

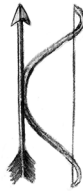
The Art of Forgetting

Book One: Rider

Joanne Hall

“Memory is the greatest gallery in the world, and I can play an endless archive of images.”

J. G. Ballard, Miracles of Life



www.kristell-ink.com

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This book is dedicated to Heather Ashley, and to the memory of Colin Harvey.

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And thanks to you, for reading it.

Praise for *The Art of Forgetting*

‘The Art of Forgetting is compelling and beautifully written . . . It’s not a book I’ll be forgetting
any time soon!’

Emma Pass, author of ‘ACID’, Random House

‘A roistering romp, with darker undercurrents . . . Intriguing characters in a setting both familiar
and different’

Francis Knight, author of ‘Fade to Black’, Orbit Books

‘. . . another excellent addition to Joanne Hall’s rapidly growing collection of published works.’

Robert Harkess, author of ‘Aphrodite’s Dawn’, Salt Publishing

Chapter One

I am five summers old. I wake up in a big bed. My head is swathed in cloth, and it aches fiercely. My father sits at my bedside. He's holding my hand lightly, but his head has dropped down onto his chest and his breathing is heavy. I call to him, and he jerks awake. He stares around in confusion, before realising it was my voice he heard. He drops to his knees and sweeps me into his arms. His love is the first thing I remember, and it has stayed with me, despite everything.

The boundary to the village of Pencarith was marked by a standing stone, watching over the bend in the river. It was here the boy waited. Every chance he got, he would slip away from his chores to spend long hours sitting in the shadow of the stone, staring into the forest.

Waiting.

Whispers in the village said he was touched in the head, a fae child, and many believed that Dallow should never have brought him home from the woods that day. Even Mae, who took him to her hearth when no one else would, looked strangely at him and fell silent when he came near.

He told himself he didn't care, for one day he would walk into the forest and find his way home, to his true parents. His stern, blue-eyed father could turn from kindness to casual cruelty on a whim, but from his first memory he had been the boy's world.

Today, though, he wasn't thinking about his father, but of his mother, that frustrating and elusive phantom. He could remember everything, every word spoken to him, every gesture. That was his gift, his curse. But no matter how he tried, he couldn't remember *her*.

He sat with his back pressed to the sun-warmed stone, methodically tearing strips from a thick blade of grass, and thought of her. In his imagination she was beautiful, graceful and willowy, a little shorter than his father, fair where his father was dark. The boy had her eyes, he was sure of it, for his father's eyes were the cold blue of a clear winter sky, while his own were deep brown, appearing too large for his thin face. He knew Mae disliked looking too long into his eyes, and she said they made her feel dizzy, as though she was falling. Secretly this pleased him.

The rumble of hooves approaching along the forest track roused him from his musing. He lifted his head and let the shredded grass flutter to the ground. Maybe this was the day at last, the day his father came for him? He ran his hands through his tangled hair and scrambled up, a quiver of anticipation churning in his belly.

The rider slowed to a walk. He was black clad, with three scarlet flashes on each sleeve, and a light cloak of the same hue hung from his shoulders. His mount was dusty from the road and damp with sweat. The rider pointed at the boy, lurking in the shadows of the rock, and snapped his fingers.

“You, boy! What village is this?”

“Pencarith, sir.” *Have you come from my mother?* he longed to ask, but the words died in his throat.

“What do they call you?”

“Rhodri, sir. Have you—?”

The rider cut him off with a flick of his hand. “No time for chat, boy. Run to the village and tell your headman to make accommodation for fifty men and horses. We’ll need lodging and food, before sunset. Can you remember all that?”

Rhodri sighed. “That won’t be a problem, sir.”

“Look lively about it. Take this for your trouble.” He flicked a small coin high in the air to land at Rhodri’s feet. The boy made no move to retrieve it.

“Please yourself then, young one. Things had better be ready for us!” He swung his horse around and trotted back in the direction from which he came. Rhodri waited until the hoofbeats faded before picking up the copper coin. He slipped it in his pocket and plodded back to the village.

The village boys lay in wait for him on the far side of the bridge. Rhodri didn’t bother to feign surprise as they jumped out of their hiding place and ringed around him.

“Who was that man?” Ferdahl, a summer older and two bigger, blocked the track in front of him. “What did he give you?”

“Was it a message from your mummy?” Duk pushed Rhodri in the back, and he stumbled forward. “Course it wasn’t, ’cos your mummy’s dead. You know what that means, fairy boy?”

“What I want to know,” Ferdahl grabbed Rhodri’s arm, twisting it behind his back, “is how come you can’t remember your mother? Seeing as how you’ve got such a bloody good memory? Is it because she never existed?”

“I can remember *your* mother. She said I screwed her good—”

“Horse!” Ferdahl’s shove sent him sprawling in the dust. “You don’t even know what your cock’s for, memory boy!”

“Sounds like you’d like to teach me. Want me to roll over?” He rolled sideways as Ferdahl’s clenched fist drove down towards his face. “See? I knew you wanted it!”

He tried to scramble away, but Ferdahl’s grasping hand caught his pocket. The threadbare fabric parted, and the copper tumbled out onto the roadside. Ferdahl pounced on it. “Where did you get this, you little thief? Did that man pay you to lie down for him?”

“That’s for me to know.” Rhodri snatched for the coin, but Ferdahl held it high out of his reach. He nodded to his companions.

“Grab him, lads.”

Duk and Lenar, the smith's son, seized Rhodri by the arms. Ferdahl squeezed Rhodri's jaw, forcing his mouth into a fish pout. "Tell me why he gave you money, or I'll break your face!"

Rhodri struggled to nod, and Ferdahl eased his grip. "He said to tell your da he had fifty men and horses coming back at sundown, and he was to provide for them. Your mother will be tired by morning!"

"Horse!" Ferdahl slammed his knee into Rhodri's belly. Rhodri doubled over, gasping for air and unable even to protest as the older boy pushed him into the dirt. Ferdahl gripped his hair, grinding his face against the rough stones of the road. "You're a horse-shitter, Rhodri. I'll teach you something worth remembering, you squealing little—"

"What's going on here?"

At the sound of an adult voice, Rhodri felt the pressure on his scalp ease. He didn't lift his head; it was safer to lie still and wait to see what happened next. He felt a trickle of blood running past his eye, and his chin was raw and stinging.

Ferdahl replied in his innocent voice. Rhodri couldn't see him from his prone position, but he had witnessed this act enough times.

"It's Rhodri. He was telling lies again. I know it's not my place to teach him a lesson, but it makes me so angry . . ."

Murmurs of agreement from Ferdahl's little band. Rhodri swallowed a groan as a hand on his shoulder hauled him to his feet.

Alfric the cooper was stern, but usually fair, and Rhodri hoped that meant he would escape a beating. Alfric avoided Rhodri's eyes as he gave him a little shake. "What did you do this time?"

"Nothing. I—"

"He had this in his pocket." Ferdahl handed over the copper with a smug air. "He says he got it from a soldier, but he wouldn't tell me why."

"That's a lie! I told you. You didn't believe me!"

Alfric sighed, rubbing the coin between his thick fingers. "What did you tell him, Rhodri?"

"The soldier said he was coming back at sundown with fifty men and horses, and Pencarith was to put them up for the night." Rhodri stared at his boots, not expecting to be believed.

"Talk sense, Rhodri! Why would the army come here? Is this a fantasy about your parents again?"

Rhodri pressed his lips tight shut, a hot flush of resentment burning his skin. Let them call him a liar, then! The whole village would soon find out the truth.

Alfric pocketed the coin. “Off to your chores now, boys. Don’t take it upon yourselves to serve out discipline in future. Not you.” He clamped a hand on Rhodri’s shoulder. “You and I need to have words, young Rhodri.”

His voice was gentle, and Rhodri let himself relax. A beating from Alfric seemed unlikely. With a hand on his upper arm, the cooper steered him towards the riverbank. For a few moments they sat in silence, watching the eddies and swirls of the water.

“Where did you get the money, Rhodri?”

“I told you. Why do you care so much? It’s only a copper.”

“Forget your story for a moment. What I’m saying to you is important.”

Rhodri pulled his knees up to his chin, fists clenching and unclenching on the scrubby grass. Alfric patted him on the shoulder and passed him a cloth to wipe the blood from his forehead.

“Sometimes men—” He broke off, cleared his throat, tried again. “There’s nothing wrong, you know, in letting a man give you coin in exchange for certain . . . favours. But you’re a little too young for that kind of affection . . .”

“You think I got the copper for that? That’s disgusting!”

“Then where did you get it?”

Rhodri gave up. “I found it,” he said. “By the river. Can I go now?”

“Not yet. Why did you lie about the soldiers? And who was the man Ferdahl saw you talking to?”

“Just a traveller. He was lost. I didn’t do anything . . . *wrong* with him. I made up the story about the soldiers because I wanted to feel important. I’m sorry.” He flicked a stone savagely into the water.

Alfric rose, apparently satisfied by this answer. “You must stop lying, Rhodri,” he said in parting. “Keep your head down. Know your place, and maybe people will forget you’re, well, *different*.”

Rhodri held his tongue. He knew his place, and it wasn’t here. He hugged himself gleefully, anticipating the chaos sunset would bring.

*

Rhodri spent the afternoon keeping out of everyone’s way. It wasn’t hard, since most of the villagers would cross the street to avoid him if they could. He found a vantage point on the roof of Dallow’s house, and from there he could see all the way from the bridge to the big house that belonged to Jordu, the headman, at the opposite end of the village. The meandering half-mile strip of shabby, one storey huts formed the bulk of Pencarith; the village was little more than a slash of dirt road carved out of the surrounding forest. The grass thatch beneath him was warm and comfortable, and it was easy to doze off, daydreaming of a better life.

The sound of hoofbeats thundering over the bridge alerted him once more and he quickly squirmed to the edge of the roof for a better look. He had chuckled to imagine what chaos a company of fifty horseman would bring to Pencarith, and it looked like the reality would be even better. The cavalry line stretched back along the forest track, a river of men and horses. All of them tired, he was sure, and all hungry. Stars knew what Jordu would do with them, and Rhodri was determined to see his reaction at first hand.

He lowered himself off the roof into the narrow alley that ran beside the house. Sticking to the shadows, he kept pace with the lead rider as he trotted through the village. Folk came to their doors to stare open-mouthed at this invasion, but no one noticed Rhodri.

Jordu emerged from his house, wringing his hands over a belly distended by too much ale. He watched warily as the leader of the invading force dismounted and strode to greet him. To Rhodri's annoyance, he was too far away to hear their exchange, but the dismay on Jordu's face was enough. By now a restive and anxious crowd had gathered on the village green opposite. Rhodri decided it was time to make himself scarce.

"You!" A sharp pinch on his earlobe made Rhodri's eyes water. "Is this *your* doing?"

"Not me, Dallow! Let go!"

"Never is you, is it?" Dallow hauled him through the crowd, keeping a painful grip on his ear. "I'm no fool, I heard what happened this morning. You can explain to the whole village before I take you home and tan the hide off you!" He gave the boy a push, sending him sprawling at the headman's feet.

"This boy," Dallow told Jordu, "who I foolishly took into my house and raised as my son, has a confession. Speak up, Rhodri."

Jordu's hands were soft and clammy as he helped Rhodri to his feet. His eyes, always cloudy, looked on the verge of tears, but he spoke gently. "Little one, what have you done?"

Rhodri's own eyes watered. He stared at Jordu's boots, dyed an opulent purple, and sniffed. Jordu placed a hand under his chin and tilted his face upwards. "No one is angry with you, Rhodri."

He didn't need to hear the muttering crowd behind him to know this wasn't true.

"I knew the soldiers were coming."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

I don't know, maybe because I was busy having the blue kicked out of me by your son? Rhodri shrugged. "I told Alfric. He didn't believe me."

"Why would he, when you tell so many lies?" said Dallow. "I'm sorry, Jordu. I tried to bring him up better, but you know how he is. Comes from bad stock, I've always said—"

"That's not true!" Rhodri whirled on him, fists flying. He thumped two impotent blows against Dallow's chest before his guardian seized him by the hands and lifted him, kicking and cursing, a foot off the ground.

“Jordu, if you’d pass me your belt—”

“I’d rather you didn’t—” but the soft-spoken headman knew better than to argue when Dallow was in this mood. “Just don’t hit him too hard.”

Rhodri squirmed, struggling to evade the blow. The buckle caught him across the top of his thigh, and he felt a searing instant of pain. He bit his lip to keep from crying out, but couldn’t hold back the hot tears rolling down his cheeks. Screwing up his face and closing his eyes, he braced himself for the next blow.

It didn’t fall. Twisting in his guardian’s grip, he saw the leader of the soldiers resting a hand on Dallow’s free arm. His knuckles were white.

“Where I come from,” he said in a low voice, “we don’t beat children for their elder’s mistakes. One of my scouts gave a message and a copper coin to this boy, and I’ve no doubt he passed the message on.”

“He did!” Alfric pushed through the crowd, puffing for breath. “I’ll admit he told me, and I didn’t believe him. You have to understand, sir, sometimes the boy has trouble telling the truth.”

“Not on this occasion, it appears. Let him go.”

Reluctantly, Dallow dropped Rhodri and handed the belt back to Jordu. Rhodri rubbed his wrists, keeping his head down. His thigh was damp and sticky with blood. His chin stung, his head ached, and he longed to crawl into a corner and hide.

The captain crouched down so they were eye to eye. He had a narrow face, with deep lines at the corners of his eyes and mouth. He winked. “Go and see one of my healers, lad. They’ll get you cleaned up.”

“Thank you,” Rhodri whispered. He’d be in for it when he got home, but that was far in the future. He limped away as fast as he could in the direction the captain indicated, staring up at the neat ranks of hollow-eyed men astride their pale horses. Some of them looked down at him and smiled.

The two healers brought up the rear of the band. Their horses were bigger, weighed down with all the medical equipment a cavalry squad on the move needed. Rhodri hobbled up to them, and one of the mounts lowered its great head to snuffle his chest. He stroked the long velvet-soft nose, and the pain in his leg faded. “You’re a fine boy, aren’t you?”

“Careful down there, small stuff!” The healer swung out of the saddle, the graceful movement at odds with his age and portly build. “He tends to bite those he doesn’t know.”

“He won’t bite me.” Rhodri held his hand out, palm flat, letting the big, warm nose sniff over it. The healer’s eyes widened.

“Look at that! He’s usually an ill-tempered bastard. Work with horses much, boy?”

Rhodri shook his head. “Not really.” Sometimes his father had carried him on the saddle in front of him, but he would never let him ride alone. And that had been in another life. Jordu

had a small mare he rode into the city, and he would lend her out for the ploughing, but Rhodri wasn't allowed near her in case she took lame. His fae nature would be blamed, and dark words muttered.

“Well, you've a way with them. What are you doing this far down the line? Did Captain Garrod send you with a message?”

“He sent me to see you. I hurt my leg.”

“Fighting?” The healer scanned him up and down, taking in the torn, dusty clothes, the scraped chin and bruised forehead. “And losing, I'll wager. Sit down, let me see what I've got for a bout of fisticuffs.”

The rest of the line began to move off. The healer gestured to his companion. “Go on, Hilas. I'll catch up when I've treated our young pugilist here.”

Hilas nodded. Rhodri watched with envy as he trotted away. It must be wonderful to have a horse, to be able to go anywhere you liked. If he owned a horse, he could go looking for his parents. They'd be so surprised if he turned up riding a fine cavalry steed. His mother would cry, she'd be so proud . . .

“Hey! Are you still with me, little chap?” The healer tapped him on the cheek. “You drifted off there. Are you feeling faint?”

Rhodri shook his head. “I'm fine.”

“This is a nasty cut. Needs a stitch or two. The rest of you should mend without help. Want some ale?”

He offered a hip flask. Rhodri took a swig, shuddering at the bitter taste.

“It'll taste better in a few years, boy.” The healer retrieved the flask and sloshed the alcohol onto the long, shallow cut on Rhodri's thigh. It burned, and he tried not to wince. “This is neat. Someone take a knife to you?”

“Belt.”

“I see.” The healer's lips narrowed as he bent his head over the wound. Rhodri flinched, and his leg jerked as he felt the needle pierce his flesh. “Try to keep still.”

Rhodri held his twitching limb steady with both hands and, as the healer straightened, his gut lurched and he vomited, narrowly missing his own feet. The stout man rubbed his back.

“You did well, boy. I've known hardened soldiers throw up after a stitching. Faint, too, and cry. Not all men cope as well as you did; there's no shame in it. Let's clean you up.”

He swabbed Rhodi's chin and forehead with a damp cloth that reeked of unfamiliar herbs, and let him refresh his mouth with more ale. “There you go, young scrapper! Back to your village!”

Rhodri didn't move: he knew what waited for him on the far side of the river. He watched the healer tidy away his instruments, stowing them into packs on his saddle. Seeing his hesitation, the healer smiled.

“Want me to walk with you, and keep you out of trouble?” Still Rhodri hung back. “You can ride on Smoke, if you like.”

Rhodri’s face brightened as he was hoisted onto the broad back of the gelding. Smoke snorted and stamped.

“You behave yourself, my friend.” The healer swatted his ride affectionately on the side of the neck. “This young fellow here—”

“Rhodri.”

“—Rhodri is going to ride you into town, to keep him out of reach of belts and fists and any other trouble he might stir up. You’re not to mess him about!”

“Does he really understand you?” The swaying motion of the horse was soothing, and Rhodri leaned forward to stroke his neck.

“Every word. Although sometimes he pretends not to, just to spite me.”

“How long have you had him?”

“Seven years. Since he came out of school. Don’t look so surprised. Horses need schooling, just like ruffian boys. It takes five years before a horse is ready for the cavalry, and they start their training when they’re just a year old. Of course, you can’t ride them that young, but you can still train them . . .”

As Smoke’s hooves echoed over the bridge, the healer’s words washed over Rhodri like a balm. All this talk of lunging and breaking, hacking, of riding to war . . . This was a different world, far removed from the petty, harsh life of Pencarith, and he yearned to be part of it, to take Smoke and gallop off into the forest and away to distant lands.

“Here we are, I said!” He didn’t know how long the healer had been staring at him. “Either you’re a real dreamer, or that bump on the head was worse than it looked!”

Rhodri grinned as the healer swung him down. “First one! My guardian doesn’t find it so funny.”

“It was your guardian? With the belt?” Rhodri nodded. “You’d better stick by me a while longer. I’ll see if the Captain can do something.”

Captain Garrod proved easy to track down. Jordu had welcomed him into his own house, which boasted a kitchen separate from the main living area. The two men sat at the table drinking ale, while Jordu’s wife bustled about in the background preparing a meal.

She scowled at Rhodri. “Don’t think I’m feeding you as well, child, after the trouble you caused!”

“Wouldn’t dare to ask, Iyla!”

Captain Garrod looked up at this exchange, and nodded to the healer. “Bron, have you patched up this young man?”

“Physically, yes, but his spirit could use some repair, and that I can’t provide.”

“In a tongue everyone can understand, Bron?” He gestured for the healer to sit. Rhodri wasn’t included, but he sat down anyway, grinning at the three men around the table. It felt good to be the centre of attention at last.

“The boy is scared of a beating, from his father, and from whoever he fought with earlier. He doesn’t strike me as a stupid child, to pick fights with bigger boys, but he carries too many bruises for my liking.”

Jordu snorted. “Boys are always covered in bruises. My eldest came home with a fine crop this afternoon. Fell off the rope swing . . .” He fell silent as Garrod tapped his fingers on the table.

“You want me to talk to his father?”

“If you think it will spare him another beating, Captain.”

“I don’t know. Headman, fetch this boy’s father and we’ll discuss the situation.”

Jordu coloured, and pushed away from the table. “Tyla! Fetch Dallow—”

“I asked you to do it, Headman.”

As Jordu departed, face crimson, some of the tension flowed from Garrod. He took a long draught of his ale. Rhodri hoped the quiet Captain was genuinely on his side, but his gut squirmed at the prospect of facing Dallow. He shifted in his seat, trying to catch Bron’s eye. He hoped the healer would tell him he could leave

“You’re taking up a lot of my time today, young Rhodri.”

“Yes, sir. Sorry, sir.”

“Does your father beat you often?”

“My guardian. Not often, sir.”

Garrod’s eyes flicked over him, taking in the scrapes and bruises. “Has someone else hit you?”

Rhodri fixed his eyes on the table top, the knots and grains of wood tracing a map there.

“Never tell tales, is that right?”

He nodded, his face hot.

“How long has this gone on?”

“As long as I’ve lived here, sir.”

Garrod’s voice was gentle. “How can we stop this, Rhodri?”

The words spilled out before he could think about them. “Take me with you, sir! Let me join the cavalry!”

The lines at the corners of Garrod’s eyes deepened. “Do you have any experience with horses?”

“We don’t let him near the horse,” said Dallow from the doorway. Jordu lurked in his shadow, wringing his hands at the confrontation. “On account of him being fae. If he curses the

horse, how can we get our harvests in?" He sat down without being invited, and Rhodri shrunk back in his seat, trying to make himself invisible.

"You think the boy is fae?"

"I found him wandering in the forest when he was only a tot. Not a mark on him, neither. If he's not fae, you tell me where he came from."

"I always thought he was the child of some village strumpet, born the wrong side of the blanket, and she ditched him through shame." Jordu chortled. "*He'll* tell you he's a lord of some kind, a wandering princeling—"

"The boy strikes me as a dreamer," Bron said.

"He is that. Why do you ask about horses?" asked Dallow. "None of yours have gone lame, have they?"

"If they did, it wouldn't be due to a fairy curse." Garrod snorted dismissively. "How old is the boy? Twelve summers?"

"Fourteen, I'd guess," Dallow said. "Though he looks smaller, the skinny little runt."

Garrod glanced over at Rhodri and shook his head. "Too young. Sorry, lad."

"Too young for what?" Dallow asked.

"Your ward is so keen to get away from this place he wants to take the King's copper."

"Join the cavalry? Go with you?" Rhodri could see his guardian calculating the implications. "He's quick for his age, you know. Smart. Good memory."

Now he likes my memory . . .

"He could be useful."

"Useful? This fae, horse-cursing, troublemaking boy from bad stock?" The Captain's lips twitched.

"He's a good lad, really. Just, you know, he's at that age where boys are a handful. Spell in the cavalry might sort him out. He's a hard worker. Clever, did I say that? You could use a boy with a good memory, and he's got the best I've seen."

"I have got a good memory," Rhodri butted in, as it dawned on him that, for once, he and Dallow were on the same side. Dallow wanted him out of here as badly as he wanted to leave. It was probably the only thing they would ever agree on.

Garrod stretched his legs out beneath the table, a smile playing across his lips. "How good?"

Dallow glanced at Jordu. "You got a pack of cards?"

Captain Garrod reached into his pocket, and tossed a string-bound, dog-eared deck of cards on to the table. "Use mine," he said. "That way I know they're not fixed."

He shuffled the cards, keen eyes watching Rhodri intently, and handed them over. Rhodri flicked through them, looking at each one once; the four suits, the major and minor houses, the

five players. Seventy-seven cards in all, dirty, well thumbed. He piled the deck and handed it back to Garrod. "I'm ready, sir."

"We'll see." The Captain tapped the cards. "Go on then."

"Three of crowns."

Garrod laid the first card down in the middle of the table so everyone could see it. "Lucky guess?"

Rhodri shook his head. "Seven of ships, The Island, two of stars, eight of crowns . . ." As he called out each name Garrod turned the card over, fingers moving swiftly to keep up with the recitation. "The Maiden, two of swords, the King, four of ships, the Wolf, six of—"

"All right, stop!" Garrod slapped his hand down on the table, scattering the cards. "This could go on all night. You've proved your point, but just because you can do a tavern trick doesn't mean you're right for the King's Third."

"It's more than a tavern trick," Dallow insisted. "He never forgets anything. It's uncanny. Think how useful he could be to you!"

The captain steepled his fingers and regarded the villager with calm disdain. "I trust you'll remember how clever and useful this boy is before you take a belt to him again. You're lucky I don't charge you for the healing."

It was Dallow's turn to stare at the surface of the table, at the scattered cards. He muttered something Rhodri couldn't catch and which Garrod chose to ignore.

"I wish I could take him with us. I've no doubt he's a bright boy, and he'd be happier, and safer, away from here. But he's too young. The King has decreed that no boy under fifteen summers should join the army, and I bend to his will." He offered Rhodri a sympathetic smile. "In a couple of years, lad, you'll do well in the King's Third, and we'll welcome you."

Rhodri shrugged, trying to appear nonchalant. Only the quiver he felt in his bottom lip betrayed his disappointment, but he refused to cry. Not here, not in front of the Captain.

Garrod gathered his cards, looped the string around them, and returned them to his pocket. He turned back to Dallow and Jordu. "I think young Rhodri has great potential, and I'll be keeping an eye on him. The King wants to turn the forest road into a major route between Hierath and the coast, so we'll be passing through here often. When the boy is old enough to be turned over to me, I don't want him . . . *damaged*. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

Dallow nodded. "Clear as a river, Captain."

"Good." He snapped his fingers at Rhodri. "Sorry about that, boy. Better go make yourself useful, I'm sure your mother needs help tonight!"

Rhodri wandered out into the evening air, trying not to slump under the weight of his disappointment. The moons had risen while his fate was decided. They were both fat and near-full, casting as much light as the sun on a cloudy day, and throwing a blurred double shadow in

front of him. He hesitated in the street, sniffing and wiping his nose with the back of his hand. His head throbbed. The effect of Bron's herbs was wearing off.

Another pair of shadows overlapped his. He sighed.

"Leave me alone, Ferdahl."

"Why? Because the Captain loves your pretty little arse so much he's sworn to protect it?"

"You were listening, then?"

"I'd be stupid not to. You listen now, memory-boy." He grabbed Rhodri's shoulder and spun the smaller boy round to face him, pushing his own broad face up close. "This changes nothing. Understand?"

"Want me to yell out? Then we'll find out what's changed."

Ferdahl let him go with a snort of disgust. "Your new friend will be gone in the morning. You can yell all you like then, he won't hear you."

Rhodri knew it was true. The Captain's warning might make the elders of the village think twice before they raised their hands to him, but Ferdahl had no cares on that score. But for this one night Jordu's son couldn't touch him. Tonight he was invincible, as he hadn't been since his fifth summer. And Ferdahl knew it.

"Shall we look at their horses?" The older boy called the grudging truce.

Rhodri shrugged. "Why not?"

They made their way in silent mistrust to the fallow field beyond the village, where the horses of the King's Third Light Cavalry were corralled. The field was quiet, save for the rustle of equine bodies, and the occasional stamp and whinny. In the moonlight the grey horses looked like ghosts. Rhodri yearned for them, for the freedom they represented and that had been offered and snatched away so quickly. He clambered up on the fence and stretched out, his fingers brushing a soft, warm coat.

"They're war horses. If you fall in, they'll trample you to death." Ferdahl sounded as if he relished the prospect.

"I'm not going to fall." The horse moved away, leaving Rhodri stroking empty air.

"Dare you to climb over."

"After what you just said? I'm not an idiot."

"No, just a scared kitten." More shadows trembled in the moonlight as Duk and Lenar arrived to join them on the fence, drawn by the magnificent, powerful, creatures. For a while they all watched in silence.

Then, "Rhodri's too scared to climb over the fence. He told me."

"Kitten!" Duk punched him on the arm.

"That's not what I said, Ferdahl. I just think it would be really stupid."

"So you are kitten? Thought you were a little lord? Don't nobles ride where you come from?"

Rhodri felt a sudden surge of bravado, the kind of foolish courage that always got him in trouble. “I will if you will, Ferdahl.”

Lenar made an ‘ooh’ sound, and Ferdahl hushed him. “Is this a dare or a bet, fae boy?”

“Call it a bet.”

“What have *you* got to bet with?”

Rhodri thought quickly. “Nerise.”

“Your sister?”

“There’s a gap in our roof. You can watch her bathing.” Rhodri had discovered the hole by accident, and mainly used it to drop crawlybugs on Dallow’s daughter while she took her monthly bath in front of the fire. But girls, and Nerise in particular, held some fascination for the older boys, and when the village girls looked at him a certain way it made him feel hot and sick and excited, all at the same time. He used the words the older boys did, when they talked about girls and sex, and although he didn’t understand some of them he knew they were obscene. Dallow would slap him round the ear if he used them, but that just made saying them more tempting.

Ferdahl licked his lips. “You watch your sister bathing? You dirty bastard!”

“Never mind that. Is it a deal?”

“And if you win—which you won’t?”

“You leave me alone, all of you. I don’t want to be friends, I just want you to leave me be.”

“What are we betting on him doing?” Lenar asked.

“What do you mean? Rhodri’s going to jump the fence.”

“It seems a lot to bet on a little climb. I mean,” Lenar swung one leg over so he sat astride the fence, “you don’t need especially big stones to do *this*.” Both legs dangled inside the field now, and before Rhodri or Ferdahl could stop him, Lenar dropped lightly to the ground.

“Rhodri’s stones haven’t dropped yet.” Duk grinned, easily dodging his target’s awkward punch.

“I think Lenar’s right.” Ferdahl pursed his lips, looking down at his friend, who seemed in no danger of being trampled to death. “Big bets need big deeds.” He turned to Rhodri. “Bet you can’t ride one.”

“Ride one?”

“Doesn’t look that dangerous.”

“Don’t be a feeblewit. You know I can’t ride.”

“One quick trot round the field. All you have to do is hang on. Unless you’re kitten?”

Rhodri thought about it. He had been thinking about it ever since Bron hoisted him onto Smoke’s back and he felt the muscles rippling beneath the glossy coat. If he could ride, he would be free. The horses didn’t look *that* dangerous . . .

“I will if you will.”

“Me?” Ferdahl looked startled. “Hells no!”

“Come on. Your father lets you ride the plough horse. You just said it doesn’t look that bad. Unless you’re the one who’s kitten?”

“I’m not scared of anything! I’ll bloody show you, you girl!”

In one smooth movement he swung his legs over the fence and joined Lenar in the field. Duk, more cautious, hung back, but he boosted Rhodri over to join them. From down here, the horses suddenly looked a lot bigger. Their shifting bodies blocked out the stars.

Ferdahl elbowed him in the ribs. “Go on, then. Get on.”

“You first,” Rhodri hissed back. Ferdahl would be likely to help him onto a horse, then call him out for a thief, and that would earn him much worse than a belting from Dallow. “This was your idea.”

“Help me catch one then!” The cavalry steeds roamed free, with no saddles or bridles, and the nearest shied away as Ferdahl reached out for it.

Rhodri thought of Smoke, nuzzling his chest and snuffling his palm. He held his hand out flat before him and took a tentative step towards the nearest horse. Its ears flicked, but it didn’t back away. He inched closer.

“Come on, boy. It’s all right.” He felt warm breath against his fingers, and he laid a trembling hand on the steed’s questing nose.

“How are you doing that?”

“Sshhh!” The horse whinnied at Ferdahl’s voice, but did not move away as Rhodri smoothed the side of its neck. “They’re like moonlight, aren’t they?”

“Very bloody poetic!” But the older boy must have felt the spell, for he spoke in a whisper. “Will it let me ride?”

“Try it.” He held the horse’s muzzle between his palms, making calming sounds, while Lenar boosted Ferdahl over its bare back. His face was pale, but he offered a nervous smile.

“Look at me riding a war horse! Your turn, short stuff!”

Rhodri let go of the horse.

The next instant he was lying on his back, staring up at the stars and gasping. It felt as if someone had punched him in the gut and knocked the air from his lungs. The ground beneath him trembled, and blood thundered in his ears.

“Rhodri!”

The thunder wasn’t in his head, but all around him. Hooves. Stampeding in every direction. If he stayed here, he would be trampled.

Rolling onto his stomach, he squirmed towards the fence. Above him he sensed, rather than felt, the horses as they charged. An iron-shod hoof flashed past his face, scraping the skin from his nose, and he squealed in terror.

“Rhodri, over here!” Lenar’s voice was closer now. Rhodri’s heart raced so hard he feared it would burst out of his chest. Every breath sent pain shooting along his side, but he could see the fence posts now, solid, driven into the ground. Lenar reached down to haul him from the chaos.

Rhodri flopped over the top bar of the fence like a landed fish, gasping for breath.

“What happened?” he spluttered.

“The moment Ferdahl got on the horse it went mad! They started charging around like they had demons in their heads. You went down, and I just about pissed myself. I couldn’t see you—”

“Where’s Ferdahl now? And Duk?”

“Duk ran for help. Ferdahl’s heading towards the river, I think. He’ll be halfway to Telesia now, or dead!” His voice was a rising wail of despair. “His da’s going to gut me! What do we do?”

“This is my fault,” Rhodri muttered.

“You shouldn’t have taken his stupid bet—what are you doing?”

Rhodri stood up on the fence, swaying slightly. “I’m going to get him back.”

“Get him back? Are you crazed?”

The horses had calmed a little, but the way they milled around suggested that any fright would set them off again.

“Get off the fence.”

“What? Why?”

“Lenar, get off the fence! Now!”

One of the restless mounts strayed near enough for Rhodri to make a grab for it. As Lenar scrambled for safety, Rhodri flung his arms around the horse’s neck and threw one scrabbling leg over its back. The horse whinnied and bucked, jolting him so hard that the pain was like a blade plunging between his ribs.

Rhodri hung on, teeth clenched, remembering everything he had ever heard about riding, and especially Bron’s rambling wisdom as they crossed the river. Direct them with your knees, the old healer had said, but he hadn’t said anything about how you hang on in the first place with no saddle, no reins, and no idea what you’re doing. He buried his fists in the horse’s mane and gave an experimental kick with his heels.

The horse tore off across the paddock as if its tail had burst into flame. Rhodri ducked as the wind whistled around his ears, but not before he saw the fence, grown to an impossible height, rushing up to greet them.

So this is how I die. He screwed his eyes closed, hoping it wouldn’t hurt too much. There was a sensation of rising, of his stomach falling away behind him. He was flying, and all he could do was hang on.

Chapter Two

The shock as the charging horse hit the ground on the far side of the fence almost threw Rhodri off. The houses of Pencarith flashed past on either side, faster than he had dreamed possible, and his fear gave way to exhilaration. He was *riding*, and the horse was responding to the pressure of his knees. For the first time in many years, he had some choice, some control.

The horse seemed to sense it too. He slowed as they crossed the bridge and entered the moon-flooded forest. Rhodri wasn't so keen on trotting; it set his teeth rattling. Now the mad, heady rush of flight was over, the pain crept up his chest. It hurt to breathe, and it was cold.

"Ferdahl!" His voice was a croak, and he realised too late that it was dangerous to shout in the forest at night. You never knew who, or what, might hear you.

They pressed on, walking now. The horse flicked his ears and tossed his head at shadows gathering under the trees. Rhodri felt the skin crawl at the back of his neck. *Don't look back, don't look back . . .*

"Ferdahl!" Softer this time, but with an edge of panic. There was a scuffle in the trees, away to the right, and another to the left. Rhodri tightened his grip on the horse's mane, ready to flee.

"Curse you, Ferdahl, where are you?"

"Who's there?" The voice was faint and trembling, but human, and not too distant.

"I'm coming to find you. Keep talking!" He pushed on through the trackless forest, ducking under low branches that snagged his hair and threatened to sweep him from his seat.

"I lost my horse." The hiccup in Ferdahl's voice betrayed his tears. It came from somewhere above Rhodri's head. Looking up, he saw a pair of legs dangling.

"Why are you in a tree?"

"It's not safe down there. Something was following me."

Again that crawling sensation, of eyes raking over his skin. There were sounds from all around that must be more than the whisper of wind against leaves. The horse gave a sharp whinny, and stamped. Rhodri was a small boy again, crouching in a tangle of tree roots, waiting for night to fall and death to find him. Dallow had found him that day, but tonight he and Ferdahl were on their own.

"We need to get back to the village. Can you get down?"

"I think so." Ferdahl lowered himself carefully, dropping onto the horse's back just behind Rhodri. His breathing was short, and his shirt sleeves were spotted with dark patches of blood.

"Are you hurt?"

"I scraped myself on a branch. Do you know the way home?"

Rhodri's unerring sense of direction lent him confidence. He pointed. "That way."

"Are you sure?"

“Do you think I’d forget the way?”

Ferdahl snorted. “Fairy.”

The moons shone brighter as they passed into a glade. The horse stopped dead, ears flat to his head, lips curling back over his teeth. Rhodri patted the side of his neck, and kicked to get him moving again, but he wouldn’t budge. “What’s wrong, boy?”

“This looks familiar,” Ferdahl said. “I think I lost my horse here.”

“We have to leave.”

Rhodri had seen what Ferdahl, behind him, could not. The moonlight played over bones picked clean, and teeth grinned in the dead horse’s skull. Empty eye sockets stared blankly at the sky.

“We have to leave *now!*”

Using all his weight, he yanked the horse around, out of the glade and back under the sheltering darkness of the forest canopy. He felt hot breath at his heels, and a snarl in the night behind him. “Come on, you stupid horse!”

The horse, shaking off his fear, responded to the urging and broke into a canter. Rhodri flattened himself against the mount’s neck as branches and twigs whipped by overhead. Ferdahl’s fingers dug in under his breastbone, making it even harder to breathe. Every stride sent stabbing pain through his chest, but he bit his lip and hung on. The image of those stark, stripped bones dulled the fire in his ribs. To fall was to die. But his vision blurred, and he was slipping, slipping sideways.

Ferdahl yelled something in his ear, but Rhodri was in a place beyond understanding. He barely felt the ground as he hit it, and heard nothing but the wind howling through the canopy of trees.

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Rhodri lay on something warm and comfortable. A bed, he assumed. He didn’t want to open his eyes. It was easier to sleep, lulled by the hum of anxious voices. There was a gap in his memory, and he explored this novelty. He remembered falling, then there was a gap—there had to be a gap, because he couldn’t have fallen into bed. Was it like this for other people? A fragmented picture of the world, seen in an incomplete series of images rather than a smooth, sinuous whole? No wonder they envied his talent, thought him star-touched. It was an unsettling experience: to forget.

He lay on an unyielding lump and as he shifted pain jabbed his torso. He gasped, his eyes flicking open to reveal a low, cobwebbed ceiling and Mae’s concerned face looming above him.

“It hurts.”

“The healer said you broke a rib.” She had a strange expression on her face. “Try and sit up.”

“I fell—I can’t remember what happened, Mae! I forgot—”

“Don’t talk about it now!” She watched as he struggled to sit up, then tucked a rough cushion behind his head. Her hand hovered near his cheek, but she let it fall without contact. “The child’s awake,” she called over her shoulder.

“He’ll need food, woman. If you’d be so good as to provide . . .”

Something was going on. Mae was not a meek woman, and Rhodri had never seen her ordered about on her own hearth, but now she moved away without protest. The healer took her place. “How are you feeling, young one?”

“A bit strange. I can’t remember—” Over Bron’s shoulder, he saw Dallow shake his head in warning. “Is Ferdahl safe? Am I in trouble?”

“Your friend is fine. You acted with courage tonight, young Rhodri.”

“Thank you.” Rhodri twisted the blanket between his hands. “What did Ferdahl say? About tonight, I mean?”

“He didn’t drop you in the swill, if that’s what you mean,” said Captain Garrod dryly. “The other lads confirmed his story. We found what was left of the horse, too. You’re quite the hero!”

Rhodri didn’t reply.

“Some broth will put the colour back in your cheeks,” the healer assured him, as Mae pushed a bowl into his hands. The heat warmed his palms, and the scent of meat and roots set his belly gurgling. “Eat that, then we’ll discuss your future.”

My future? But hunger pressed him more strongly than curiosity. The broth was almost too hot to eat, and scalded his tongue and lips as he shovelled it in.

“Not so fast.” Mae handed him a slab of rough bread. “You’re eating like we starve you!”

“We don’t, of course,” Dallow said quickly to Captain Garrod. “I know he’s a skinny mite, but we’ve never let him go short.”

“Not of food, maybe, but I’ll wage he’s been starved of something in his life.” Garrod stared at Rhodri, his finger tracing the scar on his chin. Rhodri flushed and bent his head over the bowl, using the bread to sop up the last few drops. The Captain waited until he finished, then beckoned him to take a seat at the table. His legs felt like water as he tried to walk, but he shook off Mae’s hand and made the few steps without falling.

“Tell me honestly, young Rhodri. Had you ever ridden, before tonight?”

Rhodri shrugged. “My father let me ride on his horse with him. I don’t remember ever riding on my own.”

“Where is your father now?”

“I don’t know, sir.”

The two cavalrymen exchanged glances.

“He sounds sincere,” Bron said.

“Remarkable.” The Captain did not elaborate. Silence hung over the table, broken only by Dallow drumming his fingers. Rhodri felt a slow, painful twisting in his belly. If he was in trouble, he wished they’d get on and tell him what his punishment was. The anticipation was almost worse than a beating.

“It’s against regulations . . .” Bron replied to an unspoken question.

“Who would know? I’ve had boys swear on their eyes they were old enough, and let them through.”

“But this one barely passes for his true age. If His Lordship finds out, or the King . . .”

“The King has more to worry about than one stripling boy. In the worst case, he gets sent home and I get my arse slapped. Wouldn’t be the first time. He’s comfortable with horses already, and his ability is remarkable—”

“Stop talking about me like I can’t hear you!”

Rhodri slapped both hands over his mouth, but the words escaped before he could contain them. White with fury, Dallow lunged at him, and Rhodri scrambled back, knocking his chair flying. One flailing hand caught Bron’s flagon and dumped the contents in Garrod’s lap.

The Captain leapt up with a yell. Rhodri ducked under Mae’s arm and bolted for the door.

The sunlight outside dazzled him. Rhodri ran blindly, tears of pain coursing down his cheeks, the stones in the road digging into his bare feet. He heard shouts behind him, but he didn’t look back until the track beneath him gave way to the smooth wood of the bridge, the boundary between Pencarith and the forest.

He slowed. The horrors of last night were still vivid, they would stay with him until he died. He couldn’t face the shadows beneath the trees again, not so soon. He dashed the tears away and looked back at the village, and his mouth fell open in shock.

Dallow and the Captain rolled in the dirt, throwing punches at each other. His guardian was bigger, but Garrod pinned him to the ground, one arm across his throat to choke off his curses. The Captain offered Rhodri an abrupt nod. “You done with your nonsense?”

He slowly returned to Garrod, who was kneeling in the dirt outside the house. Dallow’s face was turning purple.

“Why did you run, Rhodri?” Garrod’s voice was calm, measured.

“I know I shouldn’t have taken the horse, and it’s right I get punished for it. But if I’m man enough to own up and take a beating, I should be talked to like a person, not bartered for like a horse. Sir,” he added, belatedly.

Garrod sat back, allowing Dallow to suck in air. “You’re quite the young man, that’s true. But you won’t be a man until you learn to listen properly. Can you do that?”

“I’ll do my best, sir.”

“My men address me as Captain. Unless you’d rather not be one of my men?”

“I don’t understand, sir—Captain?”

Garrod glared down at Dallow. "I thought you said he was bright?"

Dallow croaked an incomprehensible response.

"Let me explain in terms even your guardian might understand. You're skinny, true, and a little too young. But anyone who handles a cavalry horse the way you did last night, with no experience, has the natural ability to become an excellent horseman. And you're smart. The King's Third needs the best riders, but it needs quick minds too. We have too many good horsemen who can't tell their arse from their elbow." He allowed himself a smile. "Yesterday, you asked me if you could take the copper, and I said no. Now I'm saying yes. If you want to join up, to the seventh hell with the rules!"

For all his protests that he was a man, the embrace Rhodri threw around the Captain was that of little boy on a festival morning. Garrod pushed him away with a rough tussle of his unruly brown hair.

"None of that! Gather your belongings. You've delayed me enough today. I want to leave before noon."

Dallow found his voice. "There'll be compensation, of course," he spluttered, massaging his throat.

"Compensation?"

"For the boy. He's useful round the house, and with the harvest . . ."

Garrod jerked his thumb at Rhodri. "This may take a while. Get going!"

"Yes, Captain!" Rhodri scampered away, heart as light as a drifting leaf. He hummed a tune as he burst through the door of the hut that had been his home for most of the last decade. His possessions, hardly enough to fill a knapsack, were piled in a dusty corner. He gathered them in his arms and looked around, to see if he'd overlooked anything, saying a mental goodbye to the cottage. Dallow and Mae had taken him in, after all; there was kindness in them, and perhaps his strange ways had turned them against him. Despite everything, he would take some happy memories away with him.

"You'll want some bread for the road."

Mae's voice made him jump. Intent on his packing, he hadn't noticed her sitting like a statue by the low hearthfire.

"You know I'm leaving, Mae?"

She nodded.

"Are you sad?"

"I'll give you some advice, my little fae." She rose, and began hacking at the bread with the big, wooden-handled knife. "Stop telling lies if you want to stay safe."

"I never—"

"If you hang on to this fantasy that you're high-born, it'll land you in trouble. You could end up moving in important circles, Rhodri. That kind of boast's likely to draw attention, and not

the kind you want.” She set down the knife. “If you are some noble’s bastard—and you might be—don’t brag about it. Not unless you want to wake up dead of a morning. Do you understand me?”

He nodded.

“Here!” She threw him a thick slice of bread. “You can take the bag behind the door, only don’t tell Dallow. Have you got your things?”

“Everything. Can I ask you something, Mae? Will you miss me?”

She clasped him by the shoulders. “Listen to me. You were a strange child, but while you lived here, you were my son. When you leave this place, don’t look back. You’re moving on to higher things. Memories from here will wrap around your legs like pondweed and drag you down. You have a curse on you, but it can be a gift, if you’ll let it.” She hugged him briefly. “And of course I’ll miss you, you daft beggar, for all you put such fear in my heart. Get out of here!”

She shoved him gently towards the outside. Dazed by her unexpected expression of affection, it took Rhodri a moment to realise she had closed the door behind him.

The King’s Third Light Cavalry gathered in formation in the street outside, a mobile wall of horseflesh. His future. Rhodri fastened the clasp on Dallow’s shoulderbag and stepped towards them, wondering which mount would be his.

“That’s my bag.” Dallow lurked in the shadow of the cottage. His cheek was puffy, and a bright trickle of blood leaked from his left nostril. Rhodri froze. “But you can take it, if that’s what it costs to be rid of you. Don’t come back when it all goes wrong. There’s no place for a fae—”

“Rhodri! Do you want to ride behind me, as Smoke’s so fond of you? At least until we find you a spare horse.” Bron the healer broke ranks and reached a hand down to the boy. “Do you have everything you need?”

“I do now.” Rhodri scrambled up onto the horse’s back. He took one last look at Dallow’s bruised, smouldering face. Then, with a thrill of delight, he put Pencarith behind him to begin his new life, the life he knew he was born to realise.

Chapter Three

The road snaked up a long green slope, and vanished over the brow of the hill. The King's Third was in no hurry on this summer afternoon. They were only a short ride from their latest posting and that, Bron assured Rhodri, was when the real work started. The atmosphere in the straggling column was like that of the last day of a festival, with horses and men in a state of contented fatigue; they had been travelling over two moons. At night Rhodri camped with the healers, who had taken him under their protection. He helped pitch their tents, learned to build a campfire, and was taught the bawdy songs men sung around the fires as dusk gathered. He didn't understand all the words, and when he joined in the men brayed with laughter. But the slope was steep, and soon everyone stopped singing to conserve their breath. Rhodri walked beside Smoke to give the grey a rest.

He began to be troubled by a familiar taste on his lips, and a strange scent in the air. His nose wasn't keen, but he had breathed in the fragrance for a while now, and it grew stronger as they travelled. Eventually, he had to ask.

"Bron, what can I smell? I can taste salt, but salt doesn't smell like that."

Bron smiled down at him. "That, my young wanderer, is the sea. By the stars, it's good to get back to the coast!"

"What's the sea like? I remember—I mean, I've heard people talk about it, but I've never seen it."

A dark-skinned sailor had given him a shell once, rare attention for him at one of his father's banquets. The sailor told him the sea was cradled inside it, and held it to Rhodri's ear so he could hear the waves sighing and rushing. Another delight, left behind and never mentioned, from the day he lost his old life. He felt that seeing the ocean was another small step on his journey back.

Bron cocked his head on one side, like a quizzical bird. He often looked that way when Rhodri remembered things. "It's like a pond, so vast you can't see the other side. Sometimes it's blue, sometimes green. I can't describe it. Why don't you run on and see for yourself?"

Rhodri needed no further encouragement. He soon outpaced the winding column of horses, cresting the ridge a few yards ahead of Captain Garrod. The spectacle below was overwhelming. From Bron's words, he had imagined a large lake, but the water stretched to the western horizon and beyond. Restless and slate-grey, the sea gnawed at the rocky coast, carving out bays and coves. The idea that so much water existed in one place was dizzying. Garrod reined Stormknight in behind him. "Your first taste of the sea, Rhodri?"

"It goes on forever!"

"It might do."

"Has anyone ever crossed it?"

“I doubt it. Some say our ancestors came from the sea, but who knows? I thought you’d be more interested in your new home.” He pointed to the north. “That’s where we’re headed.”

Rhodri’s eye followed the line of the coast as it meandered away northwards. The hills retreated from the sea, and the land sloped gently down towards the water. A city nestled in the hollow they left, houses crowded around a harbour and hugging the coastline of a sweeping bay: in the middle of the bay was an island, crowned by a crumbling castle. Black birds flocked around the turrets, and no flag fluttered there.

The grim vision hit him like a punch to the chest, knocking the breath out of him. He had seen it before, in a painting that hung over his father’s bed, the isle suffused with the glow of sunset, and the clouds curling in long languid shapes over a sky that dulled from gold to a blood-rich crimson. He had traced the outline of the island with his finger, until his father shouted at him for smearing sticky marks on to the canvas and lifted him away.

“Where are we, Captain?” he breathed.

“You’re looking at the wretched city of Northpoint. Your home until the King decides to send us somewhere less star-forsaken. Looks friendly, doesn’t it?” His teeth flashed, as he smiled without humour. “You’ve got a hard road ahead, young Rhodri. Want to go back? The Heart of the Kingdom is behind you, but it’s a hellish way to walk . . .”

“No, Captain.”

“Fall in then. Don’t worry about the island. It doesn’t concern you, nor any living man. I need to get my feet under the table and ale in my belly, so let’s press on!”

Rhodri fell back and let the long column trot past him, obscuring his view of the sea and the black island. He stood like a solitary stone in a river, battered by the tide of memory and sudden choking emotion.

“What’s the matter?” Bron pulled up beside him. “Are your ribs hurting again?”

Rhodri shook his head.

“Want to come aboard?”

The healer stretched down a hand but Rhodri retreated, stepping back from the King’s Third and falling in behind them. The stones of the road rattled against his feet, and he caught himself staring at them, wondering how often his father had ridden this same coast, and what destiny was carrying him directly from Pencarith to the ancestral home of his father.

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Rhodri had caught up with the troops by the time the column of riders reached the gate of the granite-walled city, and this time he allowed Bron to hoist him up onto Smoke’s back. He stared down at the people who thronged the streets, fluttering their little blue pennants and cheering. Rhodri had never seen so many people crammed so tightly into one place. There were more people in one street here than in the whole of Pencarith, and the city could have swallowed the

village a hundred times over. It wasn't just the flag wavers. Street traders jostled for position, desperate to hawk their wares to the returning cavalry; many carried heavy trays around their necks, but the fish-scrap and sweetmeats they sold smelled rancid, and no one was buying. The crowds waved their bright flags, though their clothing was drab, their faces were pinched with hunger and fatigue, and the fronts of the buildings were cracked and peeling.

"You're very quiet," Bron remarked, patting the hands Rhodri laced around his stomach. "Is something wrong?"

"I thought the city would be exotic and colourful. This is just . . . *sad*. I mean, people are trying hard, with the flags, but everything feels crushed. Do you know what I mean?"

"Yes," he said. "Northpoint is an unhappy town, and this is not its most difficult quarter."

"It looks like no one cares much for the city. What about the Lord?"

Bron gave his hands a light slap. "Not here," he said, in a lower voice. "Hold in your observations, at least until we're off the streets. Learn with your eyes, not your mouth."

Rhodri bit his lip as he scanned the crowds. This grimy port town was his father's home, so maybe he was here now? There could be people here who knew his parents, who would let them know he was alive and searching for them. He squirmed in excitement, longing to scramble down from the horse and scour the streets for his lost life.

"We're nearly there, if you need to empty your bladder," Bron said. "No? Then kindly stop squiggling about. Smoke doesn't like it."

"Sorry." Rhodri reached down and patted the gelding, who responded with a snort. His hooves rang smartly on the cobbles as they turned into a broader thoroughfare. The buildings here looked in better condition, but the people were the same, with haggard faces and patched clothes. An old woman muttered a curse as they passed. Bron ignored her.

"Here we are!" he announced, as they passed under another arch and into a wide walled quadrangle. At once Rhodri brightened; this was closer to what he had expected.

Running the length of one side of the square was a colonnade with fluted pillars of smooth white stone. It looked incongruous against the grey, lichen-spotted granite of the surrounding walls, like a single gleaming incisor in a mouth crammed with rotting fangs. Bron pointed to it.

"Your new home," he said, with pride. "At least the army doesn't go short of money in Northpoint."

"Why are the barracks so new, when everything else here is old?"

"The old barracks were destroyed in an explosion about ten years ago. This building's only been in use a few moons, and Aadamus knows the city needed it! But you'll learn all about that later. Down you get! I don't have time to stable you as well as Smoke. The Cadet Master will take care of you."

Rhodri slithered down from Smoke's broad back, jarring his feet on the cobbles. Bron had been his companion since they left Pencarith, and now the healer was abandoning him. He scuffed his feet, muttering, "I don't know where to go."

"Cadets go through the arch on the left. Wait there, someone will be along to tend to you shortly. Don't pout, Rhodri! You're a bright boy, and you'll do well here, and make friends. The sooner you start the better!" Bron reached down and tweaked his ear. "I'll keep my eye on you, my little friend. I have a hunch you're destined for great things!"

Cheered by this, Rhodri patted Smoke goodbye, and set off towards the arch in the high grey wall to the left, trying to avoid barging into anyone or bringing attention to himself while the King's Third dismounted. There was a great deal of noise and chaos in the square, as men who had been on the road for moons were reunited with their families and the garrison staff. It made him feel small and insignificant. He pulled his thin jacket tightly around his body and walked quickly, keeping his head down.

"Hey, watch where you're going!"

The fair-haired, plump boy Rhodri cannoned into looked a little older than himself. He wore a short, crimson cloak, and his baggy black breeches were turned up at the bottom.

"Sorry, I didn't see you."

"Are you a cadet?" The stranger peered at him. "You look a bit young—"

"I've already taken the copper," Rhodri assured him. "I'm looking for the Cadet Master."

"Master Skyne? Come with me." The boy took him by the elbow and steered him through the arch and into a walled square surrounded by covered walkways. "I'm Astan. What's your name?"

"Rhodri." Astan had a light voice, with a distinctive lilting quality so familiar it squeezed Rhodri's heart. The street hawkers had the same accent. So did his father.

"You – you must be local, with a voice like that."

"Born and bred a 'Pointer!" Astan's smile faded. "There's not many of us take the copper, but I want out. I figured there must be more of the world to see."

There were around a dozen other boys milling about in the quad, all older and taller than Rhodri. A lanky boy with long hair drawn back into a horsetail glanced over at them, shrugged, and said something in an undertone to his companion. He laughed, but his friend didn't. A slender boy with fair hair that straggled around his ears leaned against one of the pillars, looking around warily. As Rhodri caught his eye he peeled away and nodded at them.

"Are you new too?" he asked. "I'm Nik."

Astan introduced himself, and Rhodri. "Where have you come from?" he asked.

"The Estmarch." Nik brushed his fingers across a silver pin on his lapel, fashioned into the shape of a tree. He smiled. "It was a long journey."

“I’ll say!” Astan sounded admiring. Rhodri knew the Estmarch from his father’s maps. It was further than Pencarith; about as far as you could travel east and still be in the Kingdom. “I’m a Pointer, and Rhodri’s from . . . Where are you from, Rhodri?”

“Pencarith,” he said. “It’s in the Midlands,” he added, seeing their blank faces.

“What brings you here?” Nik asked.

“Same thing as you, I suppose. ‘Join the Third, see the world’. Isn’t that what they say?”

“I heard a dirtier version.” Astan winked, but before he could elaborate there came a bellow fit to shake the slates from the roof.

“Cadets! Fall in!”

Rhodri grabbed Astan’s arm as he looked around in confusion, and dragged him to obey as the cadets formed a straggling line across the courtyard. From the shadows under the colonnade, a tall figure emerged. He was fully a head taller than Garrod, who walked beside him, and was clad in a long black cloak that swirled around him in the breeze. With his shock of unruly black hair, shot through with grey, and his beaked nose, he bore a striking resemblance to a swooping carrion bird.

Rhodri giggled. He couldn’t help it, and the harder he tried to hold the laughter in the more determined it was to escape, out of his nose if not through his tightly clamped lips.

“Something amusing, boy?”

If a mountain had a voice, it would have sounded like Master Skyne. Rhodri shook his head, keeping his face lowered so Skyne wouldn’t catch him smirking.

“Look at me when I’m talking to you then! Straighten up! This isn’t a game, and you’ll do ten laps of the yard when I’m done talking to you to prove it!”

“But—” Rhodri threw an appealing look at the Captain. Garrod was his friend. But the Captain’s face was stony.

“Twenty laps.”

Rhodri opened his mouth, realised that any protest was likely to result in more circuits of the yard, and closed it again.

Skyne’s lips twitched. “I like a boy who learns quickly,” he said in a lower voice, taking a step back and scanning the line of nervous cadets as they tried to shuffle to attention. He prowled up and down, fixing each of them with a black eye that missed nothing, and taking their names, with a word of criticism for each of them. Rhodri was beginning to think he’d escaped lightly with his laps of the courtyard when Skyne called Nik forward and flicked at the pin on his lapel.

“Your name, boy?”

“Niklaus of Whitewood, sir.”

“Estmarcher.” The word was uttered with contempt. Nik did not reply.

“I asked you if you were an Estmarcher, boy!”

Nik's lips trembled. "I am."

"I am, *sir* . . . "

The colour was leaching from Nik's face. "I am, sir."

Skyne's hand darted out and snatched the pin, ripping it free of the cloth. Nik flinched.

"You think I'm going to hit you, boy? Twenty laps for that."

Nik's eyes darted sideways at Rhodri, but he was smart enough to keep his mouth shut. Skyne glared down at the pin, let it fall, and ground it into the dust under the sole of his boot. Nik opened his mouth as if to protest, then closed it firmly. His face had darkened from grey to crimson, and he blinked hard, pushing back tears.

"You have all taken the King's copper." Skyne spoke to all now, but his boot still ruthlessly drove the brooch into the dirt. "You are men of the King's Third, or will be by the time I'm finished with you. You owe no loyalty to your old friends, your family or the town you came from, do I make myself clear?"

"Yes sir." The reply was muttered.

"I don't think I heard you properly."

"Yes sir!"

"Niklaus of Whitewood, do you hear me?"

"Yes, sir!"

"Do you have any loyalty to the Estmarch?"

He hesitated, just a second, and his reply was less certain. "N-No sir."

"Then spit on the brooch." Skyne drew back his foot. The metal was twisted, the pin broken. Nik stared down at it. Behind his back, his fingers twisted in anxiety. "Well, what are you waiting for?"

"Sir, my father made that brooch . . . "

"I will ask you this once," Skyne pushed his face close to Nik's, "is your loyalty to your father?"

"No, sir?"

"Is your loyalty to the Estmarch?"

"No, sir."

"Who is your loyalty to?"

"The King, sir."

"And if the King told you to spit on that brooch . . . ?"

"I would do it, sir."

The Cadet Master stepped back. He seemed pleased. "For the next year, I am the King's representative in Northpoint. As far as you boys are concerned, I *am* the fucking King. I expect you to obey me as you would obey him. Now spit on that damn trinket!"

Nik spat, but Skyne had already moved down the line to the tall boy with the horse tail. “Drusain of Austover, do you think this is funny?”

“No, sir!”

“You know what’s funny? Your hair, and it’s not making me laugh. Pin it up or shave it off, do I make myself clear?”

“Yes, sir.” Drusain sounded less confident now.

“Good.” Skyne surveyed the line with the expression of a man who had been promised a feast and been delivered swill. He sucked his teeth. “You’re not the worst I’ve seen. I suppose I can turn you rabble into men. Let’s see what your Commanding Officer makes of you.” He saluted the grey-haired man approaching slowly across the square, supported by an ebony cane, and glared at the cadets until they repeated the gesture. The older man nodded, and motioned for him to carry on while he watched.

“Captain Garrod will now tell you something of Northpoint, of the barracks, and of the King’s Third.” Skyne gestured to the Captain, who cleared his throat.

“I don’t know how much you know of Northpoint,” he said. “I’ll assume nothing. The portion of the city we’re in is loyal to the Crown, and walled off from the rest of the town. This is what’s known as the Eagle District. The rest of the town is under embargo, for its disloyalty during the civil war. The King’s Third makes sure everyone gets their rations, and we keep the King’s peace between the Royalists and those who oppose the Crown. It is *not*,” he paused for emphasis, “to take sides. Although if we were to take sides, we would defend the interests of the Crown. But this is a peace-keeping duty, not an occupation.”

He paced up and down the line. “In your first year as cadets,” he said, “you will learn discipline. You will learn to care for and wield a blade, to fashion and fire a bow, you will learn history, languages, navigation, horsemanship . . . All the skills you will need as men of the King’s Third. Every morning and evening I will take you for drill. Missing drill will be punished. You will be expected to clean the stables. Poor work will be punished. Avoiding work will be punished. Missing lessons will be punished. Complaining about punishment,” he grinned, “will be punished. You will work your little arses off for very small reward, and at the end of it you will be men of the King’s Third, and you will most likely lay down your life in a muddy field, and you will do it willingly, because of what you have learned here. These are your masters.”

From behind him several men emerged from the roofed walkway, and boys and masters eyed each other with mild curiosity.

“Master Tay will take you for swordsmanship,” Garrod said.

Tay was a small, slender man, dark-skinned, with a bald head so smooth it gleamed, and a gloomy countenance. He looked like he would burst into tears if he was forced to kill anyone.

“Keir is your horse master. He’s a civilian, but you will treat him with the same respect you treat any master.”

The horse master had a long face, but a ready smile, and his eyes gleamed in a way that suggested he might be more fun to learn from than the sombre Tay. And horses were the thing Rhodri was most interested in, far more than swords and bows and the problems of Northpoint.

“Master Delane will teach you to use and care for your longbow, Master Skyne will teach you history, languages and navigation, and Master Atoud will toughen you up.” Atoud, a spare man, well-muscled under his loose-fitting shirt and breeches, nodded at this.

“I have the misfortune of being responsible for your discipline, under Master Skyne,” Garrod went on. “I want to see you out here for drill at seven and twenty bells, every day, no matter what the weather, the ale-ache in your belly, or that fact that your grandmother has gone North. No excuses. Rhodri, Niklaus, you both owe twenty laps. The rest of you, fall out and take your things to your dormitory. You’re free to explore until dawn tomorrow. That’s when the work starts. Fall out!”

While the other boys grabbed their bags and headed for the dormitory, Rhodri and Nik began their long jog around the courtyard. Neither of them was inclined to chat, and Rhodri fumed as he ran. He thought Garrod had picked him out because he was special, but now the Captain was treating him like any other boy. Worse, he had let Skyne lumber him with this unfair punishment without saying a word in his defence! He had the horrible feeling that any protest he made would result in more laps, but he grumbled under his breath as his tired feet pounded on the dusty ground.

“Come on,” Nik panted as he came up on his shoulder. “Four more laps. The Commander’s watching.”

Rhodri glanced over. He must have jogged past the old man fifteen times, but he hadn’t noticed him lurking in a doorway, appraising their efforts. He had been too intent on his own hurt feelings. Now he sped up to keep pace with Nik, who had longer legs, and the Estmarcher slowed.

“They say he’s a war hero,” Nik added.

Rhodri snorted. “Not my war.” But he glanced at the Commander with greater interest as they passed. He felt the urge to impress this man who might have known his father, whose scarred knuckles tightly gripped his black wood cane, tapping in time to a rhythm only the Commander could hear.