

Rosa et Sorbus

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I

Sometimes the name of a boy, is just *boy*. It was all he had ever been called, so it served, though in fact he turned at once toward the calling of any name, to save his backside should he be the one required.

The scullery maids, in their own way, loved him, perhaps as the child they would never have. It was also the love of familiarity. He was always there, somewhere, if not working up a sweat with huge trays, pots and pans, then getting under their busy feet as he snaffled bits of grub like a ravenous ghost. More recently he'd taken to sitting at the tiny window gazing upwards into space, an activity which had earned him more than one skelping already.

He'd grown up as the maids' odd charge in the kitchens which fired the castle's belly. They roused him in the morning with a plate of fried bacon and toasted bread – which, to be sure, would have to keep him going through the day besides what he could steal. They covered his curled body as it lay sleeping

under the window in the quiet hours. Between, they worked him hard. But then they all worked hard. And, though they were not slow to lift him across their laps and apply a work-hardened hand or wooden spoon to his bared bottom when he was careless or lazy, still they busied themselves with loud, unnecessary jobs when the steward took him by the ear to his rooms to be strapped. His howls made them cry. His wide blue eyes seemed as deep as the sea, Luisa, the small, dark one who had grown up in the mountains of the north was fond of saying. Most of the others had not seen the sea, but they somehow understood all the same. They came to imagine the sea to be as deep as the boy's eyes.

Though it was an occasional subject for tired, rambling speculation in the quietened kitchens once the castle had been put to bed, no-one seemed to be able to remember a time when the boy hadn't been around. His being there was just how things were. And, they concluded each time, they would not have things any other way.

He listened to their conversation this time, comforted by its familiarity, and by their presence. This was all he knew, but that did not mean that he was unaware of other possibilities. His bed, such as it was, allowed him to look

upwards toward the castle towers which it seemed must pierce the sky, bring it tumbling down like a piece of torn blue cloth. The highest tower of all was dark, but in the tower below that a light still shone. From that window, down and down and down to his, a sound came, a rhythm dimmed but not diminished by distance, a slow, deliberate thrashing of leather against bare flesh. He listened, waiting for it to end, which it finally did. He listened still, waiting for an aftermath of tears. As usual, it did not come.

"Flora, why is she beaten so?"

He was sitting cross-legged on the table-top, munching loudly on a leftover green apple.

"Why is who beaten so, noisy boy?"

Flora was working with bread-dough on the table beside him, plaiting it into pleasing shapes for the oven, flour everywhere.

"The girl." *Crunch*. "In the tower."

She paused and looked at him for only a moment. "The girl in the tower is none of your concern."

"Tell me, Flora. Or else I will think that you don't know."

This was a wily scheme. He knew that Flora would tell him almost any secret rather than be thought not to know. The roots

of the castle which began in the kitchens spread to every part of it, even the highest tower.

"I know very well, young man," Flora said. "She – she belongs to the Princess. She is beaten because the Princess is – is often an extremely difficult child."

This made the boy frown, as if he had been presented with a puzzle-box with no apparent means of entry.

"But why would the girl be beaten because the Princess was difficult?"

"Because that is the way things are," Flora said.

The boy did not think this was a satisfactory answer. "Does beating the girl make the Princess less difficult?"

Flora smiled to herself, hiding it from the boy. She placed the dough alongside the others on the tray, then carried the tray across to the cavernous oven, wiping her hands as she returned.

"No, boy, it seems not to."

"Then why –"

"Because," said Flora, more forcefully this time. "That is the way things are."

The boy thought about this for a while.

"If I misbehave, Flora," he said, "isn't it my skin which

suffers?"

"Yes it is, boy."

"And doesn't it sometimes make me less difficult?"

"Sometimes," Flora laughed.

"Then maybe – maybe the Princess would be less difficult if she were beaten sometimes, and not the girl."

Flora stopped and looked at the boy. His blue eyes showed no trace of meaning anything other than the words he'd spoken. She smiled.

"Perhaps she would be," Flora said, sweeping up the remainder of the flour. "Perhaps she would be."

The boy crunched up the rest of his apple, core and all.

"Do you think she's beautiful, Flora?"

"Do I think who is beautiful, annoying child?"

"The girl. Do you think she's beautiful?"

Flora lifted the boy from the table by his ear, swatted him firmly, and sent him off with a floury hand-print on his behind.

"Work," she commanded.

But the boy already knew that she was beautiful. He caught yet more of the steward's belt for tarrying by his small window during the day, waiting for those moments when she would appear at hers, gazing eastward towards the mountains, her knees drawn

up to her chest, her arms hugging them tight. He waited for her to look down at him, but she never did. He'd heard one of the maids tell a story once about a princess who was locked in a high tower, but who was rescued by a handsome prince who climbed up her hair. Some days he waited for the girl to let her thick white hair down to his window, so that he could climb it like a rope. But, of course, she never did.

He awoke early and rushed through his work towards the end of the day so that he could be done by nightfall. Safe under the cloak of pretend sleep he could then listen. The girl was not beaten every night, but more often than not. The boy's heart would both leap and sink. He felt her suffering, but felt her presence too. He heard the difference between the sound of a wooden hairbrush on her fair skin, and the sound of a whip of tree branches. Occasionally the sound was that of hand on flesh. One night, after he'd been across an exasperated Flora's lap for a dose of the heavy wooden spoon for allowing the following morning's bread to burn – making more work for all of them – he heard the crack of wood against the girl's bottom. He rubbed his sore places. Not even Flora, who knew him best, harboured any suspicion that the boy's whipping by the steward three days later – having been caught clumsily sabotaging the steward's

chair by sawing through one of the legs with a knife – had been engineered. He seemed suitably chastened as he curled up on his side in his bed, though in truth he was glad for the deep ache once he heard the familiar, terrible sounds from the tower. It was a solidarity, and it was all he had.

The most terrible sound of all was the silence once the beatings had ended. He knew she was alone and hurting, yet there was nothing he could do. He wished he could cry for her – and indeed he tried, but it proved a foreign tongue for him too. All he managed was an aching sense of emptiness and longing. He wished that he could at least tell her, in his own simple way, that he was there, that he cared about her. That, in some way he would not be able to describe, he understood.

Now, since every event in the castle of any significance was also an occasion for great consumption, which required much planning, the kitchen staff was never far from matters of consequence. The approach of the Princess's twelfth birthday meant many things to many people. To the King and Queen it was to be the occasion of her marriage, the greater part of which was a careful wrangling of political and territorial gain. To the suitors who courted their approval, it was a contest among

peers for a great prize. To the Princess herself, it was a tedious inconvenience. To the kitchen staff, it was work, and lots of it.

As usual, the boy's mind was elsewhere.

"Flora, what will happen when the Princess is married?" he asked one day, as things became busier.

"I believe the tradition is that she will live happily ever after," Flora joked.

The boy frowned, not understanding. Flora tried again, more straight-forwardly this time.

"She will go to live with her new Prince," she said. "And the two lands will be joined as allies."

The boy nodded. He understood, but this wasn't what he meant.

"And, um, what will happen to the girl?"

Flora turned to him and tilted up his chin, so that she could look into his wide eyes.

"Sometimes, boy, you are a worry to me, do you know that?"

"Yes, Flora." He nodded earnestly. "But what will happen to her?"

"She will go with the Princess, to be her servant," Flora said.

"Leave the castle?" the boy asked.

"Yes, boy." Patiently. "She will leave the castle."

He nodded again, his gaze far away. Flora narrowed her eyes at him.

That night, the boy began thinking about what he would need. It was a simple collection of things – the naive knapsack of a child running away – but required careful thought all the same. Enough food for a few days. A knife for protection, and hunting. An extra blanket or two. Beneath the covers he held tightly onto the catapult he'd been constructing in the quiet hours.

The moment came sooner than he'd imagined. One evening the kitchens exploded into a gossipy pandemonium. Dishes that had been carried to the banquet held in honour of the Princess's betrothed and his mother and father piled high with roasted meats and steamed vegetables and huge fresh fruits came back smashed into pieces. Those who had been serving the guests took turns to relate breathlessly how the Princess had released her petulant temper into a frenzy of destruction, how she had thrown plates in all directions, and cast insults of potent fury at her soon-to-be husband and mother- and father-in-law. The boy

watched those listening to the story rather than those telling it, seeing their eyes widen and gasps escape at the repeating of words he'd never heard before.

As the narrative wound to an exhausted close, everyone turned to Flora, and she spoke for the first time.

"There will be hell to pay," she said. The others nodded agreement.

The boy knew little of the diplomatic consequences of the Princess's temper, nor would he have considered them to be relevant even had he known. Sometimes matters can be too big to be important, just as they can be too small. He was sure, however, from whose hide payment would be extracted.

Two nights later, he curled up away from notice until the kitchens had quietened, then he gathered what he needed – some bread and meat; a small but heavy knife; his blanket. With a silent apology towards Flora's bed, he stole another blanket from the store, tied it into a bag, and packed everything. The last was his catapult, and a bag of dried beans he took to use as ammunition. The bag looped securely over his shoulder.

He stood for a moment in the centre of the kitchens, his eyes closed. The friendly rumble and warmth of the ovens only added to the kitchens' womb-like security, but the boy felt the

clarity of newly-discovered purpose, and there were no regrets. The window was a tight squeeze, but he was small. There was no looking back as he grasped onto the ivy and began to climb.

For the first few minutes he didn't even look up, just pulled himself hand over hand through the ivy, which shrouded the castle on all sides. It was thick enough to hide within, yet he discovered pathways which led him ever upwards. Stopping to rest for a moment, he poked his head out from the greenery and was dizzied to see how far he'd come. The lights of villages glittered across the plain, so far away they might just as well be stars. He looked up. Both of the towers were lit, and he could hear raised voices. He felt for the catapult, reassured by its shape in his pack. He climbed.

Up and up and up, one carefully-placed hand, then foot, hand, then foot, at a time. As he neared the lower of the two towers, he realised with some relief that the voices were coming from the other one. He settled himself beneath the window ledge, took out his catapult and a pocketful of beans. He took a few deep, steadying breaths, then dared to look in through the window.

The room was small but unexpectedly comfortable and well-provisioned, the entire ambit of a controlled, circumscribed

life. The furnishings provided were few, but of considerable quality. And the girl was there. She lay on the bed, facing away from him and towards the door. Her hair, white as flour, had been plaited as neatly as one of Flora's loaves, and ran almost to her waist. He thought that he could smell her, though perhaps he smelled only the flowers and spices which lifted the room away from the kitchen smells of familiarity.

And the boy was lost in the middle of a plan whose inevitability had hidden the fact that it was nothing but pure foolishness. He tried to think of what Flora would say to him, but he realised that Flora saying anything to him would require him to be in the safety of the kitchens – where he belonged. He suspected her wooden spoon would do most of the talking, anyhow. He looked down, but his small kitchen window had vanished into the bulk of the castle wall.

There was nothing else to do, so he called out "Hello!" in an urgent whisper. He paused, then tried again. "Hello! Come to the window! We can climb down!"

But the girl neither responded nor showed that she had even heard him. The indistinct voices from somewhere above them were suddenly both louder and closer, so he swallowed the fear that was creeping up his throat and pulled himself over the ledge and

in. He padded quickly across to the bed, and – pushing his catapult back into a pocket so that first he could wipe his hands, which were sweaty and grimy and nicked here and there with bloodied scratches from the ivy – reached for the girl's hand, which was at rest on the curve of her hip.

He reached, hearing his own exhausted, terrified breath as loud as thunder. His hand touched hers. She sprang awake and alert, and leapt away from him. He drew back from his own fright as they skittered away from each other. She found the best refuge she could, in the furthest corner, where she tried to bury herself in the wall.

"I'm sorry! I'm sorry! I'm sorry!" he babbled, not knowing what he'd done, falling back on a self-preserving habit of apology. She turned slowly to look at him, from behind an arm raised as protection. He saw her eyes, and they were feral, but it was the wild instinct of trapped prey rather than predator. Hands raised and open, he took a step towards her.

And then she *screamed*. With every bit of energy she could gather, she screamed and screamed, and before the boy could react to this the door burst open, and the voices he'd heard above them were no longer above them, and were no longer just voices, but the hulking presence of guards in shiny metal plate.

He turned back to the window, but he was grabbed roughly around the neck and held much tighter than necessary merely to prevent his escape.

Following the guards into the room, as if a majestic warship could create a wake ahead of it in order to announce its presence, swept a tall woman in black, all tight skin and angular features. She looked around, then at the boy.

"What is this?" she asked. There was no answer. "What is this?" she asked again, this time of the guard who seemingly bore some responsibility.

"I do not know, Mistress," he said, falteringly. "This boy was in here."

The tall woman then turned to the girl. "What is *this*," she asked again, the sibilant dripping with menace. The girl shook her head furiously, but said nothing.

"You leave her alone!" the boy shouted. "She did nothing wrong!"

The silence then was full and heavy. The guards, suddenly unsure of themselves in the face of something new and unexpected, turned to the bony woman for guidance. "Leave her alone?" the woman asked, and there was a wheezing laugh, the croak of a rusty door blowing open and closed in the wind.

Keeping her eyes fixed on the boy, she took the girl's ear between thumb and forefinger, and twisted. The girl gasped and twisted sympathetically.

With a wriggle and a stomp, the boy escaped his captor for long enough to retrieve his catapult, fill the pouch with a handful of peas grabbed from his pocket, and let fly. His ammunition struck the tall woman across her face with all the fury and inevitability that the moment required, and she reared back. Another handful of peas, and a guard was felled, and then another. But a small boy's pocket can only hold so much, and his weapon was quickly silenced. He tried to make for the window, but was stopped and quelled by a guard's hand struck without restraint across his face. He tasted something he realised was blood, and was held roughly once more.

He watched as the woman prodded carefully at her face, testing it for damage. Apparently satisfied, she took hold of the girl's ear again, and dragged her out of the small room.

"Bring him up!" she shouted. Then she stopped, turned, and dragged the girl back into the room and to the window. She looked out and down. "And then, when you're done with him, cut the ivy right back." She swept out again, the girl doing her best to keep up.

The boy was half-carried up a tight staircase and into a cold, thinly-furnished cell of a room. Worn leather straps of ordered length hung from a rack on the wall, and a rich crop of hazel rods grew tall from a deep bowl in the corner. A plain, low wooden bench by the far wall was the only furniture to speak of, other than the rude trestle in the middle of the room – across which, despite his tired struggling, the boy was quickly restrained with loops of hard leather. He saw the woman standing above him, and a flash of the girl's white dress.

"Strip him, would you," the woman said to the guard, the ostensible politeness more chilling than her shouts. "Below his waist should be quite enough."

The boy pulled against his bonds, but even he knew that it was just symbolic. He felt his pants being pulled roughly down. The girl was led to the bench facing him, where she sat very still, looking at her feet.

"Why are you here?" the woman asked.

He was quiet at first, but then it was clear to him what was right and true. "I came to rescue her," he said, simply. The girl still looked at the floor, unmoved.

"Of course, of course." There was more of the wheezy laughter. "Where did you come from?"

"I live in the kitchens."

"Of course you do. No, no, no. I think you are a *spy*. You have that look about you."

"I live in the kitchens! Ask Flora. She'll tell you."

"I think you are a *spy*, and by the time I am done with you, you will tell me that and want me to believe it."

The boy heard a soft rattle, and he knew that she was picking one of the rods from the bowl.

"You see, the truth of it is that she *is* the reason you are here. She called out to us so that we could save her from *you*. She wanted that. It is her doing that you are here."

And he knew it was true. His dreaming was exposed for the smoke that it had always been.

"I need to keep enough of these for her," the woman said, "but I can certainly spare one for you now, and perhaps another two for later."

There was a sound the boy had not heard before, a whistling, whispering whoosh, and then he felt as though he'd been cut in two. He struggled to catch a breath.

"You!" the woman shouted, pointing the rod at the girl.
"You will watch this!"

The girl's head lifted slowly. The boy lifted his as far as

he was able, even as a second stroke landed, knocking the wind out of him again; but he held onto her eyes with his own. There was no life in them that he could see, but all he had left was showing her that he was true.

He tried to hold on by counting the strokes, but somewhere after twenty-three his head fell, and the numbers disappeared into a blurring of pain.

II

Perhaps one day there was a girl who never cried. Perhaps she didn't know how. Perhaps she had no reason. Perhaps it simply never occurred to her small soul that crying might be an appropriate response to things not being the way she would wish them to be.

Her parents were certainly puzzled. They gave her all the love they could – holding her when she needed to be held, watching over her while she slept, dreaming of sunshine and clouds and fields of red, red roses. It bemused them, though all seemed right in her world, so it was a happy bemusement.

When, one day, the girl's mother lifted her onto a comfy lap in front of a warm fire, and explained that soon she was going to have a little brother, the girl was still too young to understand, but she nodded seriously and smiled as her hand was placed against her mother's new curve and she felt the gentle beating within.

As her parents loaded up their wagon with the fruit of a

long summer's growing, the girl helped dutifully, hauling small bundles this way and that – mostly the right bundles, and mostly the right way. When all was done, she was settled into a makeshift bed in the back of the wagon, and they set out for the market. A cold winter was on its way, as well as a new son and brother, and there were things to do.

This was not a land without the need for tears, however. As the road they travelled to market passed through woods which hid most of the brightness of the early day beneath heavy shadow, a band of thieves leapt from the trees to attack. Mercy was not part of their business. With a swift glinting of knives, the farmer and his wife were both slain, the wagon overturned and ransacked for money and meagre trinkets. The thieves took what they could carry, and were gone.

The girl emerged from her refuge beyond the thieves' hasty greed into a world utterly changed. She called out to her parents, but they were silent. She crawled out into the dim forest to find them lying on the cool earth, twisted into positions of resistance, but beyond her ability to awaken them with increasingly insistent words of love. Their blood seeped into the soil.

She rested her hand, then her head – as she had been shown

– against her mother's new curve, and she yet felt the gentle beating within. Soon, however, even this reassurance was gone, and she was alone.

The girl wrapped herself around the curve that was both her mother and her brother. A tear, curious as a snowflake on desert dunes, welled in her eye, then splashed down. Another tear followed, as voluptuous as the first. Then another. And another. So rich and prodigious were the tears, that soon they had formed a pool around the girl and the body of her mother. Yet still they came, a damburst of grief and confusion and loneliness and longing. Before long, the pool was a lake, the girl floating slowly about on the raft made by her dead mother and brother.

Now, the trees of this wood were not without their own measure of sapience. They'd been long asleep, but self-preservation roused them into a grumpy and disconcerted pow-wow. The lake of tears, they agreed, would soon wash away their root-soil, and then their roots, and then them, if nothing was done about this curiously wet human child. Because trees, like humans, think first of their own problems.

The girl was lifted from her raft in a cradling of branches, raised to the treetops, and soothed into sleep by the wind's constant yet disinterested swaying. Sleep required no

magic; she fell easily into its embrace. Yet a little magic was also added to her rest. This girl is a danger to trees everywhere, the trees agreed. This deluge cannot be allowed to happen again, they further agreed. It took a gathering of powers that had not occurred for some ages, but soon it was done. She would cry no more.

The lake subsided. A path that some might say had not existed until that moment led the wagon of a poor, childless weaver and his wife through the wood to the scene of the ambush. As the weaver buried the farmer and his wife with some care in a clearing nearby, the weaver's wife pragmatically salvaged what she could of the wagon's haul, for they too were on their way to market. The trees watched, impatient for their peace to be restored. The girl sat, still and silent, her eyes dry yet her face caked with the condensed salty grief that remained once her tears had evaporated. In time, she let the weaver lift her into the wagon without question or noise.

The market, like any sufficiently large gathering of people, served many purposes. It was a place to sell, and to buy, and to barter. It was a hiring fair. It was a place to exchange news, to tell stories – and sometimes to deliberately blur the

distinction between those two things. It was the end of one year, and the beginning of the next. The castle itself swallowed whatever it chose. Aware of its coming winter hunger, it filled vast, cool larders, replenished vats of wine, acquired fresh horses, stable and kitchen staff. It then expelled a sated breath of gold and silver coins.

The weaver and his wife set up their stall at the edge of the rough scatter of houses which formed the town that fed off the castle's scraps. Within a day, the town, such as it was, had been consumed by the swelling market as the tide consumes rocks on the beach, and they were surrounded by the rabble. During the days that followed, the weaver sold the strong, brightly-striped fabrics that were the product of their winter and spring, his voice carrying across the crowds, but also into the back of their wagon, where his wife worked quickly and quietly, making clothes for the girl, who sat beside her, watching.

On the third day, the girl sat beside the weaver on the back of their wagon, wearing a new dress of bold blues and purples. She watched the growing crowd with interest. As his pitch reached its height, the weaver called upon the girl to stand and turn, to display their wares. She beamed at the spontaneous applause. The small show was repeated the following

day, after some overnight rehearsal, to greater acclaim. In the evenings, as the three of them settled down in the wagon, the girl seemed content, but distant, a container for a person temporarily elsewhere.

The fourth day began with great alarm. At dawn, the castle's jaws creaked open, and a great clanking rush of armoured guards emerged. They cleared a space where the crowd was densest, pushing people roughly aside, then began to construct a low wooden platform. By the height of the day, their work was done, and they retreated to the edge of the clearing.

Through the crowd, alone, strode a tall, angular woman, clad as black as a crow, a thin rod in her right hand. She broke into the clearing the guards were holding, climbed the platform, held the rod aloft for silence, and spoke.

"Rejoice! Rejoice!" she called out, and there was a corvid rasp about her voice also. "To the Queen, to the castle, to this great land, there is a daughter!"

There were some muted, tired cheers at the news, and a few mutterings of discontent; there was also a great deal of bemused silence – this interruption was not earning them any money. The weaver and his wife looked on from a distance, the girl between them.

"The Princess will have much need for a companion in the years to come!" the woman continued. "All girl-children will be brought forward to be considered for this honour!"

The crowd's mood changed slowly at first, as word spread, but the potential gain from this transaction soon had eyes filled with gold, and parents brought their daughters forward to the platform in a surging wave. Some were willing; some were pulled reluctantly; others were carried. As the guards struggled to maintain order, a simple wooden trestle was brought to the platform and set up to one side. The woman in black flexed the rod she carried.

A girl of perhaps eight or nine years was led to the platform by a guard, her parents shooing her on encouragingly. Dazed and stiff, she bent across the trestle as directed. The woman in black whipped the rod smartly across the girl's bottom. The girl howled in protest and tried to stand up. The guard pushed her shoulders down, and a second stroke landed, to another loud howl.

"Next!" the woman called out, as the guard let the girl scamper back to her family.

An older girl with cropped black hair looked determinedly back to her father as she stepped up to the platform alone and

placed herself across the trestle. She grimaced and squirmed at the first and second strokes, but a third split her resolve and she collapsed into sobbing.

"Next!"

Then a mother dragged her daughter of barely six years to the platform, every step a battle between them.

"Next!" the woman in black called out again, before they had even reached the trestle.

As the press of applicants gradually dwindled, the cries of "Next! Next!" increasing in frustration and volume, the guards began to move through the crowd, pulling daughters from the few reluctant parents, carrying them to the platform and subduing resistance with a heavy hand. The weaver quietly told his wife to hide the girl in the wagon.

Before long, a guard approached.

"The girl who danced for you," the guard said. "Where is she?"

They said nothing.

"We can take the wagon and the girl if need be. Where is she?"

The guard pushed the silent weaver and his wife aside and climbed carelessly into the wagon, overturning the table at

which they worked and ate, scattering dishes, fabric samples, stacks of small-value coins. He tore the sheets from the bed where the three of them slept together, and found the girl beneath. She looked at him without interest as he picked her up roughly and carried her off to the platform, the weaver and his wife following.

The crowd had thinned to almost nothing. A few dozen watched the guard step up to the platform and set the girl across the trestle, holding her arms to keep her in place. Another guard kept the weaver and his wife back.

The woman in black turned towards the girl and in one fluid movement lashed the rod across her backside. The girl registered discomfort, but was silent. Distracted, frustrated, the woman had whipped the girl for a second time, and then a third time, before her continued silence was apparent. She bent before the girl, lifted her chin, perceiving the pain on the girl's face.

The woman handed the rod to the guard, signalled that he should continue the beating, while she looked into the girl's eyes. The guard's first stroke, the full strength of his arm bearing down on her body, made the girl shiver and squeal.

"Harder," the woman said.

Another stroke was hard enough to push the trestle forward

across the platform, but the girl's eyes remained clear.

"Harder."

The guard stepped back, then applied all of his body to a third stroke. The girl shook, her breathing ragged and desperate, but there was nothing like defeat.

The woman stood, let the girl's head fall back down. "This one," she said to the guard. "She's *interesting*." She turned to look at the weaver and his wife.

"Please," the weaver said. "She is not ours to give."

"No?" the woman replied, amused. "Then where is the loss?" She took something small from a deep pocket, threw it onto the ground in front of them. It was a gold coin. "Not yours by right, you understand. A gesture of generosity." She turned and walked away through the remaining crowd. The guard picked up the girl and followed close behind.

The weaver and his wife watched them disappear into the castle, then they turned slowly back to their wagon, leaving the coin in the dirt, returned their possessions to some order, and were gone by nightfall.

III

A voice, somewhere, said: "You didn't cry."

The boy lay curled on his side, pulling the hurt around him like a blanket. There was a hazy memory of being dragged down some steps and thrown into a cell, lots of shouting and banging of doors, and then a long silence. With his eyes closed he could just about imagine being back under his window in the kitchens, his meagre but secure life all around him, Flora sleeping nearby. But the kitchens were never quiet like this. The clatter and chatter of work filled every hour of the day. Even during the quietest hours of the night there were always friendly voices to accompany his sleep, and the constant protective roar of the oven-beasts.

"You didn't cry." The voice again.

He tried to convince himself that the hurt was from Flora's hand, or her wooden spoon – and much deserved – but this was hopeless. As much as the steward's belt left him shaken and sore, there was a purpose even to that that he'd always been

able to see. But this was just fearful and empty and mad. He tried not to move too much, because every time he did he felt broken and unmendable.

A short while later there was a quiet scratching of metal on metal from behind him. He heard the cell door open a little, then close again. Presently, he heard a soft voice he didn't recognise, but which at the same time was familiar.

"Are you a spy?"

It almost seemed as if the voice were inside his own head, testing him somehow. He answered.

"No."

"Who are you?"

"I told you. I live in the kitchens."

The voice was silent, so he asked a question of his own.

"Why would I be a spy?"

"Mistress often talks about spies. She is afraid of them. And tomorrow would be a good day to be a spy, I think. But I don't think you are a spy. I'm not even sure that Mistress thinks you are a spy. I think Mistress wanted to hurt you. She likes to hurt."

The last was almost whispered, a daring secret long-thought but never yet spoken.

"Why didn't you cry when she hurt you?"

Much as it made him shiver, he lifted himself on his elbows and turned towards the door. The girl was there, in the same white dress as before. He remembered something from a deep place, about a princess in a story.

"You let your hair down," he said. It fell across her shoulders now, wilful and strong.

She held up a hairpin. "I can use it to open some of the doors. Mistress doesn't know. Why didn't you cry?" There was suddenly a pleading tone in her voice.

"I don't know," the boy said. "Why would I cry?"

"Because it would be normal," the girl answered. "I think because it would be normal." Her head dropped, as if exhausted from minutes of contact with another human. "I'm sorry." She folded up into a sitting position on the cold stone floor.

"I'm sorry I came into your room," he said. "It was not my place."

"You *touched* me!" the girl spat, suddenly. "You *touched* me. Only Mistress can touch me. Everyone knows."

"I'm sorry," he said again.

"There was a guard, once." The girl let this hang.

"Mistress had his hands cut off." She shook her head to dislodge

the memory, and invited another thought. "What are the kitchens like?"

"Not like this." He turned away from the girl again and curled up.

"Do they hurt you?"

Something almost like a laugh escaped before he could catch it. "I get beaten sometimes, and it hurts, but it's not like this."

"How is it different?" the girl asked, as if the answer would solve everything.

"I hear you," the boy replied, simply. "Where I sleep, there's a window, and I can hear you at night. It's different."

There was a long silence. He didn't want to move, and didn't seem to have the heart to tell her to go.

"There's some oil," the girl said, brightly. "Mistress uses it afterwards on my skin. She says it helps, especially if I need not to have bad marks, or if there's blood. Shall I fetch it?"

"I don't need it."

"I'll fetch it."

She disappeared with quick, confident movements, and the boy had only counted a few deep, calming breaths in the

nothingness of the cell before he heard the door click behind her again, and she was there, kneeling beside him, the sudden closeness of skin and flowers and soft hair catching in his head.

"May I touch you?" the girl asked. The boy said nothing, but slowly uncurled, face down but open, eyes turned away.

"You need to..."

He pushed his hips up a little, and eased his pants down to his knees. The breathing he could hear now was hers, not his; his own was stuck somewhere. He closed his eyes.

"What do they call you in the kitchens?"

He thought about that. "If they call me anything, they just call me 'boy', and that's mostly when I'm in trouble."

"Then I can't call you that," the girl said quietly.

"Because you're not in trouble." Her fingertip touched against a broken place, traced the raised welt as it crossed his backside, then found another and slowly circled back. "Mistress is gentle when she does this."

"What will she do with me?" he asked.

"I don't know. She might hurt you for a few days and then send you back. You don't belong here."

He thought of Flora – dear Flora. She would be frantic with

worry, even as she spoke of what she would do when she got her hands on him. Who would make sure that the morning bread didn't burn? But then the girl was rubbing the warm oil onto his wounds, her fingers pushing circles and spirals into his skin. He kicked his feet a little against the stone as she caught where it was raw and open.

"Be still."

He was still. She continued to work the oil into his bottom, and the sharp, scalding pain did seem to give way to the deeper hurt which carries with it the promise of healing. The slipperiness of the oil sank away, so that he began to feel a softer, more direct contact with her hands as they finished the work. His feet kicked a little more.

"There," she said. She wiped her hands quickly on his pants, then moved away once more to a space a few feet from him, cross-legged and settled. The boy eased himself up far enough to pull his pants back into place.

"Thank you," he said. "That does help." She said nothing, but there was some movement at the corners of her mouth. He sat, as best he could.

"I listen every night and I hear you and I don't know who you are," the boy said, the words tumbling out in a big reckless

heap. "Do you have a name?"

The girl was still, though her eyes sparkled suddenly. "I think so. I think I used to."

"Is there something that she calls you? Like, when she's gentle."

There was a long pause, and the girl's reply was the quiet of death, or rage. "Yes. But it's not my name."

He nodded. "Why you? What are you doing here?"

The girl's quiet rage crested and broke to a diffuse, crushed flatness. "I don't know. I think *she* knows. I'm just here." They sat together but apart for a while in the night-silence, something between them that neither could articulate taking the place of names. "Can you walk?" the girl asked, finally. "I would like to show you something."

"Yes, I think so," the boy replied, and he clambered to his feet like an old soul.

The girl opened the cell just as easily as before with the hairpin, and she led them carefully but confidently along a wide corridor, skipping quickly into a side-room as guards approached and passed, then out again and up a narrow stairway, which ended at a heavy door.

"This is the back way," she said, as she fiddled with the

lock. It burst open, but was silent on well-oiled hinges. The boy watched as she slipped behind the curtain which hid the door from within, and he followed, finding himself in a narrow gallery.

The chamber beyond was intimidating, and that was its purpose. If the kitchens were one end of the castle, this place was the other. It was easily more than half-a-dozen times wider and longer than the main kitchen space that served as the boy's sense of scale. But the noise and busyness and comforting plentiness were not matched here. At either end of the room, stepped platforms ran from wall to wall, the platforms bearing chairs whose design delineated some measure of importance – elaborate and golden front and centre, giving way to plain and wooden behind and towards the edges. Above the rows, heavy flags bearing images of lions and strange beasts with wings were hung. The boy had seen the steward play a game on a board of black and white squares, where the pieces were set up at the start on opposite edges in a simulation of battle-lines, and the room looked to him much the same.

They climbed the rail at the gallery's edge and let themselves carefully down to the floor. The remainder of the room was completely empty, except for a horse, set in the

centre, which was as ornate as the trestle he'd been tied across to be whipped had been basic and functional. Each solid leg ended in a massive lion's paw, cast in gold, and there was barely an inch unadorned with gold and silver filigree. Decorated leather straps were secured to each corner. Closer, the boy could see what an audience might not: there were worn places everywhere, and the leather covering on the top rail was practically broken through, the meagre padding compressed to nothing, so that an indentation persisted as a centuries-long memory of everything that had been done. Beside the horse, a silver urn held a clutch of fresh, strong hazel rods, soaking in a few inches of water.

The boy crossed to the window opposite, where the girl looked out into the night.

"They'll be here by dawn," she said.

In the moonless dark he couldn't tell how far away it was, but somewhere in the distance a ribbon of lights was coming towards the castle.

"I don't know why me," the girl said. "But this is why someone."

"I wish I understood," the boy replied.

"I would like it if I knew you were watching," the girl

said, turning to him. "If I show you how to open the doors, perhaps you could get in here."

"I will try. They took my catapult, and I had a knife also. Could you help me find those?"

"Yes, I think so."

He looked around. "Do you know where the Princess will be sitting?"

The girl frowned at him, puzzled. "Yes, over there." She pointed to a throne-like chair with lion's-paw arms. "I want to call you by your name," she said. "But I don't know what it is. If we could go somewhere, somewhere away from here, tell me where would we go. If I can imagine it, it might help me sleep."

The boy looked down. "I've – I've never really been outside of the castle. At least, I don't think I have." When he looked up again her eyes were shining at him.

"May I touch you?" she said.

He nodded, and then felt her hand slide into his.

"Friends! We gather at a time of great danger for two lands, but also of great opportunity. War stands ready, but we do not intend to wait idly for its cold hand."

The words echoed around the hall, and in the boy's head,

but not even "war" found a place to settle. He watched the speaker and was fascinated by the strange creature that ate his bread, the bread he watched over. He was as wide as tall, and the opulence of the many layers of clothing, fur and ceremonial armour he wore couldn't disguise the fact that it was all a little faded and askew. The circlet crown on his head was heavy gold, but there was no shine. His words were spoken in a reedy voice, oratory without resonance. This was, the boy assumed, the King, and he felt nothing inside at all about that: not love, nor hate, nor fealty.

"And so we meet today at the edge of the abyss..."

He had been readying himself to try somehow to sneak into the hall, when the cell door had been roughly opened, he'd been grabbed by a handful of his hair and pulled through the corridor and up the wooden steps to the gallery. "She wants you to watch," the guard had barked, throwing him into a corner. "And then later – your turn." So he watched, unseen, as the game-pieces from this land and another took their places: heralds and advisors and priests and princes and princesses, and a queen on each side, and a king on each side, all marked according to their roles by diet and temperament and protocol.

"But first we recognise a sickness in our own family, which

has served as a barrier between us, and which must be drawn before we can begin to together pull ourselves back to firm ground."

A door opened with a clanking effort, there was a movement of heads, and the girl was led into the hall. She was naked. Her hands were tied behind her back, her hair bound up into a tight knot. The right hand of the woman she called Mistress was clasped around the back of her neck, propelling her forward, two guards close behind. She didn't resist, nor did she look anywhere other than at the horse and the rods.

"Let this be a symbol of our regret for divisions past, and hope for unity to come," the King declaimed without art, then sat heavily, his day's work done.

The boy had been hoping for a small symbol of his own. As the guards untied the girl's wrists and set about restraining her across the horse, facing towards the King, so that her legs opened towards the visitors in conscious, vicarious humbling, he watched another closely from the gallery. Even as small a delay in proceedings as this caused much turning of heads towards each other at either end of the hall, and a low murmur of distraction from the tedium of the understood preliminary ritual – everyone was bored – but the Princess was intending to enjoy herself. She

sat high on her gilded throne, tight dark curls billowing down almost as far as her hands, which were folded neatly in her lap. The boy watched her bounce on the seat to a rhythm somewhere in her head, smiling sweetly to an imagined audience, and he reached down to feel for the knife hidden in his pants, just under his right hip, which he and the girl had retrieved from a storeroom. He looked down to the front legs of the throne, where the night before he'd used the knife as a makeshift saw to carve into the wood in an attempt to weaken it and cause the Princess to tumble upon sitting, but though the throne was old and worn, it was also substantial, and he'd had so little time before he and the girl had had to scurry away from the morning guard change. The throne held firm.

He considered the consequences of throwing the knife. A single shot, and he would almost certainly miss. Besides, what would his goal be? To kill someone? His hand moved to the catapult tucked into the back of his pants, which the guard had not had reason to search for. But he had no ammunition – not even the dried beans that the kitchens could provide in ample supply.

The girl was now tightly restrained across the horse, each wrist and ankle leather-bound to a lion's-paw foot, and the

guards moved away. The boy watched her. She was the still centre of everything, ignored by the fancy, pampered ranks and waiting with a quiet dignity for the whipping that might help save the lives of others. The gallery was off to one side, so that if she raised her head as far as she could and turned it, she might just be able to catch sight of him; but her gaze remained steady, and down. Her body seemed relaxed, ready. She was beautiful.

The guard saw him watching the girl and gave him a firm kick. "Enjoy it, boy," he whispered in the boy's ear, with a forced laugh. "Because you won't see her again."

He thought about that. It would be fine. He would go back to the kitchens, whipped and sore and wiser, back to Flora and the ovens and the bread and all of the familiar faces and voices, and from his makeshift bed by the window he would hear the girl being beaten at night, but it would be different, because he would have seen her, and she would have seen him, and they would both know that the other existed, and know what it was like to touch. And when he was beaten, whether with Flora's wooden spoon or the steward's strap, he'd remember that he'd been beaten for her, and that she had tended to his wounds with soft hands and sweet-smelling oil. It would be fine. It was

almost like rescuing her. Wasn't that what he wanted? It needn't matter that he didn't know her name.

He tried to swallow.

The woman known as Mistress stepped forward. Her dress was plain black, dark as night, like a functionary in some sort of stage artifice intended to be an invisible hand. As she tested the hazel rods, one by one, swishing them vertically, the audience came slowly towards a reluctant, obligatory quiet. The Princess bounced with rising expectation. The boy reached again for his knife, which would be comfort.

"Proceed!" the King called out impatiently. "One hundred strokes!"

The boy wanted to cry out at the calling of the number, but he did not. Mistress stepped back and to the side, the chosen rod held lightly in her right hand as she touched it against the girl's skin in preparation. Her arm made a wide, slow arc, at the last moment speeding towards its target, and with a fierce movement of the wrist the rod landed square and true. The sound was not unfamiliar to the boy, but now it seemed a thousand times louder, like a lightning strike. The girl tensed and gasped. The Princess giggled happily to herself, and bounced, bounced. The crack of the stroke echoed sharply across the hall.

He could see the girl trying to settle, to steady her breathing. His unthinkingly found the same rhythm.

Mistress stepped back a little further, her arm found a wider trajectory this time, and she swung harder into the stroke, lower on the girl's backside, where a second stripe began to bloom into red maturity below the first. The boy saw the kings and queens and all of the others whose lives he knew nothing about, and they sagged with tedium, or whispered distractedly, or openly chatted and raised eyebrows to some bit of fresh hearsay. Only the Princess was focused, and she bounced, bounced, *bounced*, her feet swinging clear of the floor, as a second crack echoed from wall to wall, settling into silence. The girl's head dropped for a moment, and then regained itself.

Mistress drew back again, readied the hazel, and this time swung from the shoulder against the girl's thighs with such ferocity that pieces of the rod scattered across the stone floor, and a trail of blood began to find a path down to her right knee. She held back most of a muffled scream, and her legs worked uselessly against the leather. Without volition, the boy stood. Mistress saw him, and smiled. She reached for a fresh rod, shook off the water, placed it against the line where the

girl's skin was cut, and took aim. As she stepped back, she turned towards the gallery and spoke – above a whisper, but loud enough that he and the girl could both hear.

"Watch, boy," she said.

The girl strained her head at this, turned, and saw him. She held his gaze while the rod lashed into where she was already broken, and then her weight fell against the horse. There was a moment of pause during which the only sounds were the girl's ragged breath and the squeaks of the wooden frame of an old throne as it held a bouncing Princess, and then a great many things happened very quickly.

Another crack, which had not been an echo of anything, but the final failure of the two weakened front legs of the Princess's throne, split the quiet. A final *bounce*, and the throne pitched forward violently, the Princess with it, her arms windmilling. The Queen, sitting to the Princess's left, instinctively grabbed the girl, as did the tall priest to her right, but the combined momentum of throne and girl pulled them both forwards too. The King, roused from his sleepiness by the noise and sharp movement, supported himself on the arm of the Queen's throne as it descended towards the step, and his fall was also assured. The priest's young acolyte beside him followed

his master, as he did in all things. A tall guard behind the King dropped the ceremonial pike he'd been leaning on, fought with the King's throne, and gravity, but was defeated; seeking stability from the guards beside him, he pulled them all over and down, setting off a chain of clumsy tumbling in the second row. And so, the Princess leading the parade, the entire party of royalty, diplomats, men of god, related august dignitaries and their security, several dozen thrones of various sizes and wooden chairs of more functional construction, collapsed like so many gaming cards. Down one step they came, the second row falling over the first, and the third over the second, then another, then another, with a crashing and splintering of limbs and carpentry, until the parts in the heap on the stone floor were so knotted as to be indistinguishable.

What followed wasn't silence, but rather causality taking its time to decide what should come next, in the face of so much that was unexpected.

In the space between events, someone laughed, and it was the girl. The first sign of it was almost a sneeze, an expelling of some sort of blockage, but then it came freely, joyously. She laughed the way people laugh when they're alone and no-one can hear, and it filled the hall. Something small fell onto the

stone below her, became a crown for an unnoticed moment, and then settled.

Because there is something that you should know about the trees in the forest east of the castle, between the river and where the mountains start to climb, and it is this: they know a great deal about time, and patience, and quiet contemplation, but nothing of laughter, and why tears are not always unhappy. It was not that the girl had never been able to laugh so openly; she simply had never had reason to. The trees' flawed enchantment shattered.

As the girl bellowed with joy at the upturned bodies and kicking legs before her, a bubbling whisper of laughter, all the more infectious for its lack of propriety, spread among the visitors. A fresh wave of hilarity crashed across the hall as the King tried to clamber to his feet, slipped on the pool of tears that was quickly spreading across the stone, and hit the floor with a splash, as if gravity was making a point.

The boy saw Mistress grab for a handful of hazel rods from the urn and lash them across the girl's back, bottom and legs, swinging down, and down. "Quiet! Stop!" she cried out as she cut mazy tracks into the girl's skin. But the girl was delirious now, and all new sensation fed into the same process. The pool

of tears was now inches deep across the whole hall, and rising quickly.

The boy jumped from the gallery, tumbled in the wet, and rose to face Mistress. He grabbed her arm as it came down once more. She twisted and pushed him onto his back, bringing the rods down on him now with equal fury. He rolled, swung his right leg and tripped her. She crashed heavily into the tears, properly seeing them for the first time. She was winded and confused for a moment, but then rallied and resolved to take charge. "Open the doors until I stop this nonsense," she growled at the guards, who were caught between so many imperatives that they just stood. Mistress waded to the heavy door and pulled, but swollen wood and the rising tide were far stronger. She pulled a guard to help, but even together they were helpless.

The tears were now up to the boy's knees. He dragged himself to the horse, where the girl was in danger of submerging herself. He crouched, so his face was near hers, soaking himself in the stream.

"Can you stop?" he said, gently. "You need to stop now." But she just looked at him and howled.

"I order you to stop, this minute!" shrieked a voice from behind him. He stood, turned, and it was the Princess,

bedraggled and furious, her curls hanging limply. When the boy turned away, the Princess stomped to the horse, drew back her hand and slapped the girl. The boy's right hand came from nowhere. It struck the Princess squarely on the cheek; she staggered back and fell heavily into the tears, bobbing uselessly to the surface.

The flood surged, but then found a place to escape. It had now reached the level of the window, and began to pour out. The Princess, flailing at a world that was suddenly bafflingly unamenable to her demands, was carried to the window, and barely had a moment to register what was happening before she began her long fall, glancing off several roofs and walls before she hit the moat, silent as a fresh grave.

The King screamed at the sight and ploughed through the tears towards the window. But his renewed speed did not override his girth, and the torrent pushed him into the space, wedging it shut on all sides. The deluge, now unrelieved, rose ever higher.

"Come on," the boy said to the girl, though he was not sure she could hear him. He dived under the surface to release her wrists, then around to release her ankles. She rose slowly from the horse, dazed, tears still streaming.

The dignitaries were finding their unsteady feet now,

though an increasing number were forced to swim about among the wreckage of ceremonial furniture. They began to converge on the centre of the hall from all sides.

Despite its gaudy weight, the horse lifted gently in the tears. The boy pulled it urgently towards the gallery, the girl following behind in a slow daze, her flood continuing. Below the gallery, he climbed on top, found a precarious foothold which settled the horse onto the floor, then pulled himself up, clear of the tide. He saw Mistress turn away from the door and struggle towards them, arms waving and guards following close behind.

"You need to climb up," he called to the girl. "Here." He reached down as far as he could to help her onto the horse. She took a long moment, but made it. He took hold of her wrist and somehow heaved her up and over. They both fell onto their backs on the gallery, the girl's tears pouring between the balusters onto guards, and onto Mistress's rage.

"Get them," she hissed at a guard, who hesitated. "Fools," she spat, and started to haul herself atop the horse. Her hand grabbed a baluster. The boy instinctively reached for his catapult, which was still impotent. He grabbed for his knife, and stabbed blindly at Mistress's hand. She fell back into the

tears, wounded but enraged further.

Then.

There was a squelching, squeezing, squishing sound, and a muffled pop. All heads turned together to see the King shoot from the window into very thin air. He followed his daughter in a complicated cascade which ended at the moat, and nothingness. And suddenly a room full of tears had somewhere to go again.

It began slowly, the tide ebbing with a stately calm. But the smallest circular movement built upon itself, and soon it seemed as if the whole world was spinning, a hungry vortex gobbling up wood and clothing and gold and people without caring which was which, and spitting it all out. The boy watched the bodies disappear through the window one by one, dozens of them, all of them, neither caring nor counting. Last of all was Mistress. She clung to the horse as if that might save her, but it too was flung from the window in an emetic burst.

The tide finally found balance at the window ledge, and though there was a continued settling of water, there was also a real, true peace. The girl's tears had subsided, and she lay on her side, as if drowned. The boy stood on shaky legs, tried to decide what to do next, felt very small and alone in the empty hall, then sank back again, defeated.

Against the quiet, there was a scrabbling from outside of the window. The boy let himself down into what remained of the tears and waded across. He looked down. An arm's length below the ledge, Mistress was frantically trying to maintain a hold on a small outcrop of stone. She looked up at him, her eyes expecting nothing, asking for nothing. He watched her.

There was a movement beside him, and it was the girl – naked, dripping, bleeding. She calmly placed a large splinter of throne-wood in the catapult, drew it way back and aimed it downwards.

"Say my name and I won't shoot this into your eye," she said.

Mistress hissed. "Talk to me like that, you little *whore*, and I'll –"

The splinter flew silently and true, exploding Mistress's eye and pushing deeper through a gap in the bone. A muscle spasm pushed her away from the wall. She tipped backwards, continuing to flip over and over as she fell. The two of them watched her body as it was smashed long before it reached the moat.

The boy wanted to say something, but nothing made sense.

"She didn't know it," the girl said, turning. "She didn't ever know my name."

The boy was missing, and the castle sounded wrong. Flora continued the preparations for the banquet – there wasn't really anything else she could do – but she was waiting for the moment when someone would come to tell her that the world was different. The familiar hum of court ritual, baked into her senses, had vanished that evening. From elsewhere, there were silences, and there were stabs of harm, and both were equally unsettling. The stabs were coming closer.

When the food was finally arrayed in readiness on the broad tables – whole roast hogs; mutton joints and game birds aplenty; towering rainbows of fruit; and huge loaves straight from the oven – she gathered the others round and thanked them for their work. She did not mention the boy's absence. All were quietly, fearfully aware of it.

Flora took a deep breath. "Luisa," she instructed the small one. "Please inform the usher that we are ready."

"Yes, ma'am," Luisa answered, with a small curtsy, but she didn't move. Her gaze was fixed on something behind.

Flora turned. The boy was there in the doorway, and a young girl was with him, wrapped in what looked like a heavy wall-hanging – she recognised the lion's-head pattern from the

banqueting hall. They were both sopping wet, and seemed physically diminished, lost.

"Back to work!" Flora barked at the others. They didn't have work, but they scattered and found something to do, while watching to see what would happen.

"Can you help us, Flora?" the boy asked. "She's bleeding."

Flora shepherded the two of them into the kitchens, sat them down. The girl pulled back the hanging around her legs. A dark smear of dried blood cut across the top of her thigh, but it still seeped out thick and bright.

"They're all dead, Flora," the boy said quietly.

Flora ignored this, but took them both into the larder, where she laid sacks of flour end-to-end on the floor as a makeshift bed, which she covered with a fresh sheet.

"On your stomach," she said to the girl, who obeyed immediately. Flora pulled off the wall-hanging completely and set it aside. Then she fetched a bowl of water, a cloth, some soap, and a pot of fat, and set about cleaning the girl's wounds, while the boy watched.

The wounds were endless, layered. She worked the dried blood off the girl's leg, then tended to several splits in the skin across her bottom, cleaning, then sealing the area with a

thin layer of fat. But as her fingers moved across the most obvious wounds they found areas raised and thickened by long-gone but poorly-healed damage, built upon even older damage.

"They're all dead, Flora," the boy said again.

"I heard you," Flora snapped, not looking at him.

"I'm sorry."

"Stay here."

She left the two of them in the larder, closing the door behind her. The kitchen staff had given up pretending to be occupied. They all watched her.

"Luisa." She called the girl across.

"Yes, ma'am."

"Two bundles. One with mutton for three days, apples, bread, wrapped in oilcloth. The other with blankets, a knife, two fishing lines and hooks, water skins. Wrap them to be carried over the shoulder. And something warm for the girl to wear. She looks the boy's size. Find her something of his. Do it quickly."

"Yes, ma'am." She made to turn.

"And then when you're done, go up to the hall. Someone will be coming, sooner or later. I want to know when."

Luisa paused. "Yes, ma'am." She scuttled away.

Flora opened the door to the larder as quietly as she could and slipped inside. She sat on a box. The girl seemed to be asleep, though she was shaking. The boy was curled up on the floor beside her.

"Flora?" he asked, perhaps just to be sure that she was there.

"Yes, boy?"

"Did I let the bread burn?" he asked.

"Yes. We had to make more."

"I'm sorry."

"I know."

He sat up, facing her.

"You cannot stay here," Flora said, plainly.

There was panic in his eyes, but he nodded understanding.

"Where will we go?"

"I don't know."

The boy got up, then, and climbed into her lap, folding his body into a tight knot, resting his head on her chest. She felt the dampness of his hair, and he shivered against her. At first she merely allowed his presence – she was angry and unsettled in a way she would not be able to express, and she wanted to beat him until he told her he was sorry and she saw the meaning of it

in his eyes – but then she wrapped her arms around him, and found that she was rocking gently.

The moment held until Luisa's inevitable return. "Soon, I think," came the whisper through a crack in the door. "They are working their way down."

Flora lifted the boy off her lap and roused the girl with a considered urgency, then she fetched the clothes Luisa had gathered and told them to change.

In the kitchens, the faces were dark.

"Clear the food away," Flora commanded. "It won't be needed." There was reluctant movement.

The packs that Luisa had prepared were sturdy – hefty with promise for a few days, without being unmanageable. When the boy and his found companion emerged from the larder, Flora passed one to each of them.

"Cover your faces," she said. The girl was warmly wrapped in a plain tunic and pants, with a heavy cloak around her shoulders, which she pulled up over her head. The boy lifted his hood, the shadows across his features making him seem suddenly much older.

There were sacks of kitchen rubbish by the door to the stairs which climbed to the castle's back gate. Flora took up

one sack herself, and passed one each to the others. Without looking back, she led them up.

Another door at the top of the stairs opened to a grey, moonlit yard. Across the yard a much heavier door stood open, and a guard kept an uncertain, lonely watch. There were shouts of anger and confusion reaching to the top of the castle, but this corner of the world was peaceful. The guard cast them a wary glance, but didn't stir as they crossed the narrow bridge which took them across the swollen moat.

They were soon at the edge of a freshly-dug kitchen midden which sat in the dark of a large clearing between the haphazard dwellings outside of the castle. Flora set her sack down, and the others followed.

"Listen to me, boy," she said, the words measured and calm. "Travel towards the sun in the morning, and away from it in the afternoon. Stay close to the road, but not on it. Tell no-one where you came from."

He nodded.

"You should find a village in a few days. This will buy more food." She pulled a few small coins from a pocket. "You will never be safe here, do you understand?"

"Yes," he said, quietly.

Flora turned to the girl, and no obvious words came.

"Thank you for your help," the girl said.

"I have done nothing of value," Flora replied, a little flustered. "Now, go. There is nothing more to say."

"Where will the sun rise?" the boy asked.

Flora indicated a path towards low hills, with the blackness of forest beyond. She watched the two of them turn and walk into the dark. Then she emptied each of the three sacks into the midden and made her way back to the kitchens. The guard either did not notice that three had left and one had returned, or did not care.

The kitchen staff were waiting for guidance.

"The boy has gone," she said. "I don't know who will eat it, but we need to make bread for tomorrow."

She jolted them all into action with a clap of her hands, and they found their way slowly into the ritual. Heavy bowls were filled with warm water, salt, then yeast, which was allowed to dissolve until it bubbled. Then heaps of bright white flour were splashed into the bowls, and bare hands worked the mixture until it became dough, which was left to rest and grow in the space under cloths.

When a contingent of disorganised but belligerent guards

stormed into the kitchens, Flora calmly stood her ground.

"Go away. You have no business here."

But they continued with a search of all the kitchens, larder spaces, and the small rooms where Flora and the kitchen staff slept. Finding nothing, they moved on, and that was that.

Flora took her place alongside the others, lifting the voluptuously-risen dough onto floured tables, her palms pushing deep into the cool, airy mixture, spreading and gathering, spreading and gathering, until it was squared into loaves, scored roughly, and ready for the oven. The ovens were loaded, the tables cleared, and things settled into an uneasy silence.

"Go to bed," Flora said to the others, as much request as command. "I will watch the bread."

Though noises from elsewhere spoke of trouble, she sat in the quiet, listening to the rumble of fire and the baking of dough, her eyes heavily closing, then jerking open again. When the bread was ready, she lifted the trays out, turned the loaves onto the table, and stacked the trays away for the next day. Whatever that brought, people would need bread.

Then she gathered up the few blankets that had served as the boy's place to rest, took them with her into her simple room and arranged them at the bottom of her own bed. She lay down,

slept like the dead and dreamed of nothing.

Morning came as if with the unexpected stillness of a heavy snowfall, and Luisa's voice in her ear, caught between excitement and deference.

"Flora, ma'am, you must come! You must see!"

She tried to deflect the girl, but there was no doing so, and voices from nearby held the same tone of wonder, so she reluctantly allowed Luisa to pull her by the hand up to the hall, and from there to the first landing, where bodies crowded around the windows, and the world seemed to have acquired a soft red glow.

Luisa pushed herself determinedly between people to make space for them both. Flora looked, and exhaled deeply, her hand reaching out for the support of the window frame. Heaping in the engorged moat, so that it seemed to be laying siege to the castle walls, and then continuing outwards for a distance about as far as one could throw a stone, was a dense carpet of red flowers, their petals wrapped profusely into swirls and spirals which jumped unbroken from one to the next, so that they gave the appearance of a single immense bloom which encircled the castle entirely.

Across to the left, Flora watched as a group of men she did

not recognise pulled bodies from the moat, red petals still
clinging to their clothes and skin.

IV

Looking back, they would have seen the lights from the castle disappear behind dark overlapping hills as the rough track wound between – first the torches which lit the way across the drawbridge and into the great courtyard; then the layered halls and chambers stacked teeteringly above; finally, the small, unoccupied room beneath the towers where a rough wooden table held a still-burning candle, quill and ink, and a scrap of parchment filled to blackness with images of strange beasts.

But they didn't look back. Exhaustion, shock, and singularity of purpose drove them silently forward in the gloom, side by side, hooded, each with a pack over their shoulder. At the edge of the forest which soon loomed over the path they found a measure of shelter in a hollow eroded beneath massive tree roots, ate without either hunger or pleasure, and then fell separately into restless sleep, the girl's dreams painted in vivid shades of red.

The boy woke in the cathedral under a high tree canopy, the

space circumscribed by birdsong. He roused himself slowly, noting dully that, though the girl's pack was neatly bundled for travel, the girl herself was missing. He waited for a while, absorbing the quiet as nourishment, then hauled both packs over his shoulder and set off.

He hadn't gone too far before the girl appeared from nowhere.

"I was coming back," she said, seriously.

"I know."

"There is a river down here," she said, smiling at the discovery.

"It would be good to move away from the track," the boy replied, remembering Flora's advice.

He followed the girl, still bearing their packs, as she led them away from the path and down towards the sound of tumbling water. The river was young and well-fed, capering over rocky outcrops and collapsing into white foam, then gathering itself and rushing onwards. Upstream was broadly their direction of travel, so they wandered alongside the river for the rest of the day, catching sight of silvery fish from time to time.

They made camp as twilight was bearing down, stopping where they were and laying out blankets and food.

"I don't know how to make a fire," the boy said. "Luisa did that in the kitchens."

"I don't know either," the girl replied. "We can learn."

But it was mild, and the moon was bright, so a fire wasn't missed. They sat apart, bread and meat and sliced apple set out between them on folded oilcloth. "The bread is good," the girl said.

The boy nodded, and took a hungry bite of the mutton. He watched the girl eat, and missed how with Flora he didn't need to think so hard about what to say.

Twilight had become night by the time they'd finished eating and the food had been packed away. As they were settling down for sleep, the girl was still and hesitant.

"May I touch you?"

The boy nodded in the darkness. "Yes."

She brought her blanket across to his and rested her back against his chest, their shapes echoing as sleep washed over them and the river continued its push to the sea.

An early, dewy morning found them apart again, neither aware of having moved. They packed slowly, filled their water skins, then continued walking beside the river towards where the low sun was daggering through the trees ahead.

The boy's gaze was on the river, and the fish that would need both catching, and cooking on a fire, neither of which he felt capable of, but his mind was busy with a matter which stuck several times in his throat.

"You don't always need to ask if you can touch me," he said suddenly, concentrating on the glinting of the fish as the bent sunlight plunged into the water.

The girl turned her head to look at him, but continued walking. "Why not?"

He thought about that, and his face felt warm. "Because I like it when you do."

"How can you know you will always like it?" the girl replied.

"I just know."

Her stride slowed for a moment, the lost energy seeming to go to turning this idea over in her head. "But I don't think you can always know," she said, finally, then forged ahead of him as they walked, her pack securely lodged over her shoulder, her hair still loose and damp from a rudimentary morning wash in the river.

The boy lagged behind for most of the day, daydreaming about catching fish and watching the girl bite into the cooked

flesh as a campfire he'd built and lit bathed her face in scampering yellows and oranges – so it was the girl who saw the lights of the village first. Night was closing in by then. They resolved to investigate the following morning, set out their blankets, ate some of the dwindling food, and found what comfort was available.

"May I touch you?" came the girl's voice once again in the darkness.

"Yes."

She settled herself into the arc of the boy's body as he lay on his side, and pulled her blanket over both of them. Then she reached down to find his right hand, meshed her fingers with his, and slid both hands slowly into the back of her pants until they rested on the curve of her bottom. She pushed her fingertips into the skin and began to move them in small but widening spirals, feeling the low ridges from long-ago damage lift, then fall; knowing that he felt the same.

"When she was hurting me," she said, in a whisper. "How did that make you feel?"

He didn't need to think. "Close to you."

He heard her breaths become deeper and heavier as she pushed harder into his chest. She took their hands lower, down

to where the skin at the top of her right thigh had been broken. His fingers reached the wound – the skin was damp and sticky where it was still healing – and she shuddered. Fingers, hands, arms and bodies intertwined, they drifted into sleep.

The sun was busy warming the earth around them by the time the boy woke, the girl's clean hair and musty clothes still in his face, her breathing merging with the run of the river. He lay quietly and still for a while, devouring the moment and making some plans for fishing and fire. Then he slipped from under the blanket, leaving the girl to sleep, and headed with his pack towards where they had seen lights, bullying his hair into place as he went, and checking in his pocket for the heft of Flora's coins.

The village was further than it had seemed, but was still quiet when he broke through the trees onto the well-worn path. A dozen or so buildings clustered around a dusty clearing. Drawn to a clanging which reminded him of the clanking pans in the castle kitchens, he cautiously approached an open-sided building set back from the others. A huge man was hammering mightily against something that might have been a sword, in a space that seemed to be made up entirely of metal and flame. Behind him, a thin young man a little taller and older than the boy was

fetching in response to gruff commands.

It was the young man who saw the boy first, and signalled to the blacksmith with just his eyes. The blacksmith straightened.

"What d'you want, boy?"

The boy hesitated.

"Nothing, I see. Very well!" And the blacksmith continued his hammering.

The boy stood, patiently, until the blacksmith had worked the sword to his satisfaction, dunked it in a barrel of water, and set it aside.

"What d'you want, boy?"

"I need to make a fire, but I don't know how," the boy explained quickly.

"Fire?!" roared the blacksmith. "And you come to me?!"

"Yes, sir. I thought that —"

The blacksmith roared again for his own amusement, then disappeared into the darkness of his workshop, returning presently with two small items, which he threw to the boy.

"The flat one is flint. Strike it against the other to make a spark. Pull off some tree bark, the thinner and drier the better. It should light easily. Then build on top of it with

sticks."

"Thank you. I have money."

"Money, eh?" the blacksmith said. "You'll need that more than I do. Where are you going, boy?"

"East."

The blacksmith nodded, suddenly seeming to appraise the boy as if readying him for the hammer. "I would say east was a good direction. Lot of travellers heading west through here these last days. Armour and swords. No place for a wandering boy. Now go on, head east with your fire."

"Is there somewhere I could get bread?" the boy asked.

"That way. Follow your nose." The blacksmith took up his hammer again, pointed across the village, then barked at the apprentice, who set dozily to work.

Away from the furnace-heat, the boy could smell something baking, and his nose took him to a low-ceilinged inn full of dark-clad men and drinking and voices caught between whispered conspiracy and table-banging declamation. The gaunt innkeeper sold him a small loaf of meagre bread for most of his coins, and he was happy to find an escape.

"Just you, is it?" the innkeeper shouted as the boy made to leave, but he didn't answer, and was grateful to find the way

through the trees which led back down to their camp.

The girl was sitting on a rock in the afternoon sun, one of the fishing lines trailing out into the river. Seeing him, she smiled and called out. "Look! They like the old meat." The two fish laid out on the rock beside her were small, but would serve as a meal.

"I have bread, although it isn't very good," the boy replied.

While the girl recast the line onto the sparkling water where she saw movement and bubbles, the boy gathered some dry, peeling bark from a tree that looked half-dead, as well as sticks of various sizes, and built something that he hoped could be a fire.

He'd been hitting the flint against the other object – a lump of some sort of metal – for a while, the impact sounding bright and clear, without achieving anything like a spark, when he saw that the girl was watching him with a frown on her face. She took the flint and metal from him, struck once, twice, three times, and the final glancing blow sent a shower of sparks onto the bark, igniting a corner. The fire was soon burning hungrily, and they quickly piled on larger sticks as fuel for the rest of the night.

Darkness sucked the warmth from the day, but they were cheerier than they'd been since leaving: the fish crackled as they cooked, and the fire was a sort of home.

"People are going to the castle," the boy said, his mind working.

"What people?"

"From other places. Like the ones who are dead," he answered. "We should stay away. They would blame us."

"Many would praise us," the girl countered, her face flashing between lit and shadowed, and the look between them showed agreement that this would not be any safer for them.

"This bread is not good," she said, biting into a chunk.

"No," the boy smiled. "Flora would not be happy."

She looked at him. "You miss her."

He nodded. "She didn't know my name, but she knew who I was."

"She beat you," the girl said.

"Sometimes. And gave me food that was not mine to have."

The girl took a fish from the fire, tore some of the meat from the bones. Oil ran down her chin, and she wiped it away with a sleeve. She lingered over a few settling breaths before beginning to speak.

"There is something that I would like you to do," she said. "In my room, I had some ink and a small piece of parchment. I used to draw animals – bears and lions and horses, and other things that don't exist. She would give me a clean piece sometimes. But not often. When it was full, I couldn't wipe away the animals that were already there. But I could change them. I liked to give them horns, so they could fight. Or lots of legs, so they could run fast. Or wings, so they could fly. It made them new."

He saw that she was smiling at herself, and that tears were gathering in her eyes, but there was no flood. From under her blanket she pulled out a rough collection of thin tree branches, about as long as his arm, which she'd tied at the end with a strip of cloth, and then again a little further up to keep it secure and form a handle.

She came and sat next to him, both of them looking into the fire.

"I'm not her," he said, quietly.

"No. You're not her."

She took his right hand, opened it flat, laid the handle of the whip on his palm, then closed his fingers around it, and her own fingers around his.

"Your reason doesn't have to be her reason," she said. "You eat because you're hungry. You share food with a friend." She kissed him lightly on the cheek. "And the food tastes good."

"I felt close to you because you were *hurt*," he said.

She leaned against him. "Then hurt me."

Afterwards, when he'd thrown what remained of the whip into the fire, the handle having left scratches and welts on his hand he was only aware of once it was gone, they curled in the fire's glow and he pulled a blanket over them both, the girl buried in his chest, caked in tears and sweat and without any words with which to ask permission.

He was warm, but shook as if freezing, and didn't know how to stop. The first stroke on her bare skin had been wary, disbelieving, but his arm had soon found an uncanny power and conviction, as if her body were his, his arm hers, and their selves had disappeared into one. In the end he'd thrashed her until he almost couldn't let go, feeding on her cries and on the resistance of her body to each swing, his strength ultimately failing long before his hunger to make her hurt. He was back under his window in the kitchens, looking up to the tower and sharing in her suffering; he was also in the tower, his own hand

bearing the whip.

He rested his hand gently against her unclothed backside, the burning heat and mazy tracery of dark red marks he'd left on her skin merging with his own skin's soreness, and she stirred in an unsettled half-sleep. But exhaustion soon swallowed them both.

Red.

"Wake up."

The boy eased open his eyes to a bright morning, and the entire world was red. His body felt strangely worn and fragile, but he lifted himself with some groaning to an upright position. The girl was sitting nearby, half submerged in a sea of red flowers, which surrounded them both.

She looked at him, looming storm-clouds of uncertainty darkening her face. "Do – do you see them?"

He nodded. She looked down.

"I was afraid they were just" – she shook her head – "in here. I know what they are. I was running and running through them, and the sun was shining and – and there were birds and butterflies and the flowers were almost as tall as me, and I was running and then there were two – two people there and I was

running towards them and they called out to me, they called out to me, and it was my name, they called my name, and it was *Rose.*"

She looked up again, and the day broke for a second time, but only for a moment.

"They're dead. I know it."

The world was still; they watched butterflies and bees flying busily amongst the roses.

Voices began to echo through the trees, distant but closing, so they broke camp quickly and continued upwards and east, towards the morning sun and the youth of the river, the girl setting the pace, both of their packs over her shoulder.

"Where are we going, *Rose*?" the boy called out as he lagged, hungry to speak the girl's name.

"This way."

"What's this way, *Rose*?"

But she just forged ahead silently and he tried to keep pace. By evening, the river was no more, and the trees were thinning. They pushed on higher and higher until the path crested an exposed hilltop, where the girl sat, waiting for him.

"Look," she said, as he sat down beside her. The view was

of the world unrolled as a map of itself. As the sun set, they could see the fires of habitation ignite in all directions, some clustered into towns and villages, others the protection for lonely hunters or travellers. In a dozen or so places, reaching as far as they could see, the bright confectionery swagger of a great castle thrust up into the sky. Busy spidery tracks moved away from each, converging through the night on the one place, among all of them, that they knew, and where the light was brightest of all.

"Where shall we go, Rose?" the boy asked.

"I don't know. A long way from there. South, perhaps, where it's warmer. There are many places."

"I only need one place."

They were quiet for a while, until the only light in the world was that of armies marching to war. The girl unpacked and laid out their blankets. It was too late for fire, but there would be other days.

"Come here, boy."

Her voice was quiet, but he heard, and found a place in her arms.

"That's not my name. You don't know my name." There was an anger beneath his words.

"Not yet," the girl said, in a calming whisper. "When she was hurting you, how did that make you feel?"

He didn't need to think. "Close to you."

"You didn't cry," she said, plainly.

"No."

She wrapped herself around him. "Tomorrow," she said, "we head south. But before that, when you wake, take the knife into the woods. Cut six thin branches, about as long as your arm. Make sure they're straight and healthy. Tie them with cloth from your blanket. Bring them to me."

"Why?" he asked, his voice shaking. But he knew why.

V

Even now, after everything that had happened, the kitchens were still a cocoon, so the blast of noise and colour which confronted Flora as she passed through the gate that led out of the castle was no less shocking for being familiar. But the city continued to spread like a weed, and the castle was hungrier and hungrier each day. The flags and banners and liveries – golds and silvers and blood reds and noonday blues and moorland greens and twilight purples; lions and bears and dragons and eagles and fearsome beasts that had never set foot or paw or claw on any part of the land – which barely three summers before had sprung fully-formed from the earth, but in carefully-tended and distinct plots, as if in a formal garden, were now growing wild.

The castle itself did not sleep, and no space, however small, remained unoccupied. Voices were everywhere – and always – though the clashing of steel against steel was less frequent. Flora was becoming used to hearing a new word in the general hubbub. The word was *parliament*, and to her it meant work,

because her old routines were long gone. The careful balancing of foods and tastes for ceremonial diplomacy, once an occasional weight, was now a daily task. So she plunged into the tightly-woven bazaar of shops and stalls and carts which made up the raucous district west of the castle, sunlight filtering between canted roofs, rainbow-arrayed fabric displays, and the filigree smoky haze from spit-roasting meat and mind-altering weed.

The narrow streets were filled with bodies of all sizes and origins, but Flora was known, her favour and custom much prized, so each of her steps was into a clear space that had not existed a moment before. Still, this was not her domain, and a long afternoon of haggling for meats and fruits and wines and other means to keep the castle sated left her sufficiently dizzy and unsettled that the voice from behind her as she finally turned back towards the safety of the kitchens might have been a daydream.

"Did I let the bread burn?" it asked.

"Yes," she answered. "We had to make more."

"I'm sorry."

"I know."

But the two hooded figures were real, and she led them not towards the castle, but away to the lowering sun in the west,

until the teeming city thinned, then settled into farmland, which rose as far as it could into the hills. She didn't turn until the city had been left far behind, and rocky outcrops were breaking through thick heather.

They lowered their hoods together. His features were familiar, but fuller, more confident, and there were the beginnings of a rough beard.

"You've grown."

"I have."

The girl was now tall and strong. Her hair was streaked with blues and purples, and laced into an intricate braid.

"It is good to see you, my dear."

"And you, Miss Flora."

She sat, and they followed, laying their packs down.

"How are you, Flora?" the boy asked.

"I am old and tired and overworked," she replied. "There are so many balanced allegiances here that none dare think about war, so they are forced to live together, and have become used to doing so. It is likely a good thing. But I am tired. Do you have somewhere?"

She'd asked the question of the boy, but it was Rose who answered. "We travel."

They took some bread and fruit from their packs, and the three of them shared it in a quiet communion for a while, talking of nothing much and enjoying the company.

"You cannot imagine the stories people tell," Flora said. "And they still grow in the retelling. But I saw the flowers, so I know they are not all fiction."

The girl smiled a complicated smile. "My name is Rose, Miss Flora."

Flora nodded. "That makes as much sense as any of it. Why did you come back?"

The girl again spoke. "We wanted to see you. And we wanted to give you something." She took a blanket-wrapped roll from her pack. Flora opened it to reveal roses, on the cusp of opening, their petals variegated like flame. "We've been growing these. At first they were all red, but we've found how to make them yellow, and orange." She smiled again. "And sometimes all of those colours at once."

"Thank you, dear."

Rose glared at the boy, who had been quiet, nodding to him as a prompt.

"We, um, we tried for a long time to grow something else," he said. "But we didn't really know how." He passed Flora a

similar roll, which she unwrapped. Inside was a short branch; rows of neat green leaves, and the limb itself, were hidden beneath explosions of white blossom and blood-red berries in profuse clusters.

"We learned how," the girl added. The boy blushed and shifted his weight.

"These will brighten the kitchens," Flora said.

Rose stood, lifted her hood and settled her pack over a shoulder. "Goodbye, Miss Flora."

"Goodbye, my dear. Be well."

She turned and headed away from them. They sat in silence for a while. Away from the panic and scuffle, there was time to choose words carefully, though the darkness was closing fast.

"There was a young woman," Flora began. She was hesitant, but the script had been written long before. "She came to the castle sick and heavy with child. The child survived. She did not. That is all there is. I would have told you."

He nodded, said nothing.

"I miss you, boy."

"That isn't my name."

"No."

"And you didn't think to name me." He said it calmly, but

it was like sudden thunder.

"No. I thought to look after you."

The moment passed.

"Where will you go from here?" Flora asked.

"North. There is something I need to find, and it will be a good place to start."

"Come back some time."

"Many things are possible." He smiled, finally.

They embraced. He lifted his hood, his face disappearing entirely into shadow, and then he turned and walked into the gloom. Flora watched the figure diminish, merge with another; and then it was gone.

She was overcome by a bone-deep chill that had not been there a moment before, and the darkness was everywhere, so Flora set off for the fires of the castle with an urgent step. Rough moorland settled into rolling pasture, and she was soon swallowed by the ragged edges of the city, where the daily commerce was all shouted out and gaudier night-clothes were ready.

The kitchens were working like a great engine. Flora stood on the threshold, her eyes closed, and let the call-and-response of barked orders wash over her; let the heat of the ovens warm

her soul.

"Miss Flora?"

"Yes?"

It was Luisa, dear Luisa, whose hand now guided the
kitchens far more than her own.

"Are you well, Miss Flora?"

"Yes, Luisa, I am well. Will you find something nice for
these, and give them water."

The girl unrolled the blankets.

"Oh! This grew in the mountains back home! Such a lovely
tree. We used to call it *rowan*."

And two hooded figures moved slowly through the landscape.

Notes

This bloody story. There's nothing I've written that's been nearly as rewritten and rethought, or that's taken so long. It's been in my head, in one form or another, for a dozen years or so. I wrote a few thousand words about seven or eight years ago, then totally stalled and lost my faith in it. I've been chipping away at it for the last couple of years, when I've had time and motivation and when it hasn't seemed impossibly hokey.

An effect of having taken so long to write it is that I've been writing alongside multiple younger versions of me, and inevitably there are some stylistic and thematic incongruities because of that. I don't know that it's a story I would start to tell now, but I did want to finish it. I hope the joins aren't glaringly obvious.

With respect to where it came from, I'm not entirely sure. I think originally I wanted to write something about *consent*. The importance of *names* came a lot later. The significance of crying is an old theme, and the biggest remnant of the earlier

me.

There are clear thefts from *Gormenghast* – although speaking of that masterpiece and this bit of clumsy weirdness in the same breath is a cheek. The boy is something of a benign Steerpike, albeit no less destructive; and there's an element of Titus Groan in the leaving of the castle as a coming of age. The castle itself is an echo, as is the flood (of sorts); even the catapult is familiar.

I have to leave it to the reader to decide how the gender politics play here. The story as originally conceived was far more typically male-rescues-female, though not quite the conventional template. But how boring. Over the years it's become a lot more complicated. The original bones of the story are still there, but I hope it's ended up being a bit more interesting.

Is it erotica? Probably not. That wasn't the intention. It certainly deals with some BDSM themes, but I tried consciously to avoid the fetishisation of details that tends towards the erotic. I hope it's comprehensible to a non-kink reader. Is it a fairytale? Magic realism? No idea. I do know that at some point I decided that I was interested in taking the magic of a fairytale setting, but treating the emotions seriously. I don't

know that I'm good enough a writer to keep hold of the swooping changes of tone, though.

Finally: the title. This is the third or fourth title the story's had, and while I'm not totally convinced by it, it feels important to foreshadow in *some* way the last piece of information that's revealed. I can't know whether it's too obvious or too obscure, so I'm hoping it serves that role without shouting too loudly that that's what it's there for. It did occur to me that *The Name of the Rose* wouldn't have been a bad title. But I think that's been used already.

— P.B., April 2013