the Boundary River, fields extended into a haze. The nearest crop appeared to move without wind. As they approached, Robert saw pale growths hanging from branches that bent beneath their weight. The smell reached him before Beardsley supplied the name.

"Meattrees."

"What feeds them?"

"Among other things, what you've seen being delivered."

The nearest fruit hung in a sling of fibres grown from the branch itself. It was as long as Robert's arm, covered by a pale membrane beneath which blue vessels divided. At intervals the membrane tightened, drawing the whole weight upwards by a fraction before letting it settle again. A worker came along with a hooked knife and touched each sling, testing the resistance.

"Ripe?" Robert asked.

The man glanced towards Darcy's coat before answering.

"Ready for delivery."

He cut the first sling. The fruit dropped into a trough and split along a seam which had been made by its own growth. Warm fluid ran towards a covered drain. The smell combined a kitchen just before a meal with the mill yard on a hot afternoon. Robert stepped back. The worker caught the second fruit before it struck the first; bruising reduced the price.

Between the rows, pipes fed dark liquid into basins sunk around the trunks. Men carried sacks from the soil carts and spread their contents over the exposed roots. Robert saw stones, scraps of grass, a bit of pottery. Somebody's ground had arrived here still carrying small pieces of the life which had occupied it.

Beside the carts, the fruit continued its small muscular movements, pulling against fibres that had been bred to carry exactly that burden.

At the bridge a clerk sat behind a barrier while Guardsmen stood on either side. Darcy had put the silk coat right side out. He advanced with the exhausted confidence of a person who had endured too much inconvenience to be suspected of lacking status.

His papers, he explained, had been lost during a regrettable encounter with disaffected labour. His physician and attendant had accompanied him at considerable personal risk. He required immediate passage and would be pleased to remember the assistance of any official capable of providing it.

The clerk asked his name. Darcy gave a long version that included a minor appointment to a court Robert had never heard of.

The clerk did not appear to have heard of it either, which proved useful. He issued an emergency pass.

"An escort will accompany you."

"There is no need—"

"For your safety."

Four Guardsmen left the bridge with them.

For the first mile Darcy kept up a stream of conversation to conceal the ticking inside his chest. When conversation did not loosen the escort, he tried offence, then a pretended stone in his shoe. The escort stopped when he stopped and moved when he moved. One Guardsman remained close enough to touch the silk coat. Another watched Robert.

Along the next field's edge, ripe Deathleberries hung almost within reach. Darcy looked from them to the officer's hand, then to the beard hiding Robert's face. His fingers closed and opened without completing the movement he wanted.

Robert saw the calculation before he understood its terms.

"Don't use me," he said.

Darcy's hand moved towards his chin.

"They'll recognize you," Beardsley warned.

"I know."

For a moment the balladeer looked as though he might stop. Then the nearest Guard stepped closer to Robert, making the choice easier by showing Darcy exactly where the men's attention would go.

Beardsley drew his outer strands tight against Robert's skin.

Darcy pulled the beard from Robert's face.

The nearest Guardsman stopped. Robert stood exposed, the black lines visible along his neck. Darcy looked from him to the Guard and thrust Beardsley back into his hands.

Then he ran into the field.

Robert followed because remaining offered nothing better. The bushes parted before his chest reached them. He felt a faint pulling through the harness, like the response of the plants beside the Abbey's instrument. Behind him, the branches closed.

A Guard pushed into them. The bush bent towards his cloak and held it. Another branch reached across his arm. Robert heard the tear of cloth and then a cry.

He found Darcy kneeling among the berries, eating them from both hands.

"Get up."

The balladeer looked at him with tears running down his face.

Robert struck the berries from his hand.

"Now."

Darcy stood. They moved through the field until the calls behind them ceased. At its far side Robert stopped and retched, bringing up very little. His body could go without food.

Darcy had filled his pockets.

"I know another entrance," he said.

Robert took Beardsley from his shoulder and fastened him beneath his chin again.

"Then show us."

18

The Capital of the World

The entrance Darcy knew was beneath a culvert, behind a door that had been painted the same colour as the wet stone. A woman opened it after he knocked three times, waited, and knocked once more.

"You owe me," she said.

"I have come to improve the account."

She looked at Robert and Beardsley.

"No."

"Not that sort of account."

Darcy produced the small comb from his coat. It was worked in silver. The woman examined it, then stepped aside.

They entered a passage lit by reflected daylight. Workers moved past carrying baskets, pipes, trays, and tools. Water ran in an open channel beside their feet. Above the channel, children sat on a platform stripping fibrous stalks into separate lengths.

"Necessaries," Beardsley murmured.

Robert watched a child rub his wrist before starting another stalk.

"Necessary to whom?"

"You will see."

A man with a bag of tools stopped Darcy at the next junction. He had a narrow scar running from the corner of one eye to his ear.

"Upper way's closed."

"Since when?"

"Since the supports cracked. They haven't authorized new ones."

Darcy complained. The man ignored him and looked at Robert's uneven gait.

"Stairs there. Behind the blue plate. No lift, but they go all the way up. They were built for when the lifts stop working."

"Do they often?"

"Often enough that someone built stairs."

His name was Iven. Robert remembered it because he was the first person inside the city who had given him directions without asking for anything in return.

The children on the platform worked in pairs. One split the stalk. The other caught the lengths before they fell into the channel. Their feet hung above the water. A little board nailed to the wall recorded the day's quantity in bundles, though Robert could see no bundles large enough to explain the number already entered.

"They count each length," Iven told him later. "It sounds more productive."

The channels branched at every junction. Fresh water ran above head height in closed pipes; used water travelled beside the path, and waste passed below it through openings fitted with grates. A worker lifted one grate with an iron hook. Everyone nearby stopped moving until he had lowered it again. The hook was chained to his belt, and a metal exemption disk hung beside it.

Darcy showed the inside of his coat when challenged. The guard barely glanced at the fittings in his chest. He examined the workman's hook much more carefully.

"They know you?" Robert asked.

"They know what it costs."

At the cracked support Iven held a lamp close to the stone. A dark line ran through it and continued behind the plate fixed over its base. Someone had painted a number beside the line. A second number had been painted below the first.

"Two inspections," Iven said.

"Did they mend it?"

He moved the lamp. Behind the plate, Robert could see daylight where the parts should have met. The painting of the number had required a ladder. The mending required permission to close the passage above, and the people who used that passage had complained about the ladder.

Iven took them by a lower route. The path grew narrow enough that Darcy had to turn sideways. Above them came a steady grinding as a lift carried a party to the garden. The counterweight passed through the shaft beside Robert's head, a block so large that he could not see its upper edge before it vanished into shadow.

"Keep your hands in," Iven said.

He waited until Robert had passed. At the stairs he showed him the blue plate. The release was beneath it, where a shorter person could reach it and a visitor would be unlikely to look.

"Lift, then pull. If you only pull, it holds."

Robert tried it. The stair door opened against his shoulder. Beyond lay darkness, a rail polished by hands, and a draught which smelled faintly of flowers.

They did not go up at once. Iven had a delivery to finish, and the delivery gave them a reason to be on the stair. He led them first through a kitchen larger than the whole of Farthest's tavern, where thirty people worked at benches without once looking at the ceiling. The ceiling was the floor of the garden. Now and then it dripped.

At the far end, men were carrying crates towards a service lift. The crates were long, fitted with rope handles at either end, and stencilled in a hand that had been trained to make every letter the same width. ROOF STATION. PERIPHERAL SURVEY. FRAGILE: DO NOT INVERT. One had been inverted. A man stood beside it with a board, recording the fact.

"What's in them?" Robert asked.

Iven lifted a shoulder. "Things for up top. They've been going up for a month. Glass, mostly. Some soil."

"Soil?"

"In jars. Labelled." He took one of the kitchen trays and balanced it on his hip. "Somebody's paying for jars of dirt to go to the roof. I carry them. I don't ask whose dirt."

Robert looked at the stencil again. He had seen soil in carts, in sacks, in wagons with their sides boarded up, always travelling inwards. This was the first soil he had seen going up. He thought of the drawing in the Abbey with its ring of separate points, and of the dispatch beneath the kitchen table. He could not make the pieces fit, but he could feel them trying.

At the lift a guard examined the carriers. He looked at the hook chained to one man's belt, at a knife with a certified blade, at the buckle of a woman's apron. Each object that contained metal had to be matched to a disk. The disks were stamped with the name of the household which held the exemption, so that a person carrying a spoon was also carrying proof that somebody owned the right to let them.

A girl no older than the children on the stalk platform had come without her disk. She had a pair of scissors for trimming the garden's dead blossoms. The guard took the scissors, examined them, and put them in a box with other unaccompanied metal.

"I need them upstairs," the girl said.

"Then bring the disk."

"The disk's upstairs."

"Then the scissors can join it there."

He did not give them back. The girl looked at the box, then at Iven, who shook his head very slightly. She went up in the lift without them. Robert watched her hands, which had nothing to do, open and close at her sides until the doors closed.

"What will she cut with?" he asked.

"Her fingers," Iven said. "Then she'll be told she's slow."

He shifted the tray and led them to the stair.

The garden level smelled of flowers so strongly that it almost concealed the fields outside. Light descended through mirrored shafts. On

a path between clipped hedges, a group of beautiful people stood waiting while a servant adjusted their clothing.

"Human Art," Darcy said, with the approving familiarity of someone discussing a costly instrument.

One young woman held a bowl so steadily that Robert noticed the strain at her wrist. When the servant turned away, she shifted it to the other hand and flexed her fingers. Her eyes met Robert's for a moment. Then she resumed her pose.

The flowers stood in beds no deeper than the length of Robert's hand. Beneath them a false bank concealed the upper pipes. When a servant knelt to remove a dead blossom, the bank opened on little hinges and released a smell of hot water and something sour. He shut it quickly. A couple walking nearby slowed until the air had improved.

The young woman with the bowl asked them to move aside. Her voice was ordinary and impatient. It startled Robert more than her beauty had done.

"He'll come round again," she said.

The servant was examining a line of people arranged beside a pool. Each held a flower, a vessel, or a length of cloth chosen to make the next person's colours more conspicuous. The woman shifted the bowl against her hip. Robert put out his hands to help.

"Don't. Then I'd have to explain why you were carrying it."

"It's heavy."

"Yes."

She rested it on the concealed pipe casing while the servant's back was turned. Another person, further along, stepped sideways to block the view. She flexed her fingers, counted under her breath, and lifted the bowl again before the servant completed his turn.

On the upper path two men discussed the difficulty of acquiring good Human Art. One objected that the finest examples grew older. The other replied that upkeep was part of ownership. They passed close enough for the woman to hear. Her face did not change, but she tilted

the bowl a little, letting a thread of water run across the path where their polished shoes were about to go.

Robert watched them step in it. She returned the bowl to its required angle.

The performers' square lay above this garden. Getting there required another stair, a bridge over a shaft, and a passage whose windows showed the same flowers from a height at which the people holding bowls appeared motionless. Darcy admired the composition. Robert remembered the woman's fingers counting their interval of rest.

They climbed. Each level contained fewer people carrying things and more people to whom things were carried. Beardsley tightened his weave around Robert's face and told him to stop staring at every doorway.

At a square crowded with performers, Darcy slipped away. The last Robert saw of him, he was speaking to a clerk at the foot of a stair. The clerk wrote something down and pointed upwards.

Robert looked for the cream coat among ribbons and painted masks. A woman carrying a hoop stopped beside him.

"That walk," she said. "Leparda's boy?"

He knew her then: a dancer who had travelled with the Guild, older now, one shoulder held higher than the other. She had once given him a strip of sweet peel when he had been hungry enough to eat it with the rind still attached.

"Tessa."

"You've grown a beard."

"It's complicated."

She looked closely and decided not to pursue it.

Tessa put her hoop around Robert and drew him out of the stream of people. The movement looked like part of a rehearsal. Two officials passed without stopping.

"Let me see you."

He lifted his chin. Beardsley remained still. Tessa examined the repairs in the tunic before she looked at the beard.

"Leparda used that red lining."

Robert put a hand over the cloth.

"I know."

"She wanted the good side against your back. Said it would wear better."

He had thought the lining had been chosen because nothing else was available. He looked down at it as though he might now see a different colour.

Tessa asked where Ma was. He told her. She turned the hoop once between her hands, then held it still.

"We shouldn't have let them sell you."

He waited for the explanation which usually followed an admission. She offered none. A drummer called her name. She answered that she was coming, then stayed long enough to ask whether Robert could climb stairs.

"Slowly."

"Then we go slowly until the music begins."

At the next landing she adjusted the cloth around his shoulder so that it concealed the bandage. He asked whether hers still hurt.

"Only when I use it."

They climbed in the slow way she had promised. At each landing Tessa let him rest while she stretched the bad shoulder against the wall, and at each landing she told him one thing.

The Guild was gone. It had not been defeated; it had been merged. The Right-Hand poets, having been confined to verse for a generation, had turned out to be very good at writing advertisements, and a new management had bought both companies and the rights to the old treaty. The lions had been sold to a man who kept them for breeding. The executioner had been retained.

"And Ollo?"

Tessa frowned, then remembered. "The cabinet boy. He grew. They put him on the gate taking tickets. Last I heard he'd married a girl from

the costume wagon and they'd gone somewhere the Guild doesn't tour."

"Where doesn't it tour?"

"Places too poor to pay." She pushed off from the wall. "He'll be all right. He was good at slowing things down when nobody was watching."

At the next landing she told him that the Stage Manager had died of a fever in a town where the fever had been advertised on the bills as a local attraction. At the one after, that the Cashier now worked for the new management at twice his old salary, because he was the only person who understood where the old money had gone.

"Did you ever see Peep?" Robert asked.

Tessa stopped with her hand on the rail. For a moment she seemed about to give him the kind of answer Leparda had given, the answer that was a door closing quietly. Then she changed her mind.

"No," she said. "Nobody did. I asked once. The Cashier showed me a line in his book. *Surplus infant, placed.* That was all it said."

"Placed where?"

"That's what I asked." She started climbing again. "He said the entry was complete."

Robert followed her up. The line had the shape of a thing he had heard many times since, in many voices: a sentence built so that its last word shut the door behind it. He began to think he could recognize such sentences before they reached the end.

At the top of the stair the music was already beginning.

The drummer called again. She lifted the hoop with her better arm and led him into the procession.

"We're going to the Assemblage. Keep behind the drummers. They never count us properly."

Robert told her he needed to speak to someone in charge.

"Everyone there is," she said. "That's part of the difficulty."

Robert followed, carrying Beardsley's slight weight against his chin and the folded diagram beneath his clothes.

* * *

The chamber of the Assemblage contained enough food to make Robert think first of the people carrying soil across the bridge. The thought did not make the food less attractive. Fruit shone in shallow dishes. Steam rose from trays brought through doors too low for anyone important to enter upright.

The dancers passed between reclining men. Tessa moved with the measured care of someone who must conceal an injury while using it. Robert waited until the music stopped, then stepped forward.

"The wolves have masks," he said.

A man holding a pear looked at him. Another asked whether this was part of the entertainment.

The Steward came quickly across the room.

"Your introduction?"

"Robert Small."

"Your authorized introduction."

Beardsley supplied Dr. Lotushand and began explaining the urgency. The Steward listened with increasing offence.

"Then you have entered under a false description."

He took them to a waiting room with windows overlooking the city. The door closed. From there Robert saw the road fill with people carrying improvised banners. The tune reaching the window was Darcy's, though few were singing it in the same time.

At the gates the crowd stopped. Smoke rose from the walls. People scattered and gathered again beyond the range of the Guard's weapons.

The Steward had first offered the designation *Visitor in Possession of an Allegation*. Beardsley asked whether an allegation could be acted on before its possessor had finished visiting.

"That depends on its importance."

"Then call him a Person with Important Information."

"That requires approval."

"From whom?"

The Steward named three offices. Two were represented in the room beyond. The third had been absorbed into one of the first two, but he could not remember which. He left to establish where the signature should go.

While they waited, Robert stood at the window. The crowd outside the gate had ceased singing. People at the rear could not see why those in front had stopped, and continued moving until the whole mass pressed against itself. A cart overturned. Someone climbed onto it and waved a strip of cloth. Robert could not tell whether the gesture asked the crowd to advance or to let the fallen people stand.

The Steward returned with a correction. The designation could be temporary if Robert agreed to relinquish it immediately after providing the information.

"I don't want it afterwards."

"People say that."

The first broken window in the city shone below them like a little mirror. Then there were several. The Steward moved Robert away from the sill because persons awaiting designation were not permitted to expose themselves to a risk for which the office might later be considered responsible.

Beardsley asked whether the office was responsible for keeping them there.

"You are free to withdraw the application."

"And leave?"

"After your original means of entry has been examined."

A clerk arrived while they waited, bringing a writing slope and a stool. He had been sent to take down the information. He arranged the slope on his knees, opened the ink, and dipped the pen.

"Name of the Person with Important Information."

"Robert Small."

The clerk began to write, then stopped with the pen above the paper.

"Has the designation been approved?"

"Not yet."

The clerk turned to a fresh sheet and headed it *Summary of Information to Be Provided*. Robert gave it: wolves, masks, a breach below, gas that would not stop them. The clerk wrote it all down.

"That's the information," Robert said.

"This is the summary." The clerk blotted the page. "A summary has no standing. If it did, people would stop applying."

He took the page away.

Robert put his palm flat against the table. Under his clothes, the harness continued the work which permitted him to live without drawing the room's warm, scented air. Beyond the door men argued about whose title entitled him to hear what Robert had already said.

An hour passed. The Steward brought a form. Robert could read it but could not supply most of what it requested.

The form asked for his father's occupation. He could answer that one. He said *storekeeper*, and the clerk, who had returned to supervise, wrote it down with approval, as though Robert had finally produced a fact that belonged in a form. It asked for his place of birth. He said Saskatchewan. The clerk asked him to spell it. He could read it, from the cloth; he had never had to say the letters aloud. He said them slowly, one by one, and the clerk wrote them down one by one, and then looked at the word for a long time.

"There is no such district."

"It's where I was born."

"Then you were born outside a district." The clerk turned the form over, found nothing on the back, and turned it again. "There is no line for that."

"Could you write it in the margin?"

The clerk looked shocked. He explained that marginal entries were permitted only for corrections, and a correction implied a prior error, and Robert had not yet made one. If he would first state a place of birth within a recognized district, the clerk could then enter Saskatchewan in the margin as its correction. Robert asked which district he should

state. The clerk said that he could not advise an applicant on the content of his answers.

"Farthest," Robert said.

The clerk wrote *Farthest*. Then he wrote *Saskatchewan* in the margin beside it, and initialled the correction, and looked relieved.

The first explosion struck while he was explaining that he had no recognized residence. A window cracked from corner to corner. On the far side of the city, dust rose from a breach near the lower entrances.

Through it came wolves in metal armour.

Greenish vapour spread across the garden level. The wolves continued through it, masks fixed over their muzzles. Robert saw one pause to adjust a strap, using the movement he had demonstrated in the workshop.

He left the form on the table and went into the corridor. At a service door Iven and another worker were forcing a stuck latch.

"The lower passages," Robert said. "They've broken through."

Iven looked towards the windows.

"Which entrance?"

Robert showed him. Iven turned to the other worker.

"Blue stairs. Open the cross doors. Don't wait for the bell."

The blue plate resisted when Robert first lifted it. Something had shifted in the wall above the release. Iven put a shoulder against the door and told him to try again when he counted. The second attempt opened a gap wide enough for fingers. Hot dust came through it.

"Clear the rack," Iven said.

The other worker objected that the dishes on it had been entered to their section. Iven took three at a time and placed them on the floor. Robert took the next three. When there was enough space, they dragged the rack away from the door and let the rest fall.

People in the kitchen stopped working at the sound. A woman holding a tray asked whether they were expected to continue serving. The question made Robert think of the men in the chamber and the food arriving through the little doors.

"No," Iven said. "Tell the others."

She put down the tray. The first people out came carrying bundles. The second came carrying children. A boy returned for a knife and was pulled back by the woman who had asked about serving. She told him that whatever it cost, it could remain where it was.

Tessa took the stair ahead of them, one hand on the rail. At the first landing a door opened inwards against a broken cart. She could not move it with her bad shoulder. Robert crawled through the gap, pushed the wheels from the far side, and felt pain travel across the harness as he straightened. He could still be hurt.

Beyond the door, garden workers were trying to detach the line of Human Art from the order in which they had been placed. A servant insisted that they remain together for the inventory. The woman with the bowl put it down hard enough to break it and stepped out of the line.

"Count that," she said.

She helped a man whose decorative shoes had prevented him running. They removed the shoes. He went down the stairs barefoot, carrying them by their ornamental ties until someone told him to drop them if he needed both hands.

At the next turn they met people coming up. Green gas had entered the lower passage. Iven asked where they had first seen it and whether the cross door was shut. Three answered at once. He made them point. Then he sent one worker to close the door and turned the line towards an exterior stair.

"There's no bell," a kitchen boy said.

"You'll be able to hear it outside."

Robert saw the answer release him from waiting. The boy began carrying a smaller child whose foot had been cut by a dish. He held the child too tightly at first. Tessa showed him how to support the legs.

They could not reach everyone. One door remained held by fallen stone. People answered from the other side. Iven listened, told them which wall to keep against, and promised to find another approach. He

did not promise to open the door. Robert stayed until a fresh crack in the ceiling made him move.

On the exterior stair a man wearing a revolutionary armband helped lower a plank over a broken stretch. Another man with the same armband tried to turn the evacuees away from a store of food his companions had begun to empty. Tessa shouted that they needed the path, not the store. The man hesitated long enough for those nearest him to pass.

The line divided below the garden. Robert watched Iven direct one part towards a service yard where the ground still held. Tessa took the other. She turned once and raised her good hand so he could see where she was going. Then smoke passed between them.

Before he went, Iven stopped at the top of the service stair and caught Robert by the shoulder. His face was grey with dust except for the scar, which showed pale through it.

"You're going back up."

"They still have the gates."

Iven looked at him as he had looked at the cracked support: with the patience of a man who had watched a great many inspections and repaired very few of the things inspected.

"They'll talk at you," he said. "They'll talk until the roof comes in. They won't open anything."

"They might."

"They might." Iven did not argue. He took a short iron hook from his belt, unhooked its chain from the metal exemption disk, and put the hook into Robert's hand. "That lifts the grates. Any grate in the city. Put it in the slot and turn it towards you. If you need to get down and the stairs are gone, go under."

"You'll need it."

"I've got my hands. I know where the grates are." He closed Robert's fingers round the hook. "You don't. Take it."

The disk stayed on his belt, empty, with its broken chain. A guard would have called what he had just done theft. Iven did not seem to have noticed that.

Robert put the hook inside his tunic, beside the diagram and the cloth. By the time he looked up, Iven was already on the stair below, calling to someone to keep left, and the dust had closed over the place where he had been standing.

He climbed back because the men above still controlled the gas and the remaining gates. He had seen what a single open door could do. He thought information might make them open others.

The Steward found him beside the service door.

"Your temporary designation has been approved."

"They're inside."

"You are now a Person with Important Information. The designation expires upon completion of the information."

He led Robert into the chamber.

The men had sat up. They were attempting to constitute a National Crisis Management Committee and could not agree who should chair it, because the chair would establish precedence during subsequent claims for compensation.

Robert stood at the centre of the room. Beyond the doors something heavy scraped across stone. He told the men that the gas had entered the lower stairs, that workers were opening cross passages, that the wolves were already inside. The man nearest him asked whether these observations fell within the designation just granted.

"It's the information."

"We haven't received it formally."

"You're receiving it now."

The Steward reminded him that a Person with Important Information must give the committee an opportunity to establish a record. Without a record, the information might later be disputed. Robert pointed towards the crack in the window. Nobody disputed the crack. The cause would require investigation.

One man proposed electing a temporary chairman by acclamation. Three began acclaiming themselves. Another asked whether the acclamation could be weighted by contribution to the city's defence. This at-

tracted interest until a man whose estate lay outside the walls asked whether past contributions or present expenditure would determine the weight. His lands had supplied stone. They were now under the approaching army.

"I made the masks," Robert said.

The nearest men stopped speaking. It was the first fact he had offered which seemed to connect an identifiable person to a loss.

"You?"

"I helped. I know what they stop. The gas won't—"

"Then this is a confession."

The Steward took hold of his sleeve. Beardsley spoke from beneath Robert's chin, explaining the captivity, the promise to release them, the King who had broken it. The men listened with the attention they had withheld from the warning.

Another impact shook the door. A serving dish slid across the table and stopped against a man's hand. He pushed it away irritably without looking down.

The Steward released Robert. There would have to be a committee to determine the implications of the confession, but it could not be convened until the crisis committee established which matters lay outside its own responsibility.

"The door," Robert said.

They heard it then.

Robert shouted over them.

"The gas won't stop the wolves. They have masks. You have to leave."

The man with the pear raised one hand.

"Has the committee been constituted?"

Something struck the outer door.

The Steward went to it, straightening his collar. He drew himself up to explain that the current proceedings could not be interrupted without an introduction.

19

Where Ballads Come From

Gurtis came through the door behind the Steward's falling body. Blood marked the edges of his armour. He took off his mask and placed it upon the table where the pear had been.

"A useful invention," he said, looking at Robert.

Wolves entered behind him. The Most Important Men retreated until furniture and other Most Important Men prevented further movement.

Gurtis spoke of the land beyond the Nation. He described grass where there had been dust, water retained beneath living roots, food that did not require another village to be stripped of its last field. Robert had seen enough to know that part was true.

Then Gurtis described the work for which his kind had been made: cutting corruption from the body of the Nation.

"We have improved the definition," he said.

"Whose definition?" Robert asked.

"The one in the breeding order," said Gurtis. "We have only extended it."

He turned to the men along the wall. "You said the land was finished. You wrote it on your maps. You crossed it out and sent men further away to find something worth bringing back."

He held up one broad paw. Between two claws lay a little twist of living grass, carried so carefully through the battle that its roots still held damp earth.

"This grows there."

A man near the wall began to congratulate him. Gurtis continued speaking over the congratulation.

"We moved water. We kept breeding stock. We left ground uneaten. There were places it failed. We tried another place. None of you came to inspect what failed. None came to help what lived."

Robert remembered the ditch and the young wolf carrying Puffbits. He also remembered asking whether the people outside the Nation could be shown how to grow the grass.

"They'll take it," Gurtis said. "As soon as they can. They'll put a man beside it with a book and call the roots his property. They'll ask how much it yields and punish whoever leaves enough behind."

"Not everyone," Robert said.

The wolf turned his head. For a moment the room attended to Robert without requiring an introduction.

"Enough," Gurtis answered.

He set the grass in a dish. The men nearest it looked at the small living thing with the interest they had failed to show in the approaching army. One asked whether it could be propagated. Another asked who held the grant.

Gurtis smiled. The questions had given him the ending he wanted.

"You hear them," he said to Robert.

"I hear those two."

The wolf laid one claw upon the table and drew it towards himself. A straight groove appeared in the polished surface.

"We weren't made to distinguish so finely."

"You were made by them."

Gurtis looked at the little grass again. He left it in the dish while he went towards the men at the wall.

A man offered him terms. Another offered someone else's estate. Gurtis listened until the second offer was complete, then stepped forward.

Robert took Beardsley from his face and backed towards the balcony. The wolves passed on either side of him. He heard a plate break. The sounds after that were harder to separate.

He stood outside with his hands against the stone rail. Below, smoke moved between the levels. At one lower exit a line of people was crossing a plank laid over a broken section of path. Someone with a revolutionary armband held the plank steady while a woman passed carrying a child.

A long time seemed to pass. Afterwards Robert could not say how long. He stood at the rail and kept his eyes on the plank below, where the woman with the child had crossed and others were still crossing, one at a time, the man with the armband steadying each of them in turn with the same patient hand. Robert counted them. He had stopped being able to do anything about the room behind him, but he could count the people on the plank, and he did, and when the count reached thirty he found he had begun to cry, silently, not for the men at the wall but because thirty people had crossed a broken path and nobody had asked any of them for an introduction.

Beardsley, in his hand, said nothing. After a while the beard's fine strands lifted and pressed against his wrist, very lightly, where the pulse would have been if Robert's heart had needed to hurry.

It did not need to. It did anyway.

Gurtis joined him after the chamber had grown quieter.

"You have helped us," he said.

"I didn't help you do that."

The wolf looked back into the room.

"A distinction you may keep."

"What happens to them?" Robert pointed below.

"They have their Nation. We have the rest."

"You'll leave them alone?"

"I said they could keep it. I didn't promise never to visit."

Crows gathered on the broken cornices. Beyond them, others moved over the lower streets in such numbers that their shadows seemed to run together.

"And your little friends," Gurtis said. "They have done well."

Robert remembered the crow dying beside the wasp.

"They helped me."

"Of course. A boy opens a door. A king opens another. There is much to eat at the end."

"Ma didn't."

"Who?"

Robert did not explain.

Some of the birds wore pale rings around one leg. Others had no marks Robert could see. A crow landed on the balcony with something caught in its beak, set it down, and used one foot to hold it while pulling. Another waited two wing-lengths away. They knew which distances required defending.

In Muckleby's house, the old vine had held its hooks folded neatly along the channel inside it. Weerdsley had described the capsules and the marked posts where birds returned for food. Robert had imagined the war ending and the birds going back to being only birds. Now he watched one lift a morsel from the table and carry it through a window too narrow for a wolf.

The bird which had died in the forest had gained nothing from its last attack. Ma had brought water one beakful at a time. He could hold those facts beside the feast without making either disappear.

He stepped over the thing on the balcony. The crow watched him pass, then resumed its work.

Gurtis called his wolves together. They took what they could carry and left the chamber to the dead. Beardsley lay across Robert's palms, picking at a broken strand.

"We can go down the service stairs," Robert said.

"Yes."

"We should have gone before."

"We didn't know what we know now."

Robert set him on the broad rail while he fastened his tunic. His hands were shaking. Beardsley waited, giving him time.

"What will you do?" Robert asked. "After."

The beard lay very still on the stone. Below them the smoke thinned for a moment, and Robert could see the line of people on the plank, still crossing.

"I had thought," Beardsley said slowly, "about hands."

"You said."

"I did. I've been thinking about it more exactly." A strand lifted, then lay flat again. "The loom was wrong. I was trying to make the whole face at once. It was vanity. I wanted to look like myself when I finished. The finger first. Then the next finger with it."

"How long would that take?"

"Years." The beard made a sound that might, in a throat, have been a laugh. "I have, as it happens, an unusual amount of time. Nothing in me gets hungry."

"Nothing in me either," said Robert.

"No." Beardsley's weave shifted towards him on the rail. "We'll have to find something else to organize our days around, then. Most people have meals. We'll have to make do with work."

Robert thought of the Wigsmithy with its wooden heads and their notes, *dignity without severity*, *client undecided*. He thought of the crystals he had laid out in a row on the bench, as though someone might need to count what was missing.

"I could help," he said. "With the finger."

"I was hoping you'd offer." The beard paused. "I should warn you that I'm very particular about tension."

"I know."

"Good." A strand touched the back of Robert's hand, lightly, the way Beardsley had touched the tunic before mending it: testing where it would resist. "Then that's settled. We'll need a room with good light,

and somewhere Darcy can't sell anything, and a supply of wire. The wire will be difficult. I'll think about the wire."

The stone under his hands had stopped shaking, and the smoke was thinning, and for the length of a conversation there had been an after.

* * *

The beard rose from the rail.

At first Robert thought the wind had caught it. Then he saw the line, fine and taut, extending through the chamber door. He followed it inside.

Darcy held a small rod. Beardsley hung from a loop at its end, struggling to separate the fibres caught together by the hook.

"Put him down," Robert said.

Darcy's face was flushed. He moved with the effortless precision Robert remembered from the road, before the flask had begun to empty.

"I tried," he said.

"Put him down."

Robert ran at him. Darcy stepped aside, turned, and lowered the beard into a leather bag. The movement was as graceful as a flourish at the end of a song.

The Abbot entered through a service door Robert had not noticed. The Matron followed, then men in dark spectacles. One pushed a trolley carrying a small barrel. Another carried an enclosure in which Mouthbelly moved its lips.

Darcy took the barrel's handle. He would not look at Robert now.

A clerk checked a sheet against the equipment. Robert saw CEREBRO MAGNUS AND DEPENDANTS — LOWER CONVOY, DISPATCHED above the entries being crossed off. He had time to think that the small hand might have left the city before the men caught his arms.

Grundly accepted the bag.

"Unregistered retention of a deceased pattern," he said. "A considerable biological risk."

Beardsley's voice came through the leather.

"You know perfectly well what it is."

"Precisely."

"Robert, don't pull the hooked strand. Listen to me. He has it through the tension line; if you pull, you will do the work for him. Hold the bag underneath if you can. Darcy, open your hand. You haven't given it to him yet. There is still a thing you can do before this becomes the thing you have done. Abbot, the weave is stable. You know the pattern cannot survive separation. If your concern were contamination you would isolate it, and we both know there is an empty case downstairs. Robert, are you there? Don't go near the fluid. It takes the fine wires first. If they make you watch, look at something else. Look at the cloth. You still have it. You know your name."

The bag turned in Grundly's hand. Beardsley fell against its side and continued speaking from a different place in the leather. Robert could follow the movement by the voice. It remained a person's voice until the Abbot opened the mouth of the bag and something in the movement required all the beard's effort merely to keep its strands together.

The Matron opened Mouthbelly's enclosure.

Robert pulled against the men holding him. One lost his grip. Robert reached the trolley and caught a strand of the beard as the bag was emptied. For an instant he held it. Then the strand parted against the edge of the mouth.

The fluid below began to cloud. Gold wires curled and separated. Beardsley moved towards the side, trying to find a surface upon which to pull himself up. Robert reached again, but a man forced his arm behind his back.

"The pattern resists ordinary digestion," Grundly said to the clerk. "This is not ordinary digestion."

Robert could no longer see a shape he recognized. The loose fibre remained in his hand. He held it until his fingers hurt.

Darcy sat in one of the vacant chairs with a cup. He had begun humming. The first few notes described a melody Robert might once have wanted to hear again.

"Stop," Robert said.

Darcy stopped.

The clerk with the sheet had come round the table. He set a wooden case at Darcy's feet, and from the way it clinked, Robert knew what was in it before the lid was lifted. Twelve bottles lay in straw. The labels were dark red, with a line of gold at the top.

"As agreed," the clerk said. "Deathleberry, the reserve. And a travel certificate valid for the lower city, which I am instructed to say will be honoured by any office still in a condition to honour it."

Darcy looked at the case. He did not touch it.

"And the bird?" he said. "I was also promised—"

"The recovery of the beard was the consideration. Additional terms were not entered." The clerk made a small mark. "You may of course submit a supplementary claim."

Darcy was quiet. Then he laughed, very softly, a sound with nothing in it.

"Of course," he said.

Robert found that he could speak. The men holding him had relaxed, as men do when the thing they were holding against has already happened.

"What bird?"

Darcy turned his head. He looked at Robert properly for the first time since the balcony, and his face was flushed and steady and very tired.

"They said they had a crow," he said. "In the lower convoy. Lame in one foot. I thought—" He stopped. "I thought you would want her back. I thought if I could give you something back, it would come out even."

Robert stared at him. Ma was dead. He had seen the feathers on the step and the thing on Trebuchet's plate. He had carried one of those feathers ever since.

"She's dead," he said.

"Yes," said Darcy. "I know. I knew. I wanted it anyway." He looked down at the case of wine.

He bent and lifted one bottle out of the straw. His hands had stopped shaking. They were beautiful hands, jointed and polished and perfectly still, and he held the bottle in them as if it were the only thing in the room that had ever kept a promise to him.

The Abbot had already turned away. The clerk crossed out a line.

Nobody saw Darcy leave. When Robert was taken out through the service door, Darcy's chair was empty and the case was gone, and on the floor beside the chair lay the travel certificate, which Darcy had not picked up. Robert never learned what happened to him. For a long time afterwards, whenever he heard a tune break off before its last verse, he looked round.

They took Robert through the service door and up a narrow stair. Above them metal rang against stone. The sound continued when he closed his eyes.

He counted the steps because it was the only thing left that he could do on his own. Forty to the first landing. The men holding his arms were not rough. They had no reason to be; he had stopped pulling. One of them, the younger, kept glancing at the strand in Robert's fist as though he expected to be told to take it and hoped he would not be.

Forty-one to the second landing. At the turn there was a slit window, and through it Robert could see a piece of the lower city, smoke and a bridge and a line of tiny figures crossing it. He could not tell whether they were wolves or people or the Revolution. He could not tell whether Iven was among them, or Tessa, or the woman who had put her bowl down. Everyone he had tried to help was down there somewhere, and he was going up.

He thought of Beardsley on the ridge road, drawing a finger in the air. *A finger that could turn a screw on a clamp. Then I could make the next finger with it.* They had been going to need a room with good light. The beard had been going to think about the wire.

The strand in his hand was gold and fine and very slightly warm, though Robert did not know whether the warmth was his own. It was about as long as his little finger. He thought that if Beardsley had been given years, this was perhaps the amount of himself he would have started with.

Thirty-eight to the third landing. The stair narrowed. The ringing of metal grew louder, and with it a hum, low and steady, that he felt in his teeth before he heard it, and that his chest answered.

He knew that hum. He had last felt it through a pair of goggles, looking at a cloud that withdrew wherever he looked. His chest had not been able to answer it then. It could now.

The younger man felt him stiffen and tightened his grip, apologetically.

"Nearly there," he said, as though that were a comfort, and Robert understood that for the man it was.

20

The Negrecumulous

The roof apparatus stood upon three great supports fixed through the floor. Rings surrounded a central frame, each ring carrying lengths of pseudometal that entered and left it at intervals. It was the drawing from the Abbey enlarged until a person could be placed inside.

Robert tried to find the distributed points from the rejected arrangement. There were none. Every line led towards the frame.

The men fastened his wrists. The Matron opened his tunic. Grundly examined the healing wound and made a small sound of approval.

One of the men found Iven's hook inside the tunic. He turned it over, looking for the disk that should have accompanied it, and finding none, wrote a slip, tied the slip to the hook with a length of thread, and dropped both into the crate marked for tools. He left the cloth and the folded diagram where they were; neither contained metal. Robert watched the hook go.

"Very good."

Robert looked past him. Crows sat along the roof edge. Some had their eyes closed.

"You can see what's happening," he said to them.

A bird turned its head. It did not move towards him.

Beside the apparatus stood three shipping crates. Their labels faced away from the frame, towards the stair by which the sponsors would have arrived if the city had remained available for a demonstration. A

man in spectacles turned one over to use as a step. Robert read the words upside down.

FIRST RETURN: SOIL, WATER, BIOLOGICAL SAMPLES.

The second crate listed tools. The third was longer and divided within by narrow partitions. Its lid bore the word PERSONNEL.

"Where are they going?" Robert asked.

Grundly did not look up from the connection at Robert's chest.

"The initial exchange is small."

"Which people?"

"Surveyors. Technicians. The class of operator depends on conditions at the receiving end."

A clerk carried a register to the Abbot. The page had columns for anticipated yield, transport capacity, and the replacement of losses. The last was blank. Grundly signed beneath it without entering a figure.

Robert looked at the long crate again. "You were going to take me there."

"We brought you here."

"To see whether it could be done."

"To establish a viable relation. A preliminary sample is not a settled route."

The man with the register asked whether the violence below invalidated the commissioning authority. Grundly told him that an Assemblage allocation remained an Assemblage allocation until formally rescinded. Several signatories were probably dead. The clerk said this would complicate rescission and put the book away.

Robert could see the plan more plainly in the crates than in any diagram. The soil carts would go through a different opening. A receiving table would become a loading platform. Men would arrive with implements, papers, claims made in advance of meeting anyone whose ground they described. His mother's creek was small; it would not stop them. His father's shelves had been level; that would be a convenience when somebody else counted what stood upon them.

"There are people there already."

"There are people everywhere worth going."

"You can't take their ground."

Grundly looked up at last. "The Nation cannot feed itself by refusing available resources."

"You've used this place up."

"Which is why the work is urgent."

An explosion below made the register jump in the clerk's hands. He caught it against his chest. Grundly ordered the second connection brought forward.

Robert turned towards the stair. He wanted Iven to hear this, and Nella, and the woman who had put her bowl down for ten breaths. He wanted someone beside the table who understood what happened after a place became useful. The Matron pushed his shoulder back against the frame.

"Keep still. You'll damage it."

He did not know whether she meant the wound or the machine.

The first connection felt like cold water running beneath his skin. The second made his teeth hurt. At the third, light gathered in the centre of his chest and the rings began to turn.

Grundly watched a bank of indicators. He called for an increase. A Bookish Man repeated the instruction to another man at the far side of the roof.

Above them, darkness gathered in a patch of clear sky.

The crows left together.

The patch widened. It had no edge Robert could follow, yet it obscured the light beyond it. A portion descended towards the apparatus, branching and drawing itself together again as though trying several shapes before selecting one.

The shadow did not travel across the roof. It appeared within the light already there, so that a man's sleeve, the edge of a ring, and the dust falling between two stones became dark at different distances without anything passing between them and the sun. Robert could still

see the sun. It had become one object among many instead of the thing by which all the others were seen.

The outer ring turned. For an instant its inner surface opened onto a depth much greater than the thickness of the metal could contain. Within that depth something else turned, and within that something else, each movement fitted to the first while extending beyond the place where Robert's eyes could separate motion from distance. He remembered the Milloptiscope and the little wet circle his eye had left against its lens. He was no longer looking through a lens.

The men nearest the controls bent over them. Their hands continued making the movements they had rehearsed. One shouted that the readings had exceeded the scale. Another rotated the scale until the pointer stood within it again.

"That isn't a reduction," the first man said.

Grundly ordered silence.

He did not get it. The clerk with the register had opened the book again and was trying to enter the readings as they were called, because the commissioning authority required a record and nobody had yet rescinded the authority. He wrote a figure. The man at the controls called a different one for the same dial. The clerk wrote that too, beside the first, and then a third, and then stopped, because the dial was now indicating a quantity smaller than nothing and the column had no space ruled for it.

"Enter it as exceeded," Grundly said.

"Exceeded in which direction, Abbot?"

Grundly did not answer. He was looking up.

Robert had expected the thing in the sky to resemble something. Every creature in the Nation resembled something else: a moth that was also a mouth, a lion that was also a cat, a beard that was also a man. He had learned to understand new things by finding the old thing inside them. He searched the darkness for a head, a limb, a face turned towards him, a pattern like the weave of Beardsley's strands. Each time he thought he had found one, it became clear that he had only found the

shape his searching made, and that the darkness was continuing past it in every direction he had not thought to look.

The instruments were doing the same thing. The Milloptiscope's descendants on the roof, the columns of fluid, the rings with their pale lenses, had been built to measure a thing that would stay still long enough to be measured. They bent towards the dark region and returned numbers. The numbers were precise. They were precise about the instruments.

One of the Bookish Men took off his spectacles and put them on again. Another began to recite, under his breath, the names of the rings in their order, as a person might repeat a familiar prayer during a storm without believing that the storm could hear it. The names were Grundly's. Every ring had one. It struck Robert that the whole apparatus had been named before it had been switched on, and that the names had been chosen in the expectation of what would come through.

Nothing had come through. Something had come near, and nearness was a relation, and a relation had two ends.

Robert felt pressure from directions in which his body had no surface. The harness answered each pressure by drawing it towards the single point beneath his ribs. He had seen what Beardsley did when a stitch took too much strain. Here there was nowhere else for it to go. The rejected diagram lay folded beneath his clothes, warm against the skin which was being made to carry what the diagram had offered to distribute.

He tried to say stop. The word went out in his ordinary voice and disappeared in a vibration so low that he felt it in the stone before hearing it.

Above the instrument, the dark region divided without becoming smaller. In one division Robert saw a field beneath a colourless sky; in another, water moving over something which might have been a roof or the back of an animal larger than the city. Neither sight remained long enough to become a destination. The apparatus had not opened a door. It had put its hands into a space full of openings and begun to pull.

The thing that answered seemed to notice the pulling first. Robert felt the change before Grundly did. The pressure ceased increasing. It spread around him, feeling along the rings, the three supports, the fixed lines through his body, with an attention which made no distinction between the machine and the person until it reached the place where the person hurt.

Then the nearest ring bent.

"Contact," Grundly said.

The structure beneath Robert shook. He heard stone falling through the levels below. One support tilted; the men near it backed away without waiting for an instruction.

The dark shape reached the outer ring. Pseudometal folded inwards. Grundly shouted something about maintaining the field. His voice was lost in the noise.

Robert felt the pressure through his chest lessen. The fastenings at his wrists broke away from the frame. Something held him across the back and beneath the knees.

He tried to touch it. His hand passed into darkness without meeting a surface.

The roof fell below him. He saw Grundly clutching an upright that was no longer attached to the floor. The Matron had reached the stairwell. Whether she went through it before the stone broke, he could not tell.

The city was a movement of dust, falling walls, running people. He searched for the blue stair doors, but the distances were too large and changing too quickly. He could not decide who had escaped by wanting to see them.

Before he was lifted clear, a crate slid towards Robert. One of the men caught it and held it with his foot while trying to fasten its lid. The crate mattered to him in a way the sky did not yet matter: he knew its contents, their price, the consequence of letting them spill. When the second support moved, he abandoned the lid and tried to reach the stair.

Robert saw the inner wall part along a joint. Beyond it, for an instant, lay a room below the roof. A table, papers lifting, a cup rolling from side to side without finding an edge. Then the room turned out of sight. The movement was too large for the eye to accept it as falling. It seemed that the city had become a collection of rooms no longer obliged to agree about which way the ground lay.

He looked for the exterior stair. He could identify a section of rail, then the bright face of a blue plate. Neither told him where Iven was. He looked for a hoop, which was a foolish thing to search for from that distance, and searched anyway.

The thing lifting him moved between two collapsing beams without appearing to change course. Fragments passed through the darkness around his legs and emerged below it. He could feel no hand, only a distribution of pressure which kept him from being taken by any of the different directions in which the roof was going.

"There are people," he said.

He tried to point. The city had filled the space beneath him and then become too small for him to identify the people in it. This change took very little time. He had spent years being unable to leave a yard. Now he could pass beyond a city before finishing a sentence about someone he wanted to help.

"Go down."

The darkness continued rising. A movement passed through it, not an answer he could hear but a strain like the one he had felt when the apparatus pulled in several directions at once. Below, one section of the roof ceased falling for an instant. Another went through it. Dust concealed the place.

Robert held the broken strand so tightly that its end entered his skin. The sharpness gave him a size again: a hand, a little wound, a thing lost which he could name. He could not make the same act encompass the streets beneath him.

He rose into the cloud. The noise diminished. For a while the glow in his chest remained visible, illuminating the edges of his fingers. Then that too disappeared.

He still held the broken strand from Beardsley's weave. He pressed it against his palm to determine whether his hand remained there.

It did.

The next leaf of Adelaide's book is black. The pigment extends beyond the ruled margins and into the fold, where it has marked the facing page. There is no date.

* * *

In her last spring she gave the notebooks to May.

It was not a ceremony. May had come to wash her mother's hair, and afterwards, while the towel was still around Adelaide's shoulders, she was asked to fetch the violin case from beneath the bed. There had never been a violin. Elias had bought the case at an auction because it was cheaper than a box of the same size and had a lock, and Adelaide had kept the drawings in it for forty years with the lock broken.

"The tins are in the cupboard," Adelaide said. "The books go in the tins. The drawings stay in there."

May knelt and pulled the case out. She had seen it all her life and had never opened it. She did not open it now.

"What do you want done with them?"

"Nothing."

"Mother."

"I want them kept. I don't want anybody to do anything with them. That's a different thing."

May sat back on her heels. She was sixty-four years old, with a bad knee and grandchildren of her own, and she looked at her mother the way she had looked at her across the kitchen table the night she moved to her first room: as though a condition had been imposed that she did not intend to argue with, but would remember.

"Does anybody else know what's in them?"

"James. Your father. James's girl, once, on a wet afternoon." Adelaide considered. "A man who came about the chimney, once. He saw a page by accident."

"What did he say?"

"He said it was a very good lion."

May laughed, and after a moment Adelaide laughed too, carefully, because laughing now hurt somewhere she could not identify. May put the case back under the bed where her mother could see its end. She fetched two screws from her own bag, the kind her father had kept in his dish, and fixed the lid shut so that it would not fall open if someone moved it.

"There," she said. "Now nobody will do anything with them by accident."

Adelaide thought of Elias counting screws into a dish, including the ones he had decided not to use. She thought that her daughter had not seen him do this in thirty years and had kept the habit anyway, the way a house keeps the marks of a shelf long after the shelf has gone.

"Thank you," she said.

May took the towel from her shoulders and began to comb out her hair.

By ninety-two she could no longer open the window herself. The orderly wedged it with a folded card because the catch was broken. Adelaide asked him to put a dish beneath the screws if he tried to mend it. He said he would tell the man who did repairs.

The book lay across her knees. She could turn its pages if she rubbed her fingertip against the cover first. The last drawing contained a beard made of lines too close together for her to separate with her eyes. She had drawn it while the voice continued inside the bag. Now she could not find the place where the voice had stopped.

May sat beside her during the afternoon. Her own hands were old. Adelaide looked at them and remembered taking a child's wrist too tightly after a walk to see the boats.

"Did I hurt you?"

May leaned closer. "When?"

"You went without telling me."

Her daughter was quiet long enough for Adelaide to think the question had failed to reach her.

"I told Father," May said.

"He didn't hear."

"I know."

Adelaide put her hand beside May's on the cover. For a while they sat without speaking. The room beyond the open window contained the noise of a cart, a door shutting, somebody calling to somebody else who answered. She could no longer tell how far away the sounds were. They remained ordinary sounds, and she listened while her daughter stayed.

When May left, the orderly came to remove the book. Adelaide held its edge.

"Not yet."

He set it closer to her hand and went to see whether the window had held.

* * *

I had intended to end the account at the black leaf. It supplied a conclusion sufficiently grave to discourage objections to its incompleteness. Then I found the name of the orderly who had attended Mrs. Small-Toates during her final week.

He remembered the room, the window that would not quite shut, and her habit of asking for the book after she had become too weak to hold a pencil. He did not remember every word. He was particular about that. He remembered a conversation conducted, he said, in two voices, although no one else had been in the room when he entered.

One voice was a boy's. The other he described as something large speaking through a wall.

I found him through the institution's payroll, which had been kept with more care than its patients' records. He had been retired for many

years and lived above a hardware shop whose owner let him have the room in exchange for opening the shutters at seven. When I arrived at ten he had already opened them, and considered the rest of his day available for purchase.

We agreed on a price for the afternoon. He asked me to include the tea, which he made himself and which I suspect cost him less than the sum he named. I paid it. I record the transaction because a reader is entitled to know when testimony has been bought, and because I should not like it thought that I believe payment makes a witness either more or less reliable.

He asked first whether I intended to publish. I said I did not know. He said that was the right answer, and that the last person who had asked him about Mrs. Small-Toates had been a relative who wanted to know whether she had signed anything in her final week. She had not. She had asked for her book. He had given it to her.

"I told the family she talked in her sleep," he said. "That's true. I didn't tell them she answered."

I asked what he meant.

He put down his cup. He had a way of setting objects down so that they made no noise, which I took to be a professional habit.

"You hear a lot of talking in those rooms. People talk to husbands who've been dead thirty years. They talk to cows. Mostly you can hear the other side of the conversation in how they leave the gaps. They leave room for an answer they already know." He turned the cup a quarter-circle on its saucer. "She didn't leave room. She waited. And then something answered, and she hadn't known what it would say."

I asked him how he could tell.

"Because she was surprised," he said. "You don't surprise yourself at ninety-two. Not like that."

He did not claim to have understood the other voice. He did not claim it was not the wind in the broken window. He claimed only that the boy's voice had called her by name, that she had answered *I'm here* in a tone he had never heard her use to anyone living, and that he had

stood in the doorway with a clean towel over his arm and not gone in, because it did not seem to be a moment in which a towel would help.

When I asked him to repeat the conversation he did so twice. The versions were not identical. He noticed this before I did and told me which he preferred.

What follows combines his recollection with phrases written by Adelaide on the last legible pages. Its order is mine. I have no means of making that fact less inconvenient.

* * *

Robert asked whether he was dead.

The answer arrived without passing through his ears.

No.

He asked what was holding him.

A way of keeping you here.

"Where?"

The response contained distances he could not fit together. He felt the edges of several rooms at once: the stable, the laboratory, the top of the Tower. He asked it to stop, and it did.

"The Negrecumulous," Robert said.

The name had been written above a desk, copied into records, bound on the front of a book. He offered it as he had offered his own name in rooms where an introduction was required.

That is his name for what he wanted.

"What do you call yourself?"

For a moment Robert received something which could not fit into the order of a sentence: a relation between distances, a division that was also a continuity, the presence attending to him and other presences which did not begin where it ended. He drew his hand against his chest. The answer stopped.

"I can't say that."

You need not.

He had never heard an introduction end so easily.

"Are you what he wanted?"

He wanted what would answer. Then he wanted the answer to belong to him.

"Did you kill them?"

The darkness moved around his hand.

The opening was tearing. I closed what I could reach. I do not know everyone who was beneath it.

Robert held the strand of the beard more tightly. He had wanted the thing in the darkness to know enough to undo what it had done. Its answer left him with the city he had seen falling.

"Can you put it back?"

The question arrived after the answer about the opening. Robert meant the roof first, then the whole city, then the people beneath it. He had not known these would become separate requests until the presence attempted to receive them.

I cannot return what happened to a state in which it did not happen.

"You stopped it."

I stopped part of what was happening.

"Then stop the rest."

Something shifted around him. He felt a great distance divided into smaller distances, none of them corresponding to a street. The presence was trying to understand what he wanted without turning the effort into a promise.

The opening no longer draws through you. The structures beneath it were already failing. I cannot hold all the changes separately.

He had listened to explanations of what could not be done all his life. Some had protected the people explaining. Others had described a limit as real as the tubes entering Cerebro's body. He could not tell which kind this was. The difficulty did not lessen because the speaker was large enough to have made Grundly afraid.

"You could have left me there."

Yes.

"Why didn't you?"

The answer came as the briefest return of the pressure in his chest: a strain being made to pass through a living point, and that point trying to withdraw. Then it ceased before becoming pain.

"You knew it hurt."

There was a refusal inside the connection.

He did not know whether refusal meant him shouting or the part of his body which had continued resisting after he could no longer shout. He was glad that something had noticed. He was angry that noticing had come so late.

"I said stop before."

I did not receive it before.

He wanted to keep questioning until an answer appeared which would make the falling city smaller in his mind. Instead he asked about a bowl of cloudy fluid. He described the fine wires, the crystals, the way Beardsley had moved towards the edge.

"Could you find him?"

The presence did not answer at once. Robert held out the broken strand. He could not see his own hand but he could feel it extended.

This is part of an arrangement which no longer holds.

"It was a person."

Yes.

The agreement gave him nothing back. He folded his fingers over the strand and drew his hand towards himself.

For a while he asked no more questions. The silence had no walls and no indication of how long it lasted. He thought of Ma shifting on the rail above his sacks. He had sometimes stayed awake simply to hear her move again.

He thought of the line of people on the plank below the rail, and of Iven on the stair. He could not count them from here.

"I want my mother."

For the first time, he heard another sound: a breath, shallow and uneven.

Adelaide lay beneath a white cover. Her hair had become almost colourless. Robert could see her hand upon the book.

He tried to reach it. The darkness held him where he was.

"She saw me," he said.

Yes.

"Was she really there?"

The hand moved upon the cover.

"Robert," Adelaide said.

He did not know whether the name had come through the darkness or out of the memory of the Tower. He answered it anyway.

"I'm here."

Her fingers relaxed. The breath paused, returned once, and ceased.

Robert waited. He had waited for people to come back before. He understood the difference before the presence told him.

"Can you take me to her?"

Not to what has ended.

"Before it ended."

I cannot choose that.

He tried several other forms of the request. The answer did not change because he had found a better arrangement of words.

At last he opened the cloth bearing his name. He could not see it, but he could feel the raised stitches.

"Saskatchewan."

Something moved further away, or nearer, in a direction he had no name for.

A correspondence remains. The thing they placed in you can follow it.

"Home?"

A place answering the place. I cannot promise the time or the life you mean.

He thought of the room beneath the Abbey, the city falling, the path through the burning forest. There was no route he could take back through them that would arrive at the table where his mother had waited.

"Will I have to stay inside you?"

No.

"Then take me there."

The darkness loosened around him. For a moment he felt something drawing on the centre of his chest from far away: not the command of the machine, but an opening already present, strong enough to take the offered passage.

He put the strand of Beardsley's weave inside the embroidered cloth, beside Ma's feather and the two fibres Weerdsley had given him. He folded the diagram around the cloth and slid the bundle inside his tunic.

* * *

The orderly put the book beside Adelaide's bed. Later, when her daughter came, he showed her where it was. He did not tell her that her mother had been speaking in two voices. He thought there had been enough to explain that day.

May sat with her mother until the undertaker came. She had not expected to cry and did not. She held the book on her knees and turned the pages, which she had never been allowed to do, and found that most of them were familiar: not the pictures, which she had seen only once, over her mother's shoulder, and been told belonged to someone else, but the things around the pictures. The grocery sums. The dates. A list, in her father's hand, of the things May had needed for her first room, with *basin* crossed out so heavily that the pencil had torn through.

She had not known her mother had kept that list. She had not known it was in here with the boy.

On the last written page, two leaves after the black one, in a hand that wandered across the ruling, there were three words she could not make out, and then, below them, very clearly, *I'm here.* May read it several times. She did not know who it was addressed to.

She closed the book and put it in the second tin with the others. The tins and the screwed-shut case went into a sister's house, and from

there, years later, under a table with a short leg, and from there into a sale, where a man who said he dealt in print paid rather too much for them and then complained about the rag.

* * *

Robert lay on wet ground.

For some time he listened without moving. Water touched reeds nearby. Insects made a continuous sound above him. When he opened his eyes, he saw green light crossing the sky in long, linked bands.

He took a breath. His body did not require it, but the action helped him sit up.

The folded cloth remained inside his tunic. He opened it carefully. His name was there. The diagram had become damp at one edge. Beardsley's broken strand clung to the embroidery.

Beyond the reeds, something large moved through shallow water.

Robert folded the cloth again and put it away. He looked for higher ground, found a low bank beneath a leaning tree, and began to crawl towards it.

* * *

I have not extended his first step into an account of the people waiting beyond the reeds. The papers which follow require a different arrangement. I began, as before, with *Robert*, then *he*, and discovered that the next record began correcting me. It supplied the sensation before the explanation, disputed events I had placed with confidence, and returned, with particular insistence, to the small acts for which no witness remained. Its speaker would not stay in the third person. In the next volume I have let him say *I*.

—R. Shiraz

Reading order

The Negrecumulous is the first of two novels. Robert's story continues in *Saskatchewan*, which he narrates himself.

About the author

Adam Teeling is a writer based in Vancouver. He holds an MFA from the University of British Columbia. His work is published at addocdeliverables.ca.

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