

The Word that Sings the Scythe by Michael Swanwick

Will's first several days as an outlaw were peaceful ones. He traveled south along the river road and then, where the marshlands rose up, followed that same road eastward and inland among the farms. Now and then he got a ride on a hay-wain or a tractor, and sometimes a meal or two as well in exchange for work. He fed himself from the land and bathed in starlit ponds. When he could not find a barn or an unlocked utility shed, he burrowed into a haystack, wrapping his cloak about him for a defense against ticks. Such sleights and stratagems were no great burden for a country fey such as himself.

His mood varied wildly. Sometimes he felt elated to have left his old life behind. Other times, he fantasized vengeance, bloody and sweet. It was shameful of him, for the chief architect of his ruin was dead, at his own hand, and the others in the village were as much the war-dragon's victims as he. But he was no master of his own thoughts, and at such moments would bite and claw at his own flesh until the fit passed.

Then one morning the roads were thronged with people. It was like a conjuring trick in which a hand is held out, palm empty, to be briefly covered by a silk handkerchief that, whisked away, reveals a mound of squirming eels. Will had gone to sleep with the roads empty and that night dreamed of the sea. He woke to an odd murmuring and, when he dug his way out of the hay, discovered that it was voices, the weary desultory talk of folk who have come a great distance and have a long way yet to go.

Will stood by the road letting the dust-stained travelers stream past him like a river while his vision grabbed and failed to seize, searching for and not finding a familiar face among their number. Until at last he saw a woman whose bare breasts and green sash marked her as a hag, let slide her knapsack to the ground and wearily sit upon a stone at the verge of the road. He placed himself before her and bowed formally. "Reverend Mistress, your counsel I crave. Who are all these folk? Where are they bound?"

The hag looked up. "The Armies of the Mighty come through the land," she said, "torching the crops and leveling the villages. Terror goes before them and there are none who dare stand up to their puissance, and so perforce all must flee, some into the Old Forest, and others across the border. 'Tis said there are refugee camps there."

"Is it your wisdom," he asked, touching his brow as the formula demanded, "that we should travel thither?"

The young hag looked tired beyond her years. "Whether it is wisdom or not, it is there that I am bound," she said. And without further word, she stood, shouldered her burden, and walked on.

The troubles had emptied out the hills and scoured from their innermost recesses many a creature generally thought to be extinct. Downs trolls and albino giants, the latter translucent-skinned, blue-veined, and weak as tapioca pudding, trudged down the road, along with ogres, brown men, selkies, chalkies, and other common types of hobs and feys. After a moment's hesitation, Will joined them.

Thus it was that he became a refugee.

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Late that same day, when the sun was high and Will was passing a field of oats, low and golden under a harsh blue sky, he realized he had to take a leak. Far across the field the forest began. He turned his back on the road and in that instant was a carefree vagabond once more. Through the oats he strode, singing to himself a harvest song:

"_Mowers weary and brown and blithe,_

What is the word methinks ye know.."

It was a bonny day, and for all his troubles Will could not help feeling glad to be alive and able to enjoy the rich gold smell that rose from the crops and the fresh green smell that came from the woods and the sudden whirr of grasshoppers through the air.

"_What is the word that, over and over,_"

Sings the Scythe to the flowers and grass?"

Will was thinking of the whitesmith's daughter, who had grown so busty over the winter and had blushed angrily last spring simply for his looking at her, though he hadn't meant a thing by it at the time. Reflecting upon that moment, his thoughts went now where she'd assumed them to be then. He would like to have her here, with a blanket, so they could seek out a low spot in the field where the oats would hide them, and perform those rites which would guaranteed a spectacular harvest.

A little girl came running across the field, arms outstretched, golden braids flying behind her. "Papa! Papa!" she cried.

To his astonishment, Will saw that she was heading toward him. Some distance behind, two stickfellas and a lubin ran after her, as if she had just escaped their custody. Straight to Will the little girl flew and leapt up into his arms. Hugging him tightly, she buried her small face in his shoulder.

"Help me," she whispered. "Please. They want to rape me."

Perhaps there was a drop of the truth-teller's blood in him, for her words went straight to Will's heart and he did not doubt them. Falling immediately into the role she had laid out for him, he spun her around in the air if in great joy, then set her down and, placing his arms on her shoulders, sternly said, "You little imp! You must never run away like that again -- never! Do you understand me?"

"Yes, Papa." Eyes downcast, she dug a hole in the dirt with the tip of one shoe.

The girl's pursuers came panting up. "Sir! Sir!" cried the lubin. He was dog-headed, like all his kind, great of belly but with a laborer's arms and shoulders, and wore a wide-brimmed hat with a dirty white plume. He swept off the hat and bowed deeply. "Saligos de Gralloch is my name, sir. My companions and I found your daughter wandering the roads, all by herself, hungry and lost. Thank the Seven we..." He stopped, frowned, tugged at one hairy ear. "You're her _father, _ you say?"

"Good sir, my thanks," Will said, as if distracted. He squatted and hugged the child to him again, thinking furiously. "It was kind of you to retrieve her to me."

The lubin gestured, and the stickfellas moved to either side of Will. He himself took a step forward and stared down on Will, black lips curling back to expose yellow canines. "Are you her father? You _can't_ be her father. You're too young."

Will felt the dragon-darkness rising up in him, and fought it down. The lubin outweighed him twice over, and the stickfellas might be slight, but their limbs were as fast and hard as staves. Cunning was required here. "She was exposed to black iron as an infant and almost died," he said lightly. "So I sold a decade of my life to Year Eater to buy a cure."

One of the stickfellas froze, like a lifeless tree rooted in the soil, as he tried to parse out the logic of what Will had said. The other skittishly danced backward and forward on his long legs and longer arms. The lubin narrowed his eyes. "That's not how it works," he rumbled. "It can't be. Surely, when you sell a fraction of yourself to that dread power, it makes you older, not younger."

But Will had stalled long enough to scheme and knew now what to do. "My darling daughter," he murmured, placing a thumb to his lips, kissing it, and then touching the thumb to the girl's forehead. All this was theater and distraction. Heart hammering with fear, he fought to look casual as he took her hand, so that the tiny dab of warm spittle touched her fingers. "My dear, sweet little..."

There was a work of minor magic which every lad his age knew. You came upon a sleeping friend and gently slid his hand into a pan of warm water. Whereupon, impelled by who-knew-what thaumaturgic principles, said friend would immediately piss himself. The spittle would do nicely in place of water. Focusing all his thought upon it, Will mumbled, as if it were an endearment, one of his aunt's favorite homeopathic spells -- one that was both a diuretic and a laxative.

With a barrage of noises astonishing from one so small, the sluice-gates of the girl's body opened. Vast quantities of urine and liquid feces exploded from her nether regions and poured down her legs. "Oh!" she shrieked with horror and dismay. "Oh! Oh! Oh!"

Her abductors, meanwhile, drew back in disgust. "Pfaugh!" said one of the stickfellas, waving a twiggish hand before his nose. The other was already heading back toward the road.

"I'm sorry." Will smiled apologetically, straightening. "She has this little problem...." "The girl tried to kick him, but he nimbly evaded her. "As you can see, she lacks self-control."

"Oh!"

Only the lubin remained now. He stuck out a blunt forefinger, thumb upward, as if his hand were a gun, and shook it at Will. "You've fooled the others, perhaps, but not me. Cross Saligos once more, and it will be your undoing." He fixed Will with a long stare, then turned and trudged away.

"Look what you did to me!" the little girl said angrily, when Saligos was finally out of sight and they were alone. She plucked at the cloth of her dress. It was foul and brown.

Amused, Will said, "It got you out of a fix, didn't it? It got us both out of a fix." He held out his hand. "There's a stream over there in the woods. Come with me, and we'll get you cleaned off."

Carefully keeping the child at arm's length, he led her away.

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The girl's name was Esme. While she washed herself in the creek, Will went a little downstream and laundered her clothes, rinsing and wringing them until they were passably clean. He placed them atop some nearby bushes to dry. By the time he was done, Esme had finished too and crouched naked by the edge of the creek, drawing pictures in the mud with a twig. To dry her off, he got out his blanket from the knapsack and wrapped it around her.

Clutching the blanket about her, as if it were the robes of state, Esme broke off a cattail stalk, and with it whacked Will on both shoulders. "I hereby knight thee!" she cried. "Arise, Sir Hero of Grammarie Fields."

Anybody else would have been charmed. But the old familiar darkness had descended upon Will once more, and all he could think of was how to get Esme off his hands. He had neither resources nor prospects and, traveling light as he must, he dared not take on responsibility for the child. "Where are you from?" he asked her.

Esme shrugged.

"How long have you been on the road?"

"I don't remember."

"Where are your parents? What are their names?"

"Dunno."

"You do have parents, don't you?"

"Dunno."

"You don't know much, do you?"

"I can scour a floor, bake a sweet-potato pie, make soap from animal fat and lye and candles from beeswax and wicking, curry a horse, shear a lamb, rebuild a carburetor, and polish shoes until they shine." She let the blanket sag so that it exposed one flat proto-breast and struck a pose. "I can sing the birds down out of the trees."

Involuntarily, Will laughed. "Please don't." Then he sighed. "Well, I'm stuck with you for the nonce, anyway. When your clothes have dried, I'll take you upstream and teach you how to tickle a trout. It'll be a useful addition to your many other skills."

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There were armies on the move, and no sensible being lingered in a war zone. Nevertheless they did. By the time the sun went down, they had acquired trout and mushrooms and wild tubers enough to make a good meal, and built a small camp at the verge of the forest. Like most feys, Will was a mongrel. But there was enough woods-elf in his blood that, if it weren't for the war, he could be perfectly comfortable here forever. He built a nest of pine-boughs for Esme and once again wrapped her in his blanket. She demanded of him a song, and then a story, and then another story, and then a lullaby. By degrees she began to blink and yawn, and finally she slid away to the realm of sleep.

She baffled Will. The girl was as much at ease as if she had lived in this camp all her life. He had expected, after the day's events, that she would fight sleep and suffer nightmares. But here, where it took his utmost efforts to keep them warm and fed, she slept the sleep of the innocent and protected.

Feeling sorely used, Will wrapped his windbreaker about himself and fell asleep as well.

Hours later -- or possibly mere minutes -- he was wakened from uneasy dreams by the thunder of jets. Will opened his eyes in time to see a flight of dragons pass overhead. Their afterburners scratched thin lines of fire across the sky, dwindling slowly before finally disappearing over the western horizon. He crammed his hand into his mouth and bit the flesh between thumb and forefinger until it bled. How he used to marvel at those dread machines! He had even, in the innocence of his young heart, loved them and imagined himself piloting one someday. Now the sight of them nauseated him.

He got up, sourly noting that Esme slept undisturbed, and threw an armload of wood on the fire. He would not be able to sleep again tonight. Best he were warm while he awaited the dawn.

So it was that he chanced to be awake when a troop of centaurs galloped across the distant moonlit fields, grey as ghosts and silent as so many deer. At the sight of his campfire, their leader gestured and three of them split away from the others. They sped toward him. Will stood at their approach.

The centaurs pulled up with a thunder of hooves and a spatter of kicked-up dirt. "It's a civilian, Sarge,"

one said. They were all three female and wore red military jackets with gold piping and shakos to match. "Happy, clueless, and out on a fucking walking-tour of the countryside, apparently."

"It's not aware that there's a gods-be-damned war on, then?"

"Apparently not." To Will, she said, "Don't you know that the Sons of Fire are on their way?"

"I have no idea what you're talking about," Will said shakily. Then, gathering his courage, "Nor whose side you are on."

One centaur snorted in disdain. A second struck the insignia on her chest and cried, "We are the Fifth Amazons -- the brood mares of death! Are you a fool, not to have heard of us?"

But the third said, "It does not matter whose side we are on. The rock people come, the dwellers-in-the-depths from the Land of Fire. Even now they climb toward the surface, bringing with them both immense heat and a fearful kinetic energy. When they arrive, the ground will bubble and smoke. All of this -- " She swept her arm to take in all the land about them -- "will be blasted away. Then will the battle begin. And it will be such that all who stand within the circuit of combat, no matter what their allegiance, will die."

"Come away, Anthea," said the first, who was older than the other two and, by the tone of authority in her voice, the sergeant. "We were told to clear the land of any lingering noncombatants. Our orders do not require us to rescue idiots."

"What's this?" said the second. She knelt. "A child -- and a girl!"

Will started forward, to snatch Esme away from the centaur. But the other two cantered sideways into his path, blocking him. "Look at her, Sergeant Lucasta. The poor little bugger is as weary as a kitten. She doesn't awaken, even when I pick her up." She handed Esme to her superior, who held the sleeping child against her shoulder.

"We've wasted enough time," Sergeant Lucasta said. "Let's go."

"Should we douse the fire?" Anthea asked.

"Let it burn. This time tomorrow, what fucking difference will it make?"

The second centaur packed up Will's gear with startling efficiency, stowed it in leathern hip-bags and started after her commander. Then the youngest of the three seized Will's arm and effortlessly lifted him onto her back. She reared up and hastily he placed his arms around her waist. "My name is Campaspe." She grinned over her shoulder. "Hang on tight, manling. I'm going to give you the ride of your life."

So began their midnight gallop. Up hill and down they sped, past forests and farms. All the world flowed by like a billowing curtain, a thin veil over something vast, naked, and profound. Will tried to imagine what lay beneath and could not. "Will all this really be destroyed?" he asked. "Is it possible?"

"If you'd been through half the shit I have," Campaspe replied, "you would not doubt it for an instant. Rest quiet now, it's a long ride." Taking her at her word, Will laid his cheek against Campaspe's back. It was warm. Her muscles moved smoothly beneath him and between his legs. He became acutely aware of the clean stench of her sweat.

"Hey! Sarge! I think the civilian likes me -- he's getting hard!"

"He'll need to mount a stump if he expects to stick it to you," the sergeant replied.

"At least he won't need any petroleum jelly!" Anthea threw in.

"That was ... I didn't..." Will said hastily, as they all laughed.

"Oh, really?" Campaspe's eyes and teeth flashed scornfully. She took his hands from around her waist and placed them firmly on her breasts. "Deny it now!"

Horrified, Will snatched his hands away, almost fell, and seized Campaspe's waist again. "I couldn't! The Nameless Ones forbid it!"

"It would be bestiality for me too, little ape-hips," she laughed. "But what's a war for, if not to loosen a few rules here and there? Eh, Sarge?"

"Only fucking reason I know."

"I knew a gal in the Seventh who liked to do it with dogs," Anthea said. "Big ones, of course. Mastiffs. So one day she..." And she went on to relate a story so crude that Will flushed red as her jacket. The others laughed like horses, first at the story and then at his embarrassment.

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For hours they coursed over the countryside, straight as schooners and almost as fast. By slow degrees, Will grew accustomed to Campaspe's badinage. She didn't mean anything by it, he realized. But she was young and in a war, and flirted out of nervousness. Again he laid his cheek against her back, and she reached behind her to scratch his head reassuringly. It was then that he noticed the brass badge on her shoulder, and twisted about so he could read it. An image had been worked into the brass, a fine line of moon-silver that glimmered slim and bright by the light of Selene, showing three sword-wielding arms radiant from a common point, like a three-limbed swastika. Will recognized the symbol as the triskelion of the Armies of the Mighty. And he was in their power! He shuddered in revulsion and fear.

Sergeant Lucasta, galloping near, saw this and shifted the slumbering Esme from one shoulder to the other. "So you've caught on at last," she said. "We're the wicked baby-eating enemy. And yet, oddly enough, we're the ones clearing you away from an extremely dangerous situation, rather than your own fucking army. Kind of makes you think, don't it?"

"It's because he's a civilian, right, Sarge? Not much sport in killing civilians," Campaspe said.

"They can't fight and they can't shoot," Anthea threw in. "They're lucky if they know how to bleed."

"Fortunately, they have us to do all those things for them." Sergeant Lucasta held up a hand, and they slowed to a walk. "We should have joined up with the platoon a long time ago."

"We haven't missed 'em," Anthea said. "I can still see their spoor."

"And smell their droppings," Campaspe added.

They had come to a spinney of aspens. "We'll stop here for a bit and rest," the sergeant said, "while I work this thing through in my head."

Campaspe came to a halt and Will slid gratefully from her back. She took a thermos of coffee from a harness-bag and offered him some.

"I ... I have to take a leak," he said.

"Piss away," she said carelessly. "You don't need my permission." And then, when he started into the

woods, "Hey! Where the fuck do you think you're going?"

Again Will flushed, remembering how casually his companions had voided themselves during the night, dropping turds behind them even as they conversed. "My kind needs privacy," he said, and plunged into the brush.

Behind him, he heard Campaspe say, "Well, la-de-da!" to the extreme amusement of her comrades.

Deep into the spinney he went, until he could no longer hear the centaurs talking. Then he unzipped and did his business against the side of a pale slim tree. Briefly, he considered slipping away. The woods were his element, even as open terrain favored the centaurs. He could pass swiftly and silently through underbrush that would slow them to a walk and bury himself so cunningly in the fallen leaves of the forest floor that they would never find him. But did he dare leave Esme with them? Centaurs had no bathroom manners to speak of because they were an early creation, like trolls and giants. They were less subtle of thought than most thinking creatures, more primal in emotion. Murder came to them more easily than spite, lust than love, rapture than pity. They were perfectly capable of killing a small child simply out of annoyance with him for evading their grasp.

Esme meant nothing to him. But still, he could not be responsible for her death.

Yet as he approached the spot where he had left their captors, he heard childish laughter. Esme was awake, and apparently having the time of her life. Another few steps brought him out of the aspens, and he saw Sergeant Lucasta sitting in the grass, forelegs neatly tucked under her, playing with Esme as gently as a mother would her own foal. Will could not help but smile. Females were females, whatever their species, and whatever their allegiance, Esme was probably as safe with these lady-cavaliers as anywhere.

"Again!" Esme shrieked. "Please, again?"

"Oh, very well." Sergeant Lucasta said fondly. She lifted her revolver, gave the cylinder a spin, cocked the hammer, and placed it to the child's forehead.

"_Stop!_" Will screamed. Running forward, he snatched up Esme into his arms. "What in the name of sanity do you think you're doing?"

The sergeant flipped open the cylinder, looked down into the chamber. "There's the bullet. She would have died if you hadn't stopped me. Lucky."

"I _am,_" Esme said. "I _am_ lucky!"

The centaur snapped the cylinder shut, gave it a spin, and all in one motion pointed it at Esme again and pulled the trigger.

Snap! The hammer fell on an empty chamber.

Esme laughed with delight. "For the sake of the Seven!" Will cried. "She's only a child!" He noticed now, as he had not before, that Campaspe and Anthea were nowhere to be seen. This did not strike him as a good omen.

"She has the luck of innocence," Sergeant Lucasta observed, holstering her revolver. "Twenty-three times I spun the cylinder and fired at her, and every time the hammer came down on an empty chamber. Do you know what the odds are against that?"

"I'm not very good at math."

"Neither am I. Pretty fucking unlikely, though, I'm sure of that."

"I _told_ you I was lucky," Esme said. She struggled out of Will's arms. "Nobody ever listens to me."

"Let me ask you a question, then, and I promise to listen. Who is _he_ -- " she jerked a thumb at Will -- "to you?"

"My Papa," Esme said confidently.

"And who am I?"

The little girl's brow furrowed in thought. "My ... mama?"

"Sleep," said the centaur. She placed a hand on the girl's forehead and drew it down over her eyes. When she removed it, Esme was asleep. Carefully, she laid the child down in the grass. "I've seen this before," she said. "I've seen a lot of things most folks never suspect. She is old, this one, old and far from a child, though she thinks and acts as one. Almost certainly, she's older than the both of us combined."

"How can that be?"

"She's sold her past and her future, her memories and adolescence and maturity, to the Year Eater in exchange for an undying present and the kind of luck it takes for a child to survive on her own in a world like ours."

Will remembered the lie he had told the lubin and experienced a sudden coldness. The tale had come to him out of nowhere. This could not be mere coincidence. Nevertheless, he said, "I don't believe it."

"How did you come to be traveling with her?"

"She was running from some men who wanted to rape her."

"Lucky thing you chanced along." The sergeant patted the pockets of her jacket and extracted a pipe. "There is only a limited amount of luck in this world -- perhaps you've noticed this for yourself? There is only so much, and it cannot be increased or decreased by so much as a tittle. This one draws luck from those around her. We should have rejoined our companions hours ago. It was good luck for her to be carried so much further than we intended. It was bad luck for us to do so." She reached into her hip-bags and came out with a tobacco pouch. "The child is a monster -- she has no memory. If you walk away from her, she will have forgotten you by morning."

"Are you telling me to abandon her?"

"In a word? Yes."

Will looked down on the sleeping child, so peaceful and so trusting. "I ... I cannot."

Sergeant Lucasta shrugged. "Your decision. Now we come to the second part of our little conversation. You noticed that I sent my girls away. That's because they like you. They don't have my objectivity. The small abomination here is not the only one with secrets, I think." All the while she spoke, she was filling her pipe with tobacco and tamping it down. "There's a darkness in you that the rookies can't see. Tell me how you came to be traveling by yourself, without family or companions."

"My village cast me out."

The sergeant stuck a pipe into the corner of her mouth, lit it, and sucked on it meditatively. "You were a collaborator."

"That oversimplifies the matter, and makes it out to be something that was in my power to say yea or nay to. But, yes, I was."

"Go on."

"A ... a dragon crawled into our village and declared himself king. It was wounded. Its electrical system was all shot to hell, and it could barely make itself heard. It needed a lieutenant, a mediator between itself and the village. To ... give orders. It chose me."

"You did bad things, I suppose. You didn't mean to, at first, but one thing led to another. People disobeyed you, so they had to be punished."

"They hated me! They blamed me for their own weakness!"

"Oh?"

"They wouldn't obey! I had no choice. If they'd obeyed, they wouldn't have been punished!"

"Go on."

"Yes, okay, I did things! But if I hadn't, the dragon would have found out. I would've been punished. They would've been punished even worse than they were. I was just trying to protect them." Will was crying now.

For a long moment the Sergeant was silent. Then she said, "Kill anyone?"

"One. He was my best friend."

"Well, that's war for you. You're not as bad a sort as you think you are, I suspect. In any case, you're neither a spy nor an _agent provocateur,_ and that's all that really concerns me. So I can leave you behind with a clean conscience."

"I beg your pardon?"

"You're far enough from the epicenter now that you should be safe. And we'll never rendezvous with our platoon unless we ditch the luck-eater." She unholstered her gun and pointed it at the sleeping child. "Shall we try the monster's luck one last time? Or should I shoot it up in the air?"

"In the air," Will said tightly. "Please."

She lifted the gun and fired. The report shattered the night's silence, but did not awaken Esme.

"Lucky again," Sergeant Lucasta said.

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Summoned by the gunshot, Campaspe and Anthea trotted back to the spinney's edge. They received the news that the civilians were to be left behind without any visible emotion. But when Will bade them farewell, Campaspe bent, as if to give him a swift peck on the cheek, and then stuck her tongue down his throat and gave his stones a squeeze. Anthea dumped his gear at his feet and playfully swatted him on his aching bum.

The sergeant too leaned down, as if to kiss him. Will stiffened involuntarily. But instead, she said, "Listen to an old campaigner: Trouble will follow you so long as the child is in your care." She straightened. "Keep the lodestar to your left shoulder, and then at dawn walk toward the sun. That will take you east

-- there are refugee camps just across the Great River. Best not dawdle."

"Thank you."

"Let's go, ladies -- this war isn't going to fucking well fight itself!"

The cavaliers cantered off without so much as a backward glance.

Will gently shook Esme awake, shouldered his pack, and took her hand. Eventually they came upon a road and followed it eastward until they found a junk car in a thicket of sumac alongside an abandoned garage. Will made beds for himself and Esme on the front and back seats. When dawn shone through the windshield, he arose. He divided the last of his food into five parts, gave one to Esme, and put the rest in his pack.

Then they started out again.

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At noon, the land behind them turned to smoke. Not long after, an enormous blast reverberated across the land, so loud that refugees crouched in the road with their hands over their ears, and no one could hear properly for an hour afterward. All of the western shire was swallowed up in a deep and profound darkness punctuated by transient goutts of flame as farmhouses and silos were engulfed in molten rock and exploded. Those who had lived within eyeshot raised their voices in anguished shrieks. In an instant, all the generations of lives beyond counting that had been written onto the land were erased from it. It was as if they all, the cherished and the forgotten alike, not only were no more but had ceased ever to have been.

The giants that rose up out of the smoke burned bright as the Holy City itself, hotter than the forges of the sunset. By gradual degrees they darkened and cooled, first to a magma glow, then to a grey barely distinguishable from the clouds. There were two of them, and they carried cudgels. They still shone a ruddy red when they began to wheel and turn upon each other. They were great shadowy bulks, lost in the sky, when their cudgels were hauled as far back and high as they would go.

The giants' motions were slow beyond the eye's ability to discern. But if Will looked away for a few minutes and then back, their positions would be subtly altered. Over the long course of the morning, their cudgels swung toward each other. At noon, they connected. For as long as it would take to count to thirty, the silence was absolute. Then the blast rolled across the land. Will saw it coming, like a great wind making the trees bow down before it. He grabbed Esme and flung them both into a ditch, and so evaded the worst of it.

They walked many miles that day, to the sunset and beyond, though the Great River held itself ever distant and remote. Sometimes they rested, but only briefly. More, Will did not dare. At last, when the first stars were emerging in the sky, Esme began to cry for weariness. Will stooped and, with a grunt, picked her up. His legs did not quite buckle.

Eventually, Esme fell asleep on Will's shoulder. He plodded along for a while, and then a truck driver slowed down and offered to let him sit on the tailgate along with four others, just because Esme looked particularly small and weary. The driver said he was going all the way to the camps, and that with luck they would be there by morning.

So, really, she paid for herself.

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Camp Oberon stank of overflowing latrines and pitchpenny magicks. The latter were necessary to compensate for the former. Glamours as fragile as tissue paper were tacked up on almost every tent flap, so that walking down the dirt lanes between canvas dwellings Will caught sudden whiffs of eglantine, beeswax, cinnamon, and wet oak leaves, felt the cold mist of a waterfall, heard the faint strains of faraway elfin music. None of it was real, or even convincing, but each was a momentary distraction from his surroundings. Whitewashed rocks picked out borders to the meager flowerbeds planted about the older tents.

The camp was situated on a windswept ground high above the Aelfwine. Its perimeters were patrolled but it had no fences -- where could anybody go? Thrice daily a contingent of yellow-jackets herded the refugees into mess tents for meals. Between times, the old folks coped with boredom by endlessly reminiscing about lives and villages they would never see again. The younger ones, however, talked politics. "They'll be shipping us East," a kobold said knowingly at one such impromptu discussion, "to the belly of the beast, the very heart of Empire, the Tower of Whores itself. Where we'll each be given a temporary ID card, fifty dollars, a voucher for a month's housing, and the point of their boots in our backsides for putting them to such expense."

"They could of saved themselves a shitload of expense by not destroying our fucking homes in the first place," a dwarf growled. "What's the fucking point?"

"It's their policy. Rather than leaving enemies at their borders, they absorb us into themselves. By the time we've found our feet through pluck and hard work, our loyalties have shifted and we become good, obedient citizens."

"Does this work?" Will asked dubiously.

"Not so far." The kobold got up, unbuttoned the corner flaps of the tent, and took a long piss into the weeds out back. "So far, all it's done is made them into the most contentious and least governable society in existence. Which surely has something to do with their sending their armies here to solve all our problems for us, but fuck if I know what." He turned back, zipping his fly.

"This is just venting," somebody said. "The question is, what should we _do?_"

From the depths of the tent, where it was a darkness floating in darkness, an uneasy shimmer that the eye could perceive but not resolve into an image, a ghaist said, "A trip-wire, a bundle of matches, and some sandpaper can set off a coffee can filled with black powder and carpet tacks. A pinch of chopped tiger's whiskers sprinkled into food will cause internal bleeding. A lock of hair tied to an albino toad and buried in a crossroads at midnight with the correct incantation will curse somebody with a slow and lingering death. These skills and more I might be convinced to teach to any interested patriots."

There was an awkward silence, and then several of those present got up and left.

Will joined them.

Outside, the dwarf pulled out a pack of cigarettes. He offered one to Will and stuck a second in the corner of his mouth. "I guess you ain't no fucking patriot either."

Will shrugged. "It's just ... I asked myself, if I was running this camp, wouldn't I be sure to have an informer in a group like that?"

The dwarf snorted. He was a red dwarf, with the ginger hair and swarthy complexion of his kind. "You suspect our beloved Commandant of unethical methods? The Legless One would cry in his fucking beer if he could hear you say that."

"I just think he'd have somebody there."

"Ha! There were ten in the tent. In my experience, that means at least two snitches. One for money and the other because he's a shit."

"You're a cynic."

"I've done time. Now that I'm out, I'm gonna keep my asshole clenched and my hand to the axe. Knawmean?" He turned away. "See ya, kid."

Will ditched the cigarette -- it was his first, and he was certain it was going to be his last as well -- and went off in search of Esme.

Esme had adapted to the Displaced Persons Camp with an intense joy that was a marvel to behold. She was the leader of whatever gang of children she fell in with, every adult's pet, and every crone's plaything. She sang songs for the bedridden patients in the infirmary and took part in the amateur theatricals. Strangers gave her scraps of cloth so she could play at dress-up and shooed her back whenever she started down the road that led to the cliffs overlooking the Gorge. She could feed herself, a sweetmeat and a morsel at a time, just by hopping from tent to tent and poking her head in to see how everyone was doing. It made things easier for Will, knowing that she was being lovingly watched over by the entire camp. Now he followed the broken half-shilling he carried always in his pocket, straight to its mate, which he'd hung on a cord about Esme's neck.

He found her playing with a dead rat.

From somewhere, Esme had scrounged up a paramedic's rowan wand that still held a fractional charge of vivifying energy and was trying to bring the rat back to life. Pointing the rod imperiously at the wee corpse, she cried, "Rise! Live!" Its legs twitched and scabbled spasmodically at the ground.

The apple imp kneeling on the other side of the rat from her gasped. "How did you do that?" His eyes were like saucers.

"What I've done," Esme said, "is to enliven its archipallium or reptilian brain. This is the oldest and most primitive part of the central nervous system and controls muscles, balance, and autonomic functions." She traced a circuit in the air above the rat's head. Jerkily, like a badly handled marionette, it lurched to its feet. "Now the warmth has spread to its paleopallium, which is concerned with emotions and instincts, fighting, fleeing, and sexual behavior. Note that the rat is physically aroused. Next I will access the amygdala, its fear center. This will..."

"Put that _down,_ Esme." It was not Will who spoke. "You don't know where it's been. It might have germs."

The little girl blossomed into a smile and the rat collapsed in the dirt by her knee. "Mom-Mom!"

Mother Griet scowled down from her tent.

There were neighborhoods within the camp, each corresponding roughly to the locale of origin of its inhabitants, the camp officials having long ago given up on their rationalized plans for synthetic social organization. Will and Esme lived in Block G, wherein dwelt all those who belonged nowhere else -- misfits and outcasts, loners and those who, like them, had been separated from their own kind. For them, Mother Griet served as a self-appointed mayor, scolding the indolent, praising those who did more than their share, a perpetual font of new projects to improve the common lot. Every third day she held a pie-powders court, where the "dusty footed" could seek justice in such petty grievances as the

Commandant deemed beneath his attention.

Now she gestured imperiously with her walking stick. "Get in here. We have things to discuss." Then, addressing Will, "You too, grandchild."

"Me?"

"Not very quick on the uptake, are ye? Yes, you."

He followed her within.

Mother Griet's tent was larger on the inside than it was on the outside, as Will discovered when he stepped through the flap and into its green shadows. At first, there seemed to be impossibly many tent poles. But as his eyes adjusted, the slim shapes revealed themselves to be not poles but the trunks of trees. A bird flew by. Others twittered in the underbrush. High above floated something that could not possibly be the moon.

A trail led them to a clearing.

"Sit," Mother Griet said. She took Esme in her lap. "When was the last time you brushed your hair, child? It's nothing but snarls and snail shells."

"I don't remember."

To Will, Mother Griet said, "So you're Esme's father. A bit younger than might be expected."

"I'm her brother, actually. Esme's easily confused."

"No kidding. I can't get a straight answer out of the brat." She pulled a hairbrush from her purse and applied it vigorously to Esme's hair. "Don't wriggle." Mother Griet turned to Will, her pale blue eyes astonishingly intense. "How old is she?" Then, when he hesitated, "Is she older than you are?"

"She ... might be."

"Ah. Then I was right." Mother Griet bowed low over the child's head. The trees around them wavered and the air filled with the smell of hot canvas. Briefly it seemed they were sitting in a tent like any other with a wooden platform floor and six cots with a footlocker resting by each one. Then the forest restored itself. She looked up, tears running down her cheeks. "You're not her brother. Tell me how you met her."

As Will told his tale, Mother Griet dabbed away her tears with a tissue. "Let me tell you a story," she said when he was done. In her lap, Esme flopped over on her back and grinned up at her. The old crone gently stroked her cheek.

"I was born in Corpsecandle Green, a place of no particular distinction, save that it was under a curse. Or so it seemed to me, for nothing there endured. My father died and my mother ran off when I was an infant and so I was raised 'by the village,' as they say. I flitted from house to house, through an ever-changing pageant of inconstant sisters, brothers, tormentors, protectors, and friends. When I came of age, some of these turned to lovers and husbands, and they were inconstant, too. All was flux: My businesses failed, my pipes burst, creditors repossessed my furniture. The only things I dared hope to hold onto were my children. Oh, such darlings they were! I loved them with every scrap of my being. And how do you imagine they repaid me for it?"

"I don't know."

"The little bastards grew up. Grew up, married, turned into strangers, and moved away. And because their fathers had all wandered into the marshes and died -- but that's another story and one I doubt you'll ever hear -- I was left alone again, too old to bear another child but wanting one nonetheless.

"So, foolish as I was, I bought a black goat, gilded its horns, and led it deep into the marshlands at midnight. There was a drowning-pool there, and I held it under until it stopped struggling, as a sacrifice to the _genius loci, _begging that puissant sprite for a child that would not treat me as the others had. Such a wail I set up then, in my need and desire, as would have scared away a dire-wolf." She stopped. "Pay attention, boy. There might be a test afterwards."

"I _was_ paying attention."

"Yeah, right. Well, exactly at dawn there was a rustling in the reeds and this child emerged, this beautiful child right here." She tickled Esme, who squirmed and laughed. "She didn't know who she belonged to and she'd forgotten her name -- not the first time she'd done so, I warrant -- so I called her Iria, 'little island.' Do you remember any of this, sweetness?"

"I don't remember anything," Esme said. "Ever. That way I'm always happy."

"She sold her memory to the -- "

"Shush!" Mother Griet said fiercely. "I _said_ you weren't bright. Never mention any of the Seven indoors." She returned to her brushing. "She was like this then, every dawn her first one ever, every evening moon a new delight. She was my everything."

"Then she's yours," Will said with an unexpected pang of regret.

"Look at me, boy, I could die tomorrow. You don't get free of her that easy. Where was I? Oh, yes. For ten or twenty years, I was happy. What mother wouldn't be? But the neighbors began to mutter. Their luck was never good. Cows dried up and cellars flooded. Crops failed and mice multiplied. Sons were drafted, unwed daughters got knocked up, gaffers fell down the cellar stairs. Refrigerator pumps died and the parts to fix them went out of stock. Scarecrows spontaneously caught fire.

"Suspicion pointed the good village-folk straight at the child. They burned down my house and drove me from Corpsecandle Green, alone and penniless, with no place to go. Iria, with her usual good fortune, had wandered off into the marshes that morning and missed her own lynching. I never saw her again -- until, as it turns out, these last few days."

"You must have been heartbroken."

"You're a master of the obvious, aren't ye? But adversity is the forge of wisdom and through my pain I eventually came to realize that loss was not a curse laid down upon me or my village, but simply the way of the world. So be it. Had I the power, the only change I'd make would be to restore Iria-Esme-Whatevershername's memory to her."

Esme pouted. "I don't want it."

"Idiot child. If you remember nothing, you learn nothing. How to gut a fish or operate a gas chromatograph, perhaps, but nothing that _matters_. When death comes to you, he will ask you three questions, and they none of them will have anything to do with fish guts or specimen retention times."

"I'm never going to die."

"Never is a long time, belovedest. Someday the ancient war between the Ocean and the Land will be

over, and the Moon will return to her mother's womb. Think you to survive that?" Mother Griet rummaged in her purse. "No, so long as you never die, this happy forgetfulness is a blessing." She rummaged some more. "But nobody lives forever. Nor will you." Her hand emerged triumphant. "You see this ring? Ginarr Gnomesbastard owed me a favor, so I had him make it. Can you read the inscription on the inside?"

Esme brushed the hair out of her eyes. "Yes, but I don't know what it means."

"_Memento mori_. It means 'remember to die.' It's on your list of things to do and if you haven't done it yet, you haven't led a full life. Put the ring on your finger. I whispered my name into it when the silver was molten. Wear it and after I'm gone, whatever else you forget you'll still remember me."

"Will it make me grow up?"

"No, little one. Only you can do that."

"It's not gold," Esme said critically.

"No, it's silver. Silver is the witch-metal. It takes a spell more readily than gold does, and holds it better. It conducts electricity almost as well as gold and since it has a higher melting point, it's far superior for use in electronic circuitry. Also it's cheaper."

"I can repair a radio."

"I bet you can. Go now. Run along and play." She swatted the little girl on the rump and watched her scamper away. Then, to Will, she said, "Your hands are bleeding from a thousand cuts."

He looked down at them.

"It's a figure of speech, ye fool. Each cut is a memory, and the blood is the pain they cause you. You and the child are like Jack and Nora Sprat; she forgets everything, and you remember all. Neither is normal. Or wise. You've got to learn to let go, boy, or you'll bleed yourself to death."

Blood rushed to Will's head and his fists clenched involuntarily. But he bit back the retort that flew to his lips. If he had learned nothing else from dealing with old ladies much like this one in his native village, it was that sassing them back was worse than useless. You had to be polite when you told them to buzz off. He stood. "Thank you for your advice," he said stiffly. "I'm leaving now."

Though it had been a long walk to the clearing, three strides took him out through the tent flap. He stood blinking in the sunlight.

Two yellow-jackets seized his arms.

"Garbage duty," one said. Will had been pressed into such service before. He went unresisting with them to a utility truck. It grumbled through Block G and out of the camp and when the tents were small in the distance, slowed to a halt. One soldier shoved a leather sack over Will's head and upper body. The other wrapped a cord around his waist, lashing him in.

"Hey!"

"Don't struggle. We'd only have to hurt you."

The truck lurched, clashed gears, got up to speed. Soon they were driving uphill. There was only one hill overlooking Camp Oberon, a small, barren one atop which stood the old mansion that had been seized

for the Commandant's office. When they got there, Will was prodded through passages that had a musky, reptilian undersmell, as though the house were infested with toads.

Knuckles rapped on wood. "The DP you sent for, sir."

"Bring him in and wait outside."

Will was thrust forward, and the bag untied and whisked from his head. The door closed behind him.

* * * *

The Commandant wore a short-sleeved khaki shirt with matching tie and no insignia. His head was bald and speckled as a brown egg. His forearms rested, brawny and stiff-haired, on his desk. Casually, he dipped a hand into a bowl of dead rats, picked up one by its tail, tilted his head back, and swallowed it whole. Will thought of Esme's plaything and had to fight down the urge to laugh.

Laughter would have been unwise. The Commandant's body language, the arrogance with which he held himself, told Will all he needed to know about him. Here was a pocket strongman, a manipulator and would-be tyrant, the Dragon Baalthazar writ small. The hairs on the back of Will's neck prickled. Cruelty coupled with petty authority was, as he knew only too well, a dangerous combination.

The Commandant pushed aside some papers and picked up a folder. "This is a report from the Erlking DPC," he said. "That's where your village wound up."

"Did they?"

"They don't speak very highly of you." He read from the report. "Seizure of private property. Intimidation. Sexual harassment. Forced labor. Arson. It says here that you had one citizen executed." He dropped the folder on the desk. "I don't imagine you'd be very popular there, if I had you transferred."

"Transfer me or not, as you like. There's nothing I can do to stop you."

The Commandant sucked his teeth in silence for a long moment. Then he rose up from the desk, so high his head almost touched the ceiling. From the waist down, his body was that of a snake.

Slowly, he slithered forward. Will did not flinch, even when the lamius circled him, leaving him surrounded by loops of body.

"What happened to you, boy? Did it put the needles to you? I see that it did. What did it feel like, sitting in the pilot's couch with the needles in your wrists and that great war-drake slithering around in your mind? They say it changes you. Is that why you won't help us?"

Will looked away.

"You act as if you did something wrong. Hell, you're a hero! If you'd been in the forces, you'd have a medal now. Tell you what. Cooperate, and afterward I'll put you in for officer training. If you do well, there's every chance they'll grandfather you in for the decoration. That's a great deal in return for very little. Do you even know what I want from you?"

Yes, Will thought, I know what you want. You want to put your hand up inside me and manipulate me like a puppet. You want to wiggle your fingers and make me jump. Aloud, he said, "I collaborated once, and it was a mistake. I won't do it again."

"Bold words," the Commandant said, "for somebody who was conspiring with subversives not half an hour ago. You didn't know I had an ear in that meeting, did you?"

"You had two. The ghastr and the dwarf."

For a blank instant, the Commandant said nothing. Then he circled Will again, widdershins this time, freeing him from the coils of his body.

"Enough of your defiance. Either you'll do as I ask, or else you'll leave by the front door and without the courtesy of a bag over your head. How long do you think you'll last then? Once word gets out you're friendly with me?"

Will stared down at his feet and shook his head doggedly.

The Commandant slid to the door and opened it. The two yellow-jackets stood there, silent as grimhounds. "You can stand in the foyer while you think it over. Knock hard when you've made up your mind; this thing's mahogany an inch thick." The lamius smiled mirthlessly. "Or, if you like, the other door's unlocked."

* * * *

The foyer had a scuffed linoleum floor, an oliphant-foot umbrella stand, and a side-table with short stacks of medical brochures for chlamydia, AIDS, evil eye, and diarrhea. Sunlight slanted through frosted panels to either side of the front door. There were two switches for the overhead and outside lights that made a hollow _bock_ noise when he flicked one on or off. And that was it.

He wouldn't become the Commandant's creature. On that point he was sure. But he didn't want to be branded an informant and released to the tender mercies of his fellow refugees either. He'd seen what the camp vigilantes did to those they suspected of harboring insufficient solidarity. Back and forth Will strode, forth and back, feverishly working through his options. Until finally he was certain of his course of action. Simply because there was nothing else he _could_ do.

Placing his palms flat on its surface, Will leaned straight-armed against the table. Like every other piece of furniture he had seen here, it was solidly built of dark, heavy wood. He walked his feet as far back as he could manage, until he was leaning over the table almost parallel to its surface. He wasn't at all sure he had the nerve to do this.

He closed his eyes and took a deep breath.

Then, as quickly as he could, Will whipped his hands away from the table and clasped them behind his back. Involuntarily, his head jerked to the side, trying in vain to protect his nose. His face hit the wood hard.

"Cer_nunn_os!" Will staggered to his feet, clutching his broken nose. Blood flowed freely between his fingers and down his shirt. Rage rose up in him like fire. It took a moment or two to calm down.

He left by the front door.

* * * *

Will walked slowly through Block A, wearing his blood-drenched shirt like a flag or a biker's colors. By the time he got to the infirmary, word that he had been roughed up by the yellow-jackets had passed through the camp like wildfire. He had the bleeding stanchd and told the nurse that he'd slipped and broken his nose on the edge of a table. After that, he could have run for camp president, had such an

office existed, and won. Backslaps, elbow nudges, and winks showered down on him during his long slog home. There were whispered promises of vengeance and muttered obscenities applied to the camp authorities.

He found himself not liking his allies any better than he did his enemies.

It was a depressing thing to discover. So he went on past his tent to the edge of camp, across the railroad tracks, past a casual refuse dump and some abandoned construction equipment, and down the short road that led to the top of the Gorge. The tents were not visible from that place and, despite its closeness, almost nobody went there. It was his favorite retreat when he needed privacy.

The Gorge extended half a mile down-river from the hydroelectric dam to a sudden drop in the land that freed the Aelfwine to run swift and free across the tidewater toward its confluence with the Great River. The channel it had dug down through the bedrock was so straight and narrow that the cliffs on either side were almost perpendicular. The water below was white. Crashing, crushing, tumbling as if possessed by a thousand demons, it was energetic enough to splinter logs and carry boulders along in its current. Anyone trying to climb down the cliffs here would surely fall. But if he ran with all his might and jumped with all his strength, he might conceivably miss the rock and hit the water clean. In which case he would certainly die. Nobody could look down at that raging fury and pretend otherwise.

It was an endlessly fascinating prospect to contemplate: Stone, water, stone. Hardness, turbulence, hardness. Not a single tree, shrub, or flower disturbed the purity of its lifelessness. The water looked cold, endlessly cold.

"Hey, there. Remember me?"

Will spun. Out from behind a rusting bulldozer stepped the lubin who had tried to rape Esme back in Grammareshire. Saligos de Gralloch. Will remembered him in a flash. Everything about the dog-headed creature was familiar -- even, when he sauntered forward, his stench. "I certainly remember _you,_ young master. The both of ye."

There was a movement behind Saligos as Esme climbed up into the cab of the bulldozer. She plopped herself down on the seat and began yanking at the steering levers, pretending to drive.

"You've lost your hat," Will said. "And what happened to your stickfellas?"

"We had a falling-out. I had to kill them. Good thing I chanced upon the moppet here -- otherwise I'd be all by my lonesome."

"Not chance. You broke a pin or button in two when you first found the child and hid half among her clothes against the chance of her slipping away from you. Then, today, you followed the other half here."

"That's very sharp of you," Saligos said. "I note, however, that you didn't say 'my daughter,' but 'the child.' So you're not her father after all. That's two things I've learned today. The other is that she's a retard. She doesn't remember me at all. Think how convenient that would be for somebody of my particular tastes."

"She's not retarded."

"Then she's something just as good." Casually, Saligos removed his belt. "You got cute with me last time we met. That's an imbalance needs addressing. But first, I'm going to tie your wrists to yon machine. You can watch while I do _her_ -- " he nodded toward Esme, still preoccupied with the bulldozer's controls -- "good and hard."

The dragon-darkness was rising up in Will again but this time, rather than fighting it down, he embraced it, letting it fill his brain, so that its negative radiance shone from his eyes like black flame. Ducking his head to keep the lubin from seeing it, he said, "I don't think I can allow that."

"Oh, you can't, eh? And how exactly do you plan to stop me?"

A thrill stirred Will's body then, such as he had not felt since that night when the dragon had entered him and walked him barefoot through the village streets, leaving footprints of flame in his wake. His fury had burned hot as a bronze idol then, and the heat had gone before him in a great wave, withering plants, charring house-fronts, and setting hair ablaze when some unfortunate did not flee from him quickly enough.

Much of the power had come from the war-drake's presence. But the rage -- had not the rage then been his and his alone? Dragon Baalthazar had said as much afterward. Had said as well that though the sentence of death was laid down upon his rebel-friend by the dragon, it had been Will's choice and Will's alone that the death be by crucifixion.

"Esme," he said. "I want you to put your hands over your eyes now, and keep them there. Will you do that for me?"

"Yes, Papa."

The lubin sneered. "That won't do you no -- " His words cut off in a gasp as Will reached forward and seized his forearms.

Will squeezed. Bones cracked and splintered under his fingers. "Do you like it now?" he asked. "Do you like it now that it's happening to _you?_"

Saligos de Gralloch squirmed helplessly in his implacable grip. His lips were moving, though Will could not hear him through the rush of blood pounding in his ears. Doubtless he was pleading for mercy. Doubtless he whimpered. Doubtless he whined. That was exactly what he _would_ do.

Will knew the type well.

First the dragon-lust turned the world red, as if he were peering out through a scrim of pure rage, and then it turned his vision black. Time passed. When he could see again, Saligos de Gralloch's mangled body lay steaming and lifeless on the ground beside the bulldozer. Will's fingers ached horribly, and his hands were tarred with blood up to his wrists. The lubin stared blindly upward, teeth exposed in a final, hideous grin. Something that might be his heart lay on the ground beside his ruptured chest.

"Papa?" Esme was still sitting in the bulldozer seat, hands neatly folded in her lap. Her eyes were open and had been for he did not know how long. "Are you all right?"

Sick with revulsion, Will turned away and shook his head heavily from side to side. "You should leave," he said. "Flee me. Run!"

"Why?"

"There is something ... wrong with me. Something that makes me dangerous."

"That's okay."

Will stared down at his hands. Murderer's hands. His head was heavy and his heart was pounding so hard his chest ached. He was surprised he could still stand. "You don't understand. I've done something

very, very bad."

"I don't mind." Esme climbed down from the bulldozer, careful not to step on the corpse. "Bad things don't bother me. That's why I sold myself to the Year Eater."

He turned back and stared long and hard at the child. She looked so innocent. Golden-haired, large-headed, toothpick-legged, skin as brown as a berry. "You don't have any memory," he said. "How do you know about the Year Eater?"

"Everybody thinks I have no memory. That's wrong. I only forget people and things that happen. I remember what's important. You taught me to tickle trout. I remember that. And the contract I made is as clear in my mind as the day I gave up my future for it." She turned her back on what remained of Saligos. "But by this afternoon, I'll have forgotten him and what you had to do to him as well."

At Esme's direction, Will rolled the body over the cliff-edge. He did not look away in time to avoid seeing it bounce off the rock below. He kicked the maybe-heart after it. The blood on the dirt looked like that which remained after a deer had been gutted and cleaned. Nobody would think twice about it.

Then Esme led Will to a puddle by the tracks to wash his hands. While he did so, she laundered his shirt, whacking it on a rock until every last trace of gore was gone from it. Wordlessly, she began to sing the tune he had been singing when first he saw her. Despite all that had happened, she was perfectly happy. She was, Will realized then, as damned and twisted a thing as he himself.

In a way, they belonged together.

* * * *

Mother Griet died a fortnight later not from any neglect or infection but as a final, lingering effect of a curse that she had contracted in her long-forgotten childhood. As a girl, she had surprised the White Ladies in their predawn dance and seen that which none but an initiate was sanctioned to see. In their anger, they had pronounced death upon her at the sound of -- her third crow-caw, they were going to say but, realizing almost too late her youth and innocence of ill-intent, one of their number had quickly amended the sentence to a-million-and-one. From which moment onward, every passing crow had urged her a breath closer to death.

Such was the story Mother Griet had told Will and so when its fulfillment came he knew it for what it was. That morning she had called to him from a bench before her tent and set him to carding wool with her. Midway through the chore, Mother Griet suddenly smiled and, putting down her work, lifted her ancient face to the sky. "Hark!" she said. "Now, there's a familiar sound. The black-fledged Sons of Corrin have followed us here from -- "

Gently, then, she toppled over on her side, dead.

* * * *

The citizens of Block G honored Mother Griet's death with the traditional rites. Three solemn Words were carved upon her brow. Her abdomen was cut open, and her entrails read. In lieu of an aurochs, a stray dog was sacrificed. Then they raised up her corpse on long poles to draw down the sacred feeders, the vultures, from the sky. The camp's sanitary officers tried to tear down the sun-platform, and the ensuing argument spread and engulfed the camp in three days of rioting.

In the wake of which, railroad trains were brought in to take them all away. To far Babylonia, the relief workers said, in Faerie Minor where they would build new lives for themselves, but no one believed

them. All they knew of Babylonia was that the streets of its capitol were bricked of gold and the ziggurats touched the sky. Of one thing they were certain: No villager could thrive in such a place. It was not even certain they could survive. All pledged therefore a solemn oath to stay together, come what may, to defend and protect one another in the unimaginable times ahead. Will mouthed the pledge along with the rest, though he did not believe a word of it.

They were sitting alongside their baggage -- Will's knapsack and a gryphon-leather valise Mother Griet had left to Esme -- when the first train pulled in. The yellow-jacketed soldiers had set up a labyrinthine arrangement of cattle chutes and were feeding the refugees into it according to a system of numbered cards they had handed out earlier. Will and Esme had high numbers, so they watched the jostling crowds from a distance.

"Do you have everything?" he asked, for the umpteenth time.

"Yes," she replied, as always. Then, suddenly, "No! I don't have my ring, the one that somebody gave me. The silver one that I like so much."

"Little scatterbrain. You took it off when you went to sleep, and it rolled under the bed. That's where I found it, anyway." He dug the bauble out of his pocket. "I've been holding onto it for you for a week."

"Gimme it!" She thrust the ring on her finger.

In that very instant, she began to wail as if her heart were broken.

"What is it?" Will cried in alarm. "What's the matter?"

He took the child in his arms, but she was inconsolable. "She's dead," she said. "Griet is dead." He made hushing noises, but she kept on crying. "I _remember_ her!" she insisted. "I remember now."

"That's good." Will groped for the right words to say. "It's good to remember people you care about. And you mustn't be unhappy about her dying. She led a long and productive life, after all."

"No!" she sobbed. "You don't understand. Griet was my daughter."

"What?"

"She was my sweetness, my youngest, my light. Oh, my little Grietchen! She brought me dandelions in her tiny fist. Damn memory! Damn responsibility! Damn time!" Esme tugged off her ring and flung it away from her. "Now I remember why I sold my age in the first place."

She wept into Will's shoulder. He hugged her, rocking back and forth. "_Hush,_" he sang to her, "_hush, ah hush_" It was the song of the scythe on a hot summer's day. "_Hush_"

She was just a child, after all, whatever else she might be.