

WILLIAM WALLACE

SCOTLAND PUKES BLOOD



MICHAEL LAPPENBUSCH

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A bastard in the rain

The rain started early that day, long before the little church bell first struck. It didn't fall from the sky; it came like a punishment, horizontal, whipped by the wind, as if God had drunk too much and vomited up clouds aimlessly over Scotland. I stood under the crooked roof of the cottage and watched as the yard turned into a brown sea, thin rivulets that crawled like little snakes between the oxen's hoofprints. My mother cursed softly as she stacked the wood by the door. She often cursed, but on rainy days it sounded different, heavier, as if the words were pulling her throat.

"Get in here," she said. "You're bringing the dirt into bed with you."

I stopped, even though my feet were already wet. The wind whipped under my rough shirt as if it wanted to tear the skin from my sternum. I liked that. It was better than warmth. Warmth made you soft, and in this country, soft was another word for dead.

In the distance, a dog barked, one of those skinny beasts that were more bones than fur. Beyond it, the fields stretched into the gray sludge. Somewhere there, behind the bare trees and the cracked clay soil, my father was supposed to work. That's what they said. I never asked him. People talked enough.

"The bastard is probably waiting for his great master," I heard a voice say behind me.

It was Tam, the blacksmith's son, and of course he wasn't alone. Two others clung to him like small shadows, drawn to a larger one so they wouldn't disappear. They had come up from the village, all three wrapped in rags that clung to their bodies. Rain knew no bounds, only bones.

I turned slowly around. I knew my mother heard the words, but she pretended to be suddenly deaf. She pushed the last log into the stack, wiped the rain from her face, and disappeared into the cabin. The door slammed shut, the sound as hard as a blow.

"What do you want, Tam?" I asked.

He grinned. His teeth looked as if someone had thrown white stones into the dirt and then tried to rub them clean. "Just checking if the great fighter is already on his way to Mass. Maybe the priest will finally bless your heritage today."

The other two laughed, too loudly, too eagerly. They didn't know what they were laughing at; they just didn't want to be the ones being laughed at. That's how it always started.

I shrugged. "If the priest blesses my heritage, lightning will strike your filthy head first."

Tam stepped closer, so close I could smell his breath. It reeked of old cheese and wet onions. "You think just because people tell stories about your father makes you special, Will? You're nothing. Just a boy with no name."

"I have a name," I said.

"You have the wrong one," he said. "The right one is stuck to some man who doesn't even know you exist. Or he doesn't care. It's the same thing."

The rain lashed our faces like small stones. For a moment, I thought about simply walking past him, up the hill to the church, like the others dutifully did. Getting the blessing they tossed at us every week, like a bone to a dog. But then I saw him tap my chest with a dirty finger, as if he were attaching a sign that said "Bastard." And something inside me tensed.

"Leave me alone," I said. "It's too early for your bullshit."

He laughed. "It's never too early for bastards."

I punched before I could think. My fist didn't land particularly well, somewhere between his chin and neck, but it was enough to shatter his grin. He stumbled back, slipped in the mud, and landed on his back. The sound his body made as he hit the ground was a dull, satisfied thud. The other two backed away, more surprised than frightened.

Tam needed a moment to straighten up. His face was no longer a stage for jokes, but a space where someone had stubbed out a candle. He touched his mouth, saw the blood on his fingers, and something in his eyes tilted.

"You filthy bastard," he said. "I'll break your bones."

He lunged forward, and this time he was fast. His fist came from the side, and suddenly I saw nothing but rain and dirt. My head slammed against the damp ground, and a stream of cold sludge ran down my neck. I tasted dirt, felt a burning pain in my ear. He crouched over me, struck again, but I rolled to the side, feeling his hand zip past my shoulder. Then I was on my knees, grabbing his foot.

We both looked like animals that had been tied up for too long. He kicked at me, hitting my ribs, but I didn't let go. I pulled hard, and he fell again, this time onto his knees. I seized the moment, threw myself against him, and we both tumbled into a puddle that was more like a small lake. Water splashed up, the rain mingling with mud and blood.

We gasped, puffed, and cursed. His fingers grabbed my face, mine his hair. I tugged at it until I almost thought my own nails were being ripped out. He roared, and the scream was lost in the wind. The other boys just stood there, a bunch of spectators who hadn't paid but had still made it to the front.

At some point, I was holding his wrist in one hand and his neck in the other. His face was just a red, dirty expanse, his vision blurred. I squeezed, maybe for too long, maybe just right. The rain made everything slippery, but I didn't let go. Only when he gasped, as if his insides were suddenly filled with water, did I release my grip. He fell into the mud, panting, coughing.

I stood up, unsteady. My shirt clung to me, my knees trembled. I felt the blood on my lip, tasted iron and earth. The other two stepped back as if they had forgotten how to form words.

"Who... who is nothing now?" I asked.

It should have sounded strong, but my voice broke, thinned by the rain.

"You're going to be in trouble," one of them finally said. "Tam will tell his father what you've done."

I shrugged again, even though the movement hurt. "Let him. Maybe he'll even come up with a decent name for me."

They stared at me for another moment, then pulled Tam up and staggered down the hill. I watched them until they disappeared around the bend. The rain didn't let up. It knew no drama, no petty squabbles. It knew only earth and water and slow, steady destruction.

The door of the hut opened again. My mother stood there, her coat draped over her shoulders, her hair hanging around her face like a wet curtain. Her eyes quickly scanned me, like a wound one doesn't want to see, but must see.

"You're bleeding," she said.

"He started it," I said. It sounded childish, and I immediately hated myself for it.

She sighed. "Of course he does. Tam's way of understanding the world." She took a step closer, grabbed my chin, and turned my face sideways. Her fingers were rough, but warm. "You're worse than your father."

"You always say he was a good man."

"He was," she said. "And then he started fighting for things that were bigger than himself. That makes good men bad fathers."

I didn't know what to say. So I remained silent. The wind howled around the cabin like an animal that has been kept out.

"Come in," she finally said. "You're going to get sick."

"Maybe I'll become a ghost," I said. "Then they can't tell me I'm a bastard anymore."

She looked at me, first with anger, then with something that looked almost like pity, but was harsher. "They'll always tell you. Dead or alive. You don't carry bastards on your back, you carry them on your face. You have to learn to live with it."

"Or to hit with it," I said quietly.

She heard it. She heard everything. "Hitting is easier. Living is harder."

I stepped past her into the hut. The smell of smoke, wet wool, and thin soup hit me. The room was small, the ceiling low; when the wind blew, everything creaked, as if the wood were remembering the time when it was still a tree. I sat down on the stool beside the fire. It burned dimly, as if ashamed to still be alive.

My mother added another piece of wood. Sparks flew up, tiny stars that immediately died. She grabbed a cloth, dipped it in a bowl of water, and came over to me.

"Hold still," she said.

She wiped the dirt from my face. The water was cold, but her hands were steady. I looked at her. She had wrinkles that had come too soon and eyes that had seen too much. She wasn't

beautiful in the conventional sense, but she was the only one who stayed when everyone else left.

"He's right," I said suddenly. "I have the wrong name."

She paused, the cloth still against my cheek. "Your name is Wallace. It was your father's name, and it's yours now. Whether they like it or not."

"But I am..."

"Don't say it," she snarled, pressing the cloth harder against my lip. "Don't say that word here. They can shout it outside all they want. Not in here. In here, you are my son, and that's enough."

It hurt, but I nodded. Part of me still wanted to say the word, out loud, a hundred times, until it lost its sting. Another part never wanted to hear it again. People are full of such contradictions. Some drink to drown them. Others fight. I didn't know then which type I was. Maybe both.

"And him?" I asked. "Does he know about me?"

She withdrew her hand, wrung out the cloth, and placed it back in the bowl. The water turned a light red. "He knew."

"Did you know?" I clung to the word. People like to cling to the past because it no longer resists.

"He's still alive, isn't he?" I asked.

She didn't answer immediately. Instead, she stepped back to the stove and stirred the soup, as if a deeper truth could be found in the thin porridge. "He's out there," she said finally. "With sword, with shield, with the others. He's fighting for a Scotland that will never thank him."

"Then why isn't he here?"

She laughed briefly, bitterly. "Because men would rather die for grand words than live for small spaces. Honor. Freedom. King. That all sounds better than mopping wet floors and listening to children crying at night."

I imagined a man, tall, strong, with a face similar to mine, only harder. A man who rode through the rain while others hid. A man who knew where he belonged. I didn't.

"Is he a good fighter?" I asked.

"Yes," she said. "Too good."

Outside, the church bell suddenly tolled, heavy and hollow. It was time for mass. The villagers would climb the hill, the priest would say things no one really understood, and in the end, they would hate the rain just as much as before. But they would feel less guilty about it.

"Are you going today?" my mother asked.

I thought of Tam's face, of his threat. Of the blacksmith whose hammer weighed heavier than any prayer. "Maybe I'll stay here," I said. "Someone has to make sure the roof doesn't blow away."

She looked at me appraisingly. "You want to avoid her chatter."

"I want to hear the rain," I said. "It lies less."

She thought for a moment. Then she shrugged. "Stay. But if the sky falls, you'll be the one pushing it back up."

She took her shawl, wrapped her coat around herself, and stepped to the door. One last look, then she was outside. The cold crept in immediately, filling every corner. I heard her footsteps, first near, then far. Then only the rain, drumming on the roof like a badly tuned instrument.

I sat there, staring into the fire. The smoke stung my eyes, but I didn't blink. I thought of the man fighting somewhere, the boy lying in the mud searching for his pride, the word they hung around my neck like a millstone. I thought of names, of blood, of the strange way rain made everything the same and yet forgot nothing.

Perhaps, I thought, all a bastard needs is something stronger than his reputation. A sword. A reason. Or just enough rage to force both.

Outside, the dog barked again, and the wind howled along. I drew my knees to my chest, stretched my hands toward the fire, and silently vowed to myself that one day they would know me. Not as a bastard. As something else. Something that even the rain couldn't wash away.

The rain didn't stop, it just changed its form. Sometimes it pattered like stones on the roof, sometimes it came so finely and quietly that you could almost forget it, until you realized that everything was wet, even what should have been inside. I sat by the fire, if you could call that thin flickering flame a fire, and pushed a half-charred piece of wood back and forth with the tip of my shoe. There was nothing to do that hadn't already been done a thousand times, and yet people did it again and again, because otherwise life would simply have been waiting for death. That's what one of the old men in the village had once said. Drunk, of course.

Sometimes I imagined the roof above me giving way, very slowly, as if it no longer had the strength to resist the wind. It would simply collapse, on top of us, wood and straw and rain and sky in one big, wet heap. My mother and I, wedged between beams and dreams, and someone in the village would say, "It was just that bastard woman's hut anyway." Then they would carry on, chopping wood, praying, cursing, plowing the fields as if nothing had happened. That's how things worked here. Things broke, people broke, but the land remained. Grayer than before, but it remained.

I stood up because sitting made me tired, even though I had just woken from a dream that hadn't been a dream at all, but this very day, only once more. I fetched the short knife that was tucked under my straw mattress. It was nothing special, the blade duller than the priest's mind, but it was mine. Once I had asked if it belonged to my father. My mother had said no, too quickly, and I had understood that the truth lay somewhere in between. Perhaps it had come

from one of his friends, perhaps he had lost it, perhaps it was simply a knife I had found and filled with stories.

I sat down at the table, laid the knife on the wooden board, and stared at the blade. It reflected the fire, small and distorted, as if it didn't know what it was supposed to be. I ran my thumb along the edge, feeling the slight scratch, not deep enough to really hurt. A good knife, I'd heard, had to cut like a sentence you couldn't take back.

There were many such phrases in the village. People there loved to talk about others because they had too little to think about themselves. "Those up there"—that was the masters in their stone houses, who paid taxes and whose men fetched wood like everyone else. "Those over there"—that was the English, who were like a disease no one had named so it would seem only half as bad. And then there were people like us, without a protective name, without a proper roof over our heads, without a real place in the stories. We were what was between the lines, what no one said aloud, but everyone knew. Sometimes I felt like a footnote in a book someone else had written, drunk and in a bad mood.

The wind pushed against the door as if it wanted to come in, just to see if anyone was still alive inside. I put down the knife, stood up again, and went to the small opening in the wall we called a window, even though it let in more draft than light. The pane was nothing more than a piece of bubble, uneven, smeared, the rain running down it like tears on a face that had cried too many times. Beyond it, I saw the yard: mud, an overturned bucket, the trail left by Tam's body when I'd dragged him into the puddle. The rain was washing away the marks, but I knew they were still there, somewhere beneath.

I imagined him sitting at the blacksmith's now, talking about his blow, omitting or downplaying my blows, exaggerating his own pain. Men didn't just lie when promising women something; they also lied when recounting fights. Every blow they dealt seemed heavier in retrospect, every one they received lighter. Those who won nothing invented a victory. Perhaps Tam would later say he'd left me lying on the ground, only leaving because he felt sorry for me. Perhaps someone would even believe him. That's how legends are born. That's how wars begin.

"A bastard has it easy," an old man once told me, a man who had more missing teeth than hair on his head. "If you win, they say: 'See, he turned out alright after all.' If you lose, they say: 'That was to be expected.'" He said this while biting into a piece of bread so hard you could have smashed a window with it. Then he laughed, dryly, without joy. I was too young then to understand the joke, but old enough to know the taste of injustice. It's bitter and lingers.

There was a knock at the door. Not a loud bang, more of a hesitant tapping, as if the visitor wasn't sure if he was in the right place, or anywhere at all. I jumped, automatically reaching for the knife, feeling the rusty handle in my hand. Then I exhaled and put it down again. If it had been the tax collectors, they wouldn't have treated the door so politely. And if it had been Englishmen, they wouldn't have knocked at all.

I opened the door. Standing in the doorway was a man who looked as if he'd been drinking with the rain. His coat was soaked through, his hair plastered to his forehead, and his beard a grayish-brown mess, littered with remnants of what might have been food days before. He smelled of horse, smoke, and cheap beer—a combination that was practically standard in the village.

"Is Màiri there?" he asked, without making any effort to sound particularly friendly.

"She's at church," I said.

He blinked, looked past me into the hut as if to check if I was lying. Then he nodded slowly. "So you must be the boy."

It didn't sound like a statement he liked or disliked. It sounded like he was assessing the quality of a piece of meat.

"Which boy?" I asked.

"The one everyone's talking about." He shrugged as if he were cold. "Are you letting an old man in, or do I have to talk to the pigs outside the hut?"

"We have no pigs."

"Then you're the only one left," he said, and simply stepped past me into the interior.

I closed the door, more to keep the wind out than to keep it in, and turned around. He was standing by the fire, holding out his hands as if he had a right to warmth wherever he went.

"Who are you?" I asked.

"Hungry," he said. "Thirsty. Tired. Or all of the above, depending on the time of day." He looked around. "And you?"

"This is our house," I said. "If you want something, you wait until my mother gets back."

He laughed. It wasn't a friendly laugh, but neither was it one that would immediately turn violent. It was the laughter of someone who had seen too many battles to have any respect left for a wet boy with a blunt knife.

"You are similar to him," he said after a while.

I felt something tighten in my stomach. "Who?"

"You know exactly who." He squatted down, rubbed his hands, sniffed the soup in the pot, and grimaced as if he'd expected tall grass instead of meat. "He was like that, too. He stood in the rain as if the sky belonged to him. As if every drop fell only so he could curse it."

"Do you know my father?" I asked.

He looked up at me, studied me intently, and in his eyes there was suddenly something that felt like a memory. "I was standing next to him when we knocked an Englishman's helmet off," he said. "The Englishman was surprised, your father wasn't. It was a good day until they came up behind us. Those are the best days in this country: the ones that only end half badly."

"What's your name?" I asked again.

"Fergus," he said. "Some people also call me 'The one who tells too many stories.' But those are usually the ones they like to hear."

I slumped back down on the stool. Fergus. I'd heard the name before, somewhere in my mother's conversations when she thought I was asleep. A drunk, a vagrant, a former fighter who'd had more luck than sense. Someone who went with the men when there was trouble, and drank with the women when things got even worse.

"She never told me you were coming," I said.

"She didn't know either," he replied. "I'll come when I can. That's how it is with men like me. We bring too much rain if we stay in one place too long."

He reached for a wooden cup that was on the table, smelled it, grimaced, and put it down again. "Water. Worse than any torture."

"We have nothing else," I said. "If you want beer, go to the tavern."

"The tavern wants money," he said. "Or news. I have too little of one and too much of the other."

He straightened up, came closer, and stood in front of me. I felt his breath, heavy and acidic, but not as revolting as Tam's. This had something of old smoke about it, like smoke that had seeped into fabric, but even after days still spoke of fire.

"They say in the village that you're tough," he said. "Today you pushed the blacksmith's boy into the mud. They don't like that."

"They don't like me either," I replied.

"That's true." He nodded. "But it's better if they have a reason. People are calmer when they can sort out their dislike. 'The bastard' is too general for them. 'The bastard who beat my son'—that sounds more concrete. More tangible. They can pray for that, or hate you, or both."

"What do I care what they think?"

He grinned. "Not much yet. But wait until you're older and want something they have. Land. A wife. A seat at the table. Then you'll care."

I thought briefly of the girl who sometimes stood by the well, red hair, freckles, a smile she rarely showed because her father had beaten it out of her. I had never spoken a word to her. Even the thought of it felt like a sin, one that earned you two extra Our Fathers.

"Do you know him well?" I asked quietly. "My father."

Fergus sat down opposite me, resting his elbows on the table. The wood creaked under his weight. "As well as you can know a man you've been through the wringer with," he said. "We fought side by side against the English. You get to know a man when you see what he looks like with someone else's blood running down his face."

"And what did he look like?"

"Angry," said Fergus. "And alive. As if he were finally doing what he was born to do: break things that need to be broken."

I remained silent. It was an image I liked. Better, at least, than the man who had once stood here, silent, with shadows under his eyes, and then left again before I was old enough to hold his hand. Sometimes I thought I had only imagined him. A dream in a room too cold to dream.

"Why isn't he here?" I asked.

"Because he can't sit still," Fergus said. "Because he believes this country belongs to the men who are willing to die for it. Because he hasn't understood that sometimes life is harder than death."

"That's what my mother says too," I murmured.

"Your mother is smarter than most," he said. "That's why she hasn't kicked you out yet."

I chuckled briefly, even though there was nothing to laugh about. "You can't throw someone out who they already see being thrown out," I said.

Fergus nodded slowly. "A true statement. You really are his son."

The words hit me harder than Tam's fist. His son. Not just a bastard, but someone's son. It was as if he'd draped a heavy, yet warm, cloak over my shoulders.

"So he's still fighting?" I asked. "For... for this country?"

"He's fighting for something he sees in people's eyes when they say 'freedom,'" Fergus replied. "He's also fighting against something within himself. Sometimes a man doesn't know which enemy he's fighting."

I pictured my father standing in the rain, just like me, only taller, with a sword instead of a blunt knife. Perhaps somewhere on a hill, on the other side of which stood men in shining armor, smelling of oil and money. I didn't know anything shiny. Everything we had was blunt. And yet it cut.

"Will he come back?" I asked.

Fergus gazed at the fire as if he could read the future there. "Men like him always come back," he finally said. "Sooner or later. Either on their own two feet or on a cart."

The silence after his words was heavy. Outside, the rain pattered as if trying to fill the pause. I heard footsteps on the path, muffled by the mud. The church bell was silent now; Mass must be over. Soon my mother would open the door, wring out her coat, see Fergus, and either hug him or slap him. Perhaps both.

"And what am I supposed to do?" I asked, without really knowing why.

“Wait,” said Fergus. “Grow stronger. Learn that you owe nothing to anyone but yourself and the woman who gave you life. And when the day comes that you are asked which side you are on, don’t lie. Men who lie in war are the first to be forgotten.”

“Will there be a war?” I asked.

He laughed again, dryly. "Son, there's always war here. Sometimes quieter, sometimes louder. Sometimes with swords, sometimes with words. You were born into a war that isn't yours, but you'll die in it if you're unlucky. Or you'll make it yours."

The door opened before I could answer. Cold, rainy air rushed in, and behind it stood my mother, with the face of a woman who had kept her mouth shut for too long and now didn't know what to do with all the words.

She saw Fergus, stopped in the doorway and closed her eyes for a moment, as if to make sure he was not just a memory.

“Of course,” she said. “When the sky falls, the dirt always finds its way into my cabin.”

"Nice to see you too," said Fergus, standing up. "The fair was full of wonders again, I suppose?"

“The miracle is they haven’t hanged you from the gate yet,” she replied. Then she turned to me. “Has he told you any stories yet?”

“A few,” I said.

“Be careful not to choke on them,” she said. “His stories are like bones. You can lick them, but you won’t get full.”

Fergus grinned. "But they keep you alive when there's nothing else left."

She glanced at him, a look that held both weary affection and even more weary anger. Then she closed the door and bolted it. Outside, the rain raged on, pressing against the wood like a drunkard against a locked tavern door.

I watched the two of them as they looked at each other without saying a word. There was something in the air, thicker than smoke. It was the past, a past that refused to fade away.

At that moment I realized that the rain wasn't the worst part. The worst part was waiting for the next blow, the next visitor, the next message from the outside. The sky could rage as much as it wanted – the real storms were inside people who had seen too much and still carried on.

I placed my hand on the knife lying on the table. It was dull, but I realized it wouldn't stay that way forever. Nothing stays dull forever if it's used often enough.

They stood facing each other like two people who had already argued and couldn't quite remember who started it. Their eyes met somewhere in the middle, above the sooty fire, between the thin pot of soup and my blunt knife. It was as if I were sitting in a tavern at the ends of the earth, the only one who had remained sober, just to watch the others get drunk on the memory.

"You could have told me you were coming," my mother finally said, without taking her eyes off him.

"I only found out myself when the rain started," Fergus replied. "Sometimes the clouds take you to where you still owe money."

"You have no debts here," she said. "Only unrest."

"Unrest is the only thing keeping this country warm," he said. "Everything else is already cold."

She snorted and hung her wet coat on a hook that looked as if it might burst from the wall at any moment. Her hair was plastered to her temples, darker than usual, and I saw her hands tremble briefly before she picked up the spoon to stir the soup. It was the same motion as every day, but today something was different. It was as if someone had hung an extra weight on her wrists.

"Why are you really here, Fergus?" she asked. "Don't tell me stories. I know them all."

He sat down again without asking, grabbed a piece of wood, and poked at the fire as if searching for words he hadn't yet burned. "They're rounding up men again," he said finally. "Further south, they've already emptied entire villages. Some go voluntarily, others are taken like cattle."

"The English?" I asked.

"The English, who bought our own nobles," he said. "One hand washes the other, and in the end both are covered in blood."

My mother placed three bowls on the table and poured in soup that looked more like hot water with a hint of cabbage. She slid one over to me, then to Fergus, keeping the third for herself. For a moment, no one spoke; only the slurping and the soft crackling of the logs filled the room. It was astonishing how quiet a cabin could be, even though the sky outside was falling apart.

"Who are they getting?" she then asked.

"Anyone who can hold a gun," Fergus said. "And anyone stupid enough to believe that the gentlemen won't forget him afterwards."

She glanced over at me, just briefly, but I felt it like a blow. "He's still a child," she said. "They won't want him."

"Only mothers talk like that," said Fergus. "To men, he's just a pair of arms and a belly, kept just full enough so he doesn't fall over before he kills their enemy."

I wanted to say something, that I was strong enough, that I could endure more than others, that they should go ahead and come for me—but the words caught in my throat. Between the soup and the pride, there was still too much fear. The older you get, the more you learn to hide it. But at this age, you still wear it like a second coat that doesn't fit.

"They're going to come by here anyway," Fergus continued. "Whether you duck or not, it's better if you know beforehand."

"How close are they?" my mother asked.

"A few villages away." He drank the last of his soup as if it were something stronger. "Greed never takes long to find a way."

She set her bowl aside, half full, as if hunger had suddenly lost its appetite. "And you? Will you join us again?"

He grinned crookedly. "My body says no, my pride says yes. And my mind sits in between, drinking."

I couldn't imagine what it was like to go into battle. All I knew were punches in the mud, fists still visible, eyes that either hated or respected you, depending on how the fight had gone. What Fergus meant was something different. Bigger. Louder. And I didn't know whether I was more afraid of it or more eager for it.

"What does all this have to do with us?" I asked. "We have nothing. No land, no money, no name to list."

"That's precisely why," said Fergus. "Those with nothing are the cheapest. When they fall, nobody asks who they were."

My mother clenched her fists. "He will not leave," she said. "Not for their wars. Not for their king."

"The king is far away," said Fergus. "Those who come here carry his name like a tool. But they fight for themselves."

"Much better," she snarled. "A king you can't see, and men fighting for their own lives. What an honorable death."

The air grew thick. I looked from one person to the other and knew it wasn't just about the war. It was about the man who wasn't here. About my father, who somewhere out there in the rain was perhaps looking at the same sky as me, but had a different life. A life in which he didn't have to mend shoes for a boy who didn't fit in his bed because, on his journey, he had become anything but a father.

"Did he send you?" my mother asked quietly. "Did he send you to see if we were still alive?"

Fergus didn't answer immediately. He stared at the table, at the cracks in the wood that stretched like old scars. "He mentioned your name," he said finally. "His own, too. The boy's. He didn't beg, but he asked how you were."

"And what did you answer?" she asked.

"That you still live under the same roof," he said. "And that you still have more courage in your gut than most men in their armor."

For a moment I thought she was smiling, but her lips remained hard. "Courage," she said. "Courage is just another word for no other way out."

I played with the spoon in my bowl, letting it trace circles. The soup sloshed as if it were a tiny sea, and the spoon a boat without a harbor. I felt I had to say something, something important, something that would free me from this role of listener, but the right words wouldn't come. Instead, something else came.

"If they want to come for me, let them," I said. "I'm not hiding."

They both looked at me. Two pairs of eyes, as different as fire and cold stone, but in that moment they were alike: surprised, angry, proud, worried – all at once. It's a strange moment in a boy's life when adults suddenly look at him as if he's bigger than he feels.

"You have no idea what you're talking about," my mother said.

"Maybe not," I admitted. "But I also have no idea what it's like to spend your whole life here in this hole, hiding because others think you're worth less."

"You are not worth less," she said. "You are just easier to hurt."

"Then let them try," I said. I heard the harshness in my voice and recognized it. It sounded like the words that ran through my head at night when I heard the rain and imagined myself one day standing on a hill, shouting my name, without anyone laughing.

Fergus leaned back and folded his arms. "He's just like him," he murmured. "It's in his nature."

"What's inside me?" I asked.

"The disease of not being able to stay small," he said. "Some people are born with a hole in their heart that only gets bigger the longer they live. They fill it with work, with women, with beer, with fights. But it remains a hole. Your father has one. You do too."

"A beautiful view," my mother said dryly.

"I'm just saying what I see," replied Fergus.

Outside, thunder rumbled. The sky growled like an old dog refusing to give up its bone. The rain intensified, lashing against the roof and trickling down the walls in thin threads. I felt the cabin sag slightly, as if it were collapsing under the weight of the wetness and the words.

"When are they coming?" I asked, this time more quietly.

"Maybe tomorrow," said Fergus. "Maybe next week. Maybe in a month. But they're coming. Once started, greed never stops."

My mother stood up, picked up our empty bowls, as if that said it all. "Then they should ask me first," she said. "If they want my son, they'll have to go through me."

"You can't stop them with a spoon," said Fergus.

"I've stopped worse things with less," she replied.

I believed her. I had seen her twist the hand of a drunken merchant when he thought he could touch her in exchange for a few scraps of cloth. I had seen her tell the priest to his face that he could keep his holy water if he would, in the same breath, bless the gentlemen who were taking our last goat. She wasn't tall, but tall enough to frighten others.

The afternoon dragged on, slowly like a wounded animal. Fergus did tell stories after all, even though at first they had pretended not to. Stories of bad roads, bad horses, bad men who died for the right reasons, and good men who killed for the wrong reasons. He told of my father, how he had laughed when the others were already tired, how in battle he seemed to have more of an enemy within himself than before him. He told of dark nights by the campfire, of the smell of burnt meat that lingered even when the wind shifted.

I listened, and one image after another flashed through my mind. A man I resembled more than I cared to admit. A country so broken it devoured its own sons and wondered why no one grew old. And suddenly I knew that this rain wasn't just water. It was a kind of test. Those who stayed inside learned to wait. Those who went outside learned to die. Eventually, I would have to decide which side of the door I wanted to be on.

As it grew darker, my mother added more wood to the fire, even though we didn't have much. The shadows in the cabin lengthened, crawling up the walls like spiders. Fergus put his wet coat back on.

"You're leaving?" I asked. "In this weather?"

"I was born in the rain," he said. "Someday I'll have to thank it."

"You can sleep here," my mother said reluctantly. "The road to the village is muddier than your jokes."

He shook his head. "They don't like it when I stay in one place for too long. Those who hate me think I bring bad luck. Those who like me drink too much when I'm around. Both are bad for the liver."

He approached me and briefly placed his hand on my shoulder. His fingers were hard, but not cold. "When they come, don't make too big a fuss. Not yet. Sometimes you survive by looking smaller than you are."

"And when does one become grown up?" I asked.

"When there's no other way," he said. "You'll notice."

He nodded to my mother, and that nod held more history than I could have written in a year. Then he opened the door. The rain lashed his face, but he didn't even flinch. He stepped out, and the darkness swallowed him faster than I would have liked.

My mother closed the door and leaned her forehead against it briefly. Her shoulders slumped forward, and for a moment she wasn't the woman who was growling at the priest, but just a body burdened with too many worries. Then she straightened up again, as if she had donned invisible armor.

"You're not going to the village tomorrow," she said.

"If they want to get me, they'll find me here," I replied.

"I know." She sighed. "But I want you to have at least once the illusion that you could escape your fate."

I went to the window and looked out into the night. There was nothing to see, only blackness, in which the rain moved like a mass of tiny ghosts. Somewhere out there was my father. Somewhere out there, too, was the war they all considered inevitable. And I stood between them, in that hut, with a blunt knife and a name too heavy for my shoulders.

"When he comes back," I said quietly, "I don't want him to know me as the boy who hid."

"When he comes back," my mother said, "he'll be glad you're still breathing. Everything else is just window dressing."

I didn't know if she was right. I only knew that the rain couldn't fall forever. Eventually, the sky would be empty, or too tired to continue. And then something else would fall: orders, swords, decisions.

I slept badly that night. The wind whistled through the cracks, and every sound was as if there were already boots at the door, as if men were standing outside, ready to shout names that meant nothing to them. I held the knife in my hand, under the covers, so tightly that the handle cut my fingers. It wouldn't have saved me, but it was something that belonged to me.

Just before I drifted off to sleep, I thought: If they come for me, let them come for me as I am. Wet, angry, with a hole in my heart that was still empty and therefore wanted to devour everything that sounded grand: honor, freedom, revenge. I knew such words were dangerous. But on this day, on this evening, in this cabin, they were the only thing that seemed bigger to me than the word they had hung around my neck.

The rain continued to drum on the roof, as if someone from above was counting how much time I had left to be a simple boy before they demanded something else of me.

Father, blood, and wet clay soil

In the morning, everything smelled of cold ash and a bad night's sleep. The rain had stopped sometime in the dark, but the land hadn't forgotten it. The yard was a single brown slurry, every step a soft squelching sound, as if the ground itself were clenching its teeth. I woke with a taste in my mouth as if I'd spent the night licking an old piece of iron. The knife was still in my hand. My fingers were cramped around it, pale from the pressure.

My mother was already up. I heard her outside, trudging to the well with her bucket, her steps heavy but steady. She walked as if every day were the same, regardless of whether men had been announced who would take other men away to force them into wet clay soil somewhere

in the distance. Some people could pretend everything was normal until the abnormal came kicking down the door. I had never learned that trick.

I sat up, rubbed my eyes, and looked around the hut. Yesterday's smoke still hung in the air, thin as a lame excuse. Dark drops, forced in by the night's rain, clung to the cracks in the wall. I pulled the blanket off, feeling the cold immediately begin to gnaw at me. Barefoot on the clay floor, which was harder than it looked. I put the knife back under the straw mattress where it belonged and stood up.

When I opened the door, the morning hit me like a blow. The air was damp but cold, and the sky hung low over the land, as if it were about to fall on us again. My mother stood by the well, the bucket half full, her back slightly bent. She didn't look up when I stepped out. She knew I was there. Mothers sense these things, just as dogs sense when a stranger is coming up the path.

I took a few steps, feeling the mud ooze up between my toes, cold, slimy, but more honest than most people. The yard looked as if a herd of drunken oxen had danced there. I could still see the traces of yesterday's fight, now deeper, softer, like a memory etching itself in instead of fading.

"You didn't have to fight him yesterday," my mother said without turning around.

"He started it," I replied. "With his mouth."

"People like him start talking every day," she said. "You don't have to wage war every morning just because some idiot opens his mouth."

I stepped beside her and also grasped the bucket handle. Together we lifted it, the wood creaking, the water sloshing. Our hands touched briefly, and her fingers were rough but warm. I thought of Fergus's words, of the hole in the heart, and of men who couldn't stay small.

"You're coming today, aren't you?" I asked.

"Maybe," she said. "Maybe not. This country is full of maybes."

"And what if it does?"

She put the bucket down and looked at me properly for the first time. Her eyes were red at the edges, but not from crying. It was the dryness left behind by the cold when it ran through you. "If they come, they'll talk to me," she said. "You keep your mouth shut, you don't look at them for too long, you act as if you're less than you are. Less is sometimes safer."

"Fergus says you have to grow up sometime," I muttered.

"Fergus also says beer helps with thinking," she replied. "If you want to grow up, you can still do that if you know what you're growing into."

From the village I heard a bell. Not a church bell, more the dull clang of metal on a cart. The sound crept up the hill, along with something else: voices, deep, higher, jumbled, and interspersed with the typical clatter of hooves on wet earth. I felt my stomach clench.

"They're on their way to the tavern," my mother said, as if trying to reassure me. "Anyone who has power drinks first before using it."

I didn't know if it was true, but it sounded right. Men who sent others to their deaths wanted to be sure their own blood was warm first. I pictured the scene: a few riders, reasonably well-dressed, with faces that smelled more of money than work, dismounting, shaking off the rain, and entering the tavern where the smell of stale beer and damp wood greets them. Then they sit down, order, talk, and laugh, while outside, those they're taking with them act as if it's none of their business.

"Do you think he's with them?" I asked.

"Who?" she asked, even though she knew exactly who I meant.

"He."

She lowered her gaze to the water in the bucket, in which a distorted sky was reflected. "No," she said. "He is not riding in foreign service. If he is sitting on a horse somewhere, it is not because they sent him."

It was good to hear that, even if I didn't know if it was true. Sometimes lies are like a cup of warm water: they taste of nothing, but they keep you going until evening.

We carried the bucket back to the hut together. The door was open, and thin wisps of smoke drifted out. It was dark inside, but it smelled of something that might be some kind of breakfast: oats, water, salt. Nothing to write a song about, but enough to keep you going.

I sat down at the table, and while she stirred the porridge, I glanced past the wall. There hung a piece of leather, old, cracked, the pattern half-faded. It had once been a belt, she had told me. No villager had ever worn it; it was too well-made. It was one of the few things she hadn't traded for flour, cloth, or lard. She said it reminded her of something important, though she never said exactly what.

"Did he leave the belt behind?" I asked suddenly.

She froze for a moment, then continued stirring, but more slowly. "Yes," she said. "Not intentionally. He was in a hurry."

"Where?"

"To where men run when they think they can cut the world in half with their swords."

I stood up, moved closer to the leather, and touched it carefully. It was hard, but still smooth in places. I imagined him wearing it, across his hip, perhaps with a sword attached, perhaps simply as a sign that he was more than a mere peasant. A belt is just a piece of animal hide, but if you pull it tight enough, it doesn't just hold up your trousers; it also holds together your self-image.

"When he comes back," I said, "he shouldn't think I just sat here eating porridge."

"When he comes back," my mother said, "he will be glad that you are still sitting at a table at all."

I wanted to object, but before I could find the words, we heard footsteps. Not a few, not slow, but several, in a rhythm that didn't suit our people. One of those contrived marches men invent to feel more important than they were. The sound came from the path, then across the yard, then directly toward our door.

My mother put down the spoon and wiped her hands on her apron, even though it didn't make them any cleaner. Her shoulders straightened, her eyes narrowed to slits, in which something flashed that I rarely saw: pure, unfiltered rage that had no other place but that face.

"Sit down," she said to me. "And remember: less, not more."

I sat down again, putting my hands under the table so they couldn't see how they were trembling. The knife lay under my straw mattress, out of reach. I felt naked, even though I was wearing the same clothes as every day.

There was no knock. The door simply opened, as if it were just a curtain. Three men entered. The first was the tallest, wearing a coat that must once have been expensive, before the rain had turned it into an equalizer. On his chest he wore the mark of a lord, a coat of arms that meant nothing to me, except that someone far away believed they could rule over us. The second was thinner, with eyes like nails that fixed on everything, never catching on anything. The third carried a list that looked like a weapon, because everything on it would affect someone.

The tall man glanced around briefly, as if assessing whether we were worth taking seriously. Then he nodded curtly, as if he had received an answer to a question he hadn't even asked.

"Màiri Wallace?" he asked.

"That's me," my mother said. Her voice was calm, but not friendly.

"We are on a mission from our master," the man said. "The king needs men. Our master is doing his part. We have come to record names."

I had expected him to speak louder, with more bombast, like the priest when he talks about hell and heaven. But his voice was sober, as if he were discussing cattle prices.

"Our Lord," my mother repeated. "A lovely word. I know many lords, but hardly any who are mine."

The thin man with the nail-like eyes took a step forward, but the tall man raised his hand slightly. "We are not tasked with discussing," he said. "Only with listing."

The third man unfurled the list. His fingers were stained, as if the ink had seeped into his skin. "In this household lives a female head," he said, "and a male offspring of military age."

The words hit me like small stones. Female head. Male offspring. Military age. Not a name, just categories.

"My son is still young," my mother said.

"How old?" asked the man with the list.

She hesitated briefly. "Old enough to work, but not old enough to die."

"That's not old age," said the man with the nails in his eyes. "We need numbers."

She named one that was lower than the correct one. I noticed, but said nothing. The men exchanged glances. The one with the list shrugged. "The king doesn't ask about birthdays," he said. "Only for arms that can hold a sword."

The tall man looked directly at me. His gaze wasn't angry, just tired, as if he'd been in this job for too long. "Can you hold a sword, boy?"

I felt my mother suck in her breath beside me. I could have said "no." I could have said I was weak, sick, anything. I saw her hands clench into fists. I saw the belt on the wall, the old leather hanging like a silent question. I saw the knife under my straw mattress, lost in thought, blunt, but mine.

"I can hold anything that's given to me," I said.

The sentence hung in the air, heavier than the smell of smoke. My mother's eyes burned on the back of my neck, but I didn't look at her. I only saw the man before me, his wrinkles that weren't from laughter, and the way he briefly quivered his jaw, as if regretting my answer.

"Courageous," murmured the man with the nail-like eyes. It didn't sound like a compliment. More like a diagnosis of an illness.

The list rustled. A quill pen scratched across the paper. "Boy's name?" he asked.

I opened my mouth, but my mother was faster. "His name is William," she said. Not a trace of tremor in her voice. "William Wallace."

It was the first time someone had spoken the name aloud without tainting it with another word. Not bastard, not filth, not nothing. Just William Wallace. It sounded bigger than this room, bigger than the mud outside the door.

The man with the list wrote. The letters were crooked, but they existed. A name on paper is dangerous. It can save you or tighten the noose around your neck.

"You'll be down in the village in two days," said the tall man. "They'll gather you, equip you, and tell you what to fight for. Bring something warm. The ground is cold if you fall."

My mother took a step forward. "He won't..."

"It's an order," he interrupted, and this time his voice sounded harsher. "Anyone who doesn't come will be brought in. Anyone who resists will be treated as an enemy."

He looked at her for another moment, as if he wanted to say something else, but the words failed him. Then he turned, the others followed him, and they stepped out into the courtyard. The door remained open for a heartbeat, the cold wind crept in, then it clicked shut.

It was quiet. So quiet that I could hear my own heartbeat, heavy, uneven. My mother stood there as if her legs were made of clay.

"You idiot," she whispered finally. "You damned, stubborn idiot."

I stood up, slowly. "They would have come anyway," I said. "I wanted to..."

"You wanted to be big," she said. "Bigger than this roof, bigger than this table, bigger than me."

I didn't know what to say. She was right. I wanted to be more than the boy in the mud that everyone laughed at. I wanted someone to know my name, and now they did. The wrong people first, as is usually the case.

I went to the belt and took it from the wall. The leather was heavier than it looked. It felt like a burden that, after so many years, still refused to let go. I put it around my waist; it was too loose, but I could tie a knot. My mother watched me, and in her eyes, two things were fighting: the fear of losing me and the pride that I was acting as if I were ready.

"He took it back then, too, before he left," she said quietly.

"Did he hesitate?" I asked.

"Just long enough to kiss me," she replied. "You're my child. You didn't even do that."

I stepped closer to her and put my arms around her. She remained stiff for a moment, then sank slightly into me, as if she had forgotten how heavy her own body was. I didn't feel her tears on my skin, but I knew they were there somewhere, deep inside, in a layer that rarely allowed them to surface.

"I'll be back," I said.

It was a stupid, big, classic lie. But sometimes you have to say it in order to even begin.

Outside, the wet clay soil awaited. Somewhere out there was blood that didn't yet know whose it belonged to. And somewhere further on, beyond all that, was a man who bore the same name as me, perhaps gazing at the same gray sky.

The next two days dragged on like a beaten dog that still shows up at the door every morning. The sky remained gray, but it stopped raining; as if it had decided to dry us off so the blood would stand out better later. The ground outside was still a single heap of mud, but in some places a thin, brittle crust had formed. If you stepped on it, it broke, and underneath everything was still soft. That's how it was with me: hard on the outside, mush on the inside.

My mother didn't talk much. She did what needed to be done—fetching water, making a fire, cooking something from scratch—and she had this look in her eyes that was simultaneously here and somewhere else. Sometimes I caught her standing by the door, her hand on the bolt,

as if she just wanted to run off, somewhere where no one kept lists and labeled boys fit for military service with falsified numbers. But she never opened the door when she stood there like that. She stayed and took deep breaths, as if she had to hold the air in her chest so it wouldn't escape.

I pretended to help her, but the truth was, I was just wandering around, searching for something that resembled a plan. I polished the knife as if I could somehow turn it into a sword. I tried on the belt for the fifth time, tightening it, then loosening it again, as if it were a part of me that hadn't quite found its place. I went outside the hut and shoveled a few channels in the mud to drain the water. It was pointless, but it kept my hands busy. Sometimes that's all you have.

Every now and then I heard voices in the village below, growing louder, then fainter again. They were already practicing how they would present themselves to the men who were keeping the lists. Some would hide their sons, others would pretend to be proud so that losing them wouldn't hurt so much. Everyone had their own way of keeping their sanity.

On the second night, I dreamt of a field. It wasn't the field above our hut; this one was larger, flatter, and the ground so muddy that every step sucked me in, as if it wanted to hold me. There was no sky above me, only a gray mush stretching to the horizon. In the distance, I heard metal on metal, that hard, cold clang that had nothing to do with wood or hammer. There was a man, his back to me, a broad back beneath a wet coat. He stood in the clay soil as if it belonged to him. When I came closer, he turned his head only slightly, and I saw eyes like my own, only older, more tired, angrier.

"You need to step harder," he said, without actually moving his mouth. "Otherwise the ground will swallow you up."

"Is this our country?" I asked.

"As long as you're standing on it, yes," he said. "As soon as you fall, it belongs to the others again."

When I woke up, I was drenched in sweat, even though it was cold. The blanket clung to me, my heart was racing. It was still dark in the cabin, but the fire was still glowing faintly. My mother sat at the table, her back to me, her shoulders like two rocks battered by the wind for far too long. I didn't know if she had been asleep.

"You talk when you dream," she said without turning around.

"What did I say?" I asked.

"Nothing clever," she said. "Like most men."

I sat up and rubbed my face. "I dreamt about him," I said.

"From whom else?" she said quietly.

"He said I need to stand up straighter."

"You always have to," she replied. "Otherwise they'll think you want to dance."

She turned around, and I saw the weariness in her eyes, but also something else I rarely saw: a kind of pride that couldn't decide whether it was allowed to stay. "You can still run away, you know," she said. "The forests are vast. Some hide their sons. Some send them to relatives, even further into the unknown."

"And then what?" I asked. "Am I supposed to spend my whole life stalking around traps like a fox?"

"I prefer a live fox to a dead dog on some lord's coat of arms," she said.

I shook my head. "If I run away, the village won't just call me 'bastard' anymore. They'll call me 'coward'. And that sticks just as much."

"Why should you care what the village says?" she asked, and for the first time she sounded truly angry. "They would have drowned you if they could have when you were little. They only left you because they hoped you would die quickly or become useful."

"Exactly," I said. "Now I'll be useful."

I didn't like the sound of the word, but I said it anyway. Sometimes you swallow things you know are bad for you, simply because otherwise you won't get anything at all.

"Useful for whom?" she asked.

I didn't answer. We both knew that this question was bigger than this cabin.

The morning I was to leave came uninvited. The sky was clearer than it should have been. A few pale rays of sunlight tried to make the land look less wretched, but the mud gave everything away. Every step left a mark, and I wondered how many of them one would remember.

I put on the best shirt I had. It wasn't really good, just less patched than the others. My mother smoothed it out, although it wrinkled again immediately anyway. Then she took out a bundle she'd hidden somewhere without me noticing. Inside was a piece of bread, some cheese, hard as a rock, and a cloth, which she wrapped everything in as if she were making it into a treasure, which it wasn't.

"You don't eat it all at once," she said. "They'll give you some down there, but you know how men are when food is scarce. Don't let them take anything away from you."

"They're soldiers," I said. "They share."

She laughed bitterly. "Men only share if they hope to get something in return. Women, land, stories that make them bigger later. They keep their food as long as they can."

I took the bundle, tied it to a rope, and slung it over my shoulder. Then she slid something into my hand. It was a small piece of wood, smoothed, with a notch in it.

"What is it?" I asked.

"A piece of the cradle you once lay in," she said. "Before we burned it."

I looked at her. "Why?"

"So you know that you were once warm somewhere," she said. "Just in case you forget."

I closed my hand around it. The wood was light, but it weighed more than the bundle of bread and cheese. I put it in my pocket, close to my skin.

We walked down the path to the village together. Each step in the wet ground made a sound, like someone was laughing softly. The hut grew smaller behind us until it was just a dark speck between the gray sky and the brown land. I wondered if it looked any different coming down from above, as a gentleman, in a coat, with his trinkets. Probably not.

Halfway there, I saw Fergus. He was leaning against a tree that was more dead than alive, chewing on something that looked like a piece of leather. Perhaps it was. His eyes were narrow, but alert.

"Well," he said, "the hero really is coming."

"He's not a hero," my mother said. "He's my son."

"That's not mutually exclusive," Fergus said. "Just mostly."

He looked me up and down, his gaze lingering briefly on the belt I was wearing. A flicker of approval crossed his face. "It suits you," he said. "As if you'd always been waiting for it to be attached to a body again."

"You could have stopped him," my mother told him. "You could have told him your stories in a way that would have scared him."

"They all get scared," said Fergus. "But fear won't stop anyone who already has the hole burned into their skin."

"Maybe you are the hole," she snarled. "With your fine words about the fight and the great before and after."

He shrugged. "Maybe. But I didn't put him on the list. That was someone else."

I didn't want them to get entangled in his past again. "Are you going too?" I asked him.

He grinned, and I saw that he was missing a tooth that I had seen yesterday. "If they take me, yes. If they see me, no."

"What does that mean?" I asked.

"They say I'm old enough to duck when necessary," he said. "But old enough to realize when I can't anymore."

"Coward," my mother said.

"Survivor," he corrected. "The only difference is who tells the story."

We continued walking. Fergus joined us, a few steps behind me, as if he were a shadow unable to shake what he had once seen. The village drew closer. The first huts, similar holes to ours, only scattered differently across the hillside. Smoke rose from the roofs, thin, acrid. Dogs barked, children were called inside, doors opened and closed like mouths about to say something, then changed their minds.

They were already standing in the square in front of the tavern: a few dozen boys and men, some barely older than me, others with wrinkles that suggested they should have said they were out of the game long ago. They stood in a crooked line, which no one tried to straighten. A few carried sacks, others only the clothes on their backs. Their faces reflected everything: defiance, fear, pride, and blank stares. Some talked quietly among themselves, others stared at the ground as if having a final, silent conversation with it.

The three men from yesterday were back, this time not in our hut, but under a rough overhang at the tavern. The list lay on a barrel, the quill pen beside it. A few others stood nearby: village elders, the priest, the blacksmith. They looked like a small gathering of people who had never had to hold a sword, but liked to talk about it.

I spotted Tam. His lip was swollen, his eye slightly discolored. When he saw me, his mouth twisted, not quite into a smile, not quite into a threat. More into something that said: We're now on a playing field where others make the rules. His friends weren't with him. They had mingled with the others, as if they didn't want to be too close to a story that had been lying in the mud just yesterday.

The man in the long coat stepped forward and raised his hand. "Good," he said. "You are on time. The king will thank you."

Nobody answered. A crow cawed somewhere on the tavern roof, as if mocking the word "thank you".

"You will continue your journey today," he continued. "Southwards. It won't be easy. But those of you who return will have something different to tell than the price of oats and beer."

I looked at my mother. She was standing at the edge of the crowd, among other women who looked similar: tired, hard, with eyes that refused to cry as long as someone was looking. Her hands were clenched together. I lifted my chin slightly. It wasn't a grand gesture, just a small sign: I'm leaving, but I'm leaving now.

Fergus stood beside her, slightly to the side, as if he belonged and yet didn't. "Don't forget to step more firmly," he said quietly as I passed him. "The ground beneath strangers' feet is even more greedy than this."

"Will you be there when I come back?" I asked.

He laughed briefly. "If I'm still breathing, yes. If I'm no longer breathing, I'll tell others your stories."

"Which ones?" I asked.

"Those in which you didn't stay small," he said.

Then there was only the clay soil beneath my feet, the space in front of me, the men with the list, and the long path they would show us. Somewhere out there waited a field where blood and water mingled until it was impossible to tell which had come first. Father, blood, and wet clay soil—all of it was suddenly no longer just a thought suspended between the beams of our hut. It was something coming toward me, step by step, and I was going toward it.

We set off like a herd being pushed from behind. No drumbeat, no grand farewell, just the muddy squelching of our footsteps and the cawing of the crow watching us as if it knew more about the future than all of us put together. The tall man in the coat rode ahead, two others on horseback beside him, and behind them we, forced to walk because that's how the world was ordered: those above, those below, and mud in between.

The road south wasn't a real road. It was simply the place where the earth had given up pretending to be untouched. Cart wheels had churned it up, hooves had trampled it wide, rain had boiled it soft. Now our boots shuffled through the same brown muck, and I thought of how many others had trudged this way before. Perhaps somewhere in the dirt was a remnant of them: blood, sweat, a lost tooth. The land devoured everything and gave nothing back but more dirt.

Tam was running beside me. Not right next to me, but close enough that I could hear him. His breathing was heavy, uneven. He wasn't a good runner, he was a good hitter, and those are two different things. His lip hadn't completely gone down; it glistened in the cold light like a poorly wrapped sausage. I glanced at it briefly, then looked ahead again.

"Well, bastard," he growled at some point. "Satisfied? Now we're important."

"We were never important," I said. "We're cheap."

"Cheap people die too," he said. "And the gentlemen drink to their health just the same."

A few boys in front of us laughed at something they themselves had said. It sounded nervous. Behind us, someone was panting, too old for this march but too young to lie down. Some carried all their possessions in a bundle, others carried nothing but the hope that someone would miss them later.

"Are you scared?" I asked Tam.

He spat in the mud. "My back hurts," he said. "Fear is bad for your posture."

"You'll still be shaking when the first one falls," I said.

"Won't you?" he asked.

I thought of my dream, of the man with the similar eyes who had told me I needed to stand up for myself. "Yes," I said. "But I won't be the first."

We took a short break when the sun had crested the horizon, more out of a sense of duty than genuine warmth. The riders dismounted, stretched their legs, and one of them had one of the village elders pour him a drink from a jug. Not water, something else. Something that burned. We got nothing. We supposedly had our youth to keep us warm.

I sat down on a stone that jutted out of the mud as if it had fought its way up and didn't want to go back down. The bundle of bread and cheese lay beside me; I untied it and broke off a piece. It was hard, but my jaw was young. I chewed until it tasted like something that kept you alive. Someone plopped down beside me: a pale boy with freckled skin, the color of which winter had only just begun to drain from him.

"I am Aidan," he said, without looking.

"William," I said.

"I know," he said. "You're the bastard from the cabin up on the hillside."

I rolled my eyes. "Nice that my reputation is marching along."

He shrugged. "It's better than no one knowing who you are."

"Sometimes," I said. "Sometimes the opposite is better."

He glanced at me briefly, a quick assessment, like someone checking whether I'll be more of a shield or a weight. "My mother says your father is a good fighter," he said.

"My mother says he is a bad father," I said.

Aidan laughed briefly. "Maybe he's both."

"Maybe," I said.

A shout came from the front, one of those curt commands that brooked no argument. We re-tied our bundles, stood up, and set off again. The break hadn't been long enough for a real rest, just long enough for the mud clinging to our boots to dry. With the next step, it tore open like a second skin.

The further we walked, the less familiar the landscape became. The hills changed. The trees grew bare, as if they had been raised closer to the wind. Every now and then we passed a homestead that looked like ours, only sadder. Women stood in doorways, children peering out from behind them, some crying, others simply staring at us as if we were ghosts.

I searched every one of those faces for one that resembled me. For eyes I knew without ever having seen them. It was a stupid, illogical reflex, but I couldn't stop it. My father was out there somewhere. Every man's face we passed, every rumor hanging in the air, every story people whispered—everything was a possible thread leading to him.

"You hope to find him," said Aidan, as we crossed a small stream that consisted more of brown water than clear drops.

"I don't know what I hope for," I said. "I just don't want to be the only one who looks the way I do."

"Most of them end up looking like this eventually," he said. "Tired, dirty, and angry."

"That's not the same," I said.

In the afternoon we came to a spot where the ground no longer gave way. Rocky, flat, cold, as if someone had cut away the mud. The riders stopped, and so did we. The tall man turned and looked over the group, as if to count how many of us were still standing upright enough to be of any use.

“Tonight you’ll sleep in your own filth,” he said. “Tomorrow or the day after, you’ll belong to someone else.” His voice was dry, without pathos. “There, they’ll throw you together with other villages. Some will tell you you’re brothers because you carry the same banner. Don’t believe it too much. Brothers can be worse than enemies.”

Someone asked, “What are we fighting for?” and everyone pretended not to hear the question. The man in the coat glanced briefly at the boy who had asked it. He was thin and had more hair on his face than strength in his arms.

“You fight so that others don’t have to fight,” the man said. “That’s the official answer. You know the other one yourselves.”

“Which other ones?” Tam asked.

The man snorted. “You fight because you can’t stop. Because otherwise you’ll sit in your huts, mortified that you’ve remained small. You fight because your pride is bigger than your country.”

A few people laughed, but there was nothing joyful about it. The man fell silent, started walking again, and we followed. The sun was hanging low now, a pale speck over the world, pretending to still be warm.

As it grew darker, we stopped on a patch of land consisting only of wet grass and a few bushes. “Here,” said one of the riders. “You don’t deserve any more.” He didn’t even say it angrily, more wearily.

We made a fire, or tried to. The wood was wet, our fingers cold. Finally, something crackled, thin flames licking at what we gave them. We sat in a semicircle, our faces in the light, our backs in the cold. I felt the belt at my hip, as if it had become one with my skin.

Aidan rubbed his hands together. “Do you really think your father is where they’re taking us?” he asked.

“Maybe,” I said. “Maybe he was there. Maybe he’s somewhere else now. Maybe he’s already lying somewhere in the clay soil.”

“Would that be better or worse?” he asked.

I thought about it. “Better if he had come back before he was lying there,” I said. “Worse if I never find out where he is.”

Tam was there too, a little apart, with two others I only knew by sight. He was quieter than usual. Sometimes he stared into the flames, as if he saw something in them that he didn’t like.

“What will you do when you meet him?” Aidan asked.

"I don't know," I said. "Tell him he's an asshole. Hug him. Stab him in the stomach. Maybe all three."

"In that order?" he asked dryly.

"It depends on how he looks at me," I said.

Night crept closer. There was no roof above us, only the sky, which was already growing heavier. I lay down on the ground, my arms under my head, and felt the dampness seep through my clothes. The earth wasn't soft, but it yielded, just enough that you could imagine it would eventually swallow you up completely.

A few of the older men told quiet stories, nothing grand, just fragments. One spoke of a battle where the ground had been so deep that men had drowned standing up. Another told of a man who, in the middle of the battle, had started laughing and couldn't stop until someone had clamped his mouth shut with steel. They laughed as they did so, a dry, ragged laugh. As if to show death that it hadn't completely taken hold of them yet.

Eventually, my eyes closed. I dreamt of the field again, but this time I wasn't alone. Men stood to my right and left, in rows, shoulder to shoulder, the air thick with breath, fear, and sweat. In the distance, I heard drums, those dull thumps you feel in your body before you hear them. Next to me stood a man with a belt similar to mine. I tried to see his face, but each time I looked, it turned away as if it were made of smoke.

"Stop looking for him," said a voice that didn't come from one mouth. "Find yourself first."

When I woke up, morning had already arrived—gray, wet, and tired. My bones ached, even though I wasn't old at all. I sat up and rubbed the back of my neck. The others sat up as well; one cursed because he'd rolled into something soft and smelly during the night. The man in the coat walked between us as if checking on a herd.

"Get up," he said, as if we weren't already awake. "Today you'll meet the others. From then on, you're no longer just boys from a village. From then on, you're material."

"Material for what?" I asked quietly.

"For everything they throw at us," Aidan muttered.

We got up again, shouldered bundles, and sorted our worn boots on the rough ground. And as we took the next step, I felt something shift inside me. Up until then, everything had been theoretical: lists, glances, names on paper, stories told around the fire. But now, as we marched further south, I realized that the clay soil everyone talked about wasn't just beneath our feet. It was inside us, too. Soft, malleable, ready to bear traces—or swallow us whole.

A father who was out there somewhere. Blood still flowing in my veins. Wet clay soil just waiting for one of us to stumble. It was all there. And me in the middle of it, a bastard on the march, with a name bigger than any life I'd ever known.

School of Fists and Curses

They called it a camp, but it was nothing more than an ugly stain on the landscape. Tents pitched crookedly, as if they'd lost to the wind, fires that produced more smoke than heat, and in between, men who looked as if they'd been trying to endure their own lives for far too long. Hanging over it all was that smell I later recognized everywhere: sweat, horse, bad food, old leather, fresh cursing.

We arrived in a long, crooked procession. The men at the gate looked at us like a farmer at a bundle of potatoes: scrutinizing, unimpressed. One of them spat in the dirt, as if we were the reason he was there, not the king or some lord sitting far away in dry rooms deciding who got to die.

"Put them there," said a broad-shouldered man with a voice like a quarry. "We'll sort them later."

Sorting. We were no longer a bunch of boys sent out from the village square. We were merchandise being sorted into boxes with labels: strong, weak, usable, ballast.

We stopped, somewhere between two rows of dirty tents. I couldn't really feel my legs anymore, just a dull ache. Aidan beside me swayed slightly, but he kept his balance. Tam was panting like an old horse that no one wants to feed anymore. The men from the ride didn't pay us any further attention. They had done their job: deliver, check, move on. One laughed at a joke I hadn't heard, another patted his horse on the neck. We were just background noise.

Then he appeared.

He wasn't the tallest there, nor the strongest. But he had this way of walking on the ground, as if it belonged to him. The gait of a man who had fallen many times and gotten back up each time, with an extra dose of nonchalance in his eyes. His hair was closely cropped, his beard messy but not neglected. His nose was crooked, as if it had decided at some point to look straight, and his eyes were two pale holes, in which a remnant of a fire remained that must once have been greater.

"So this is the new crap," he said, without looking directly at us. "What's your name?" he asked the man in the coat.

"No 'how'," he said. "Just 'what'. Villagers. Those fit for military service. The rest is your problem, Sergeant."

Sergeant. The word suited him like a punch to the face.

He took a step towards us, stopped, and folded his arms. "I am not your father," he said. "I am not your priest, and I am certainly not your king. I am the one who makes sure you don't wet your pants at the crucial moment. If you're lucky, you'll survive long enough to hate someone who is above me."

A few grinned, nervously. Others simply stared at him. I felt something inside me simultaneously recoil and surge forward. The man had a presence that couldn't be ignored. He wasn't like the quiet, tired men who had picked us up from the village. This man was sharper,

more angular, like a stone shaped just right to fit comfortably in your hand when you wanted to throw it at someone's head.

"You are now in the service of the king," he continued. "That means you will die for people whose names you don't know and who will never know yours. At times you will freeze, starve, stink, and wish you were back home. This will pass. Either because you get used to it, or because you're buried."

He walked down the row, scrutinizing each person. His gaze swept over their faces like a cold blade. He lingered on some longer, as if trying to memorize their weaknesses. When he reached me, he paused.

"How old are you, boy?" he asked.

I knew what my mother had answered, but I also knew he didn't like lying. He was a man who considered lying a waste of time. "Old enough," I said.

The corner of his mouth twitched. "Cheeky," he said. "I used to like cheeky rascals. They usually die first. Saves me work."

"Then maybe I did something good for you," I said, before my mind could stop me.

A few people beside me froze. Others held their breath. The sergeant looked at me for another moment. Then he took a step closer, so close I could smell his breath: no beer, no garlic, just dry mouth and long days.

"Name," he said.

"William," I replied. "William Wallace."

"Wallace," he repeated. Something flitted across his face, hard to grasp. He spat in the dirt. "We've had a few of those before. They're usually louder than all the others."

"It's easier to die if it's loud," I said.

He laughed briefly, without joy. "Perhaps," he said. "We'll see if there's more to you than just a mouth."

He kept walking. I could feel my heart still beating too fast. Aidan nudged me with his elbow. "Looking for a beating on the very first day," he whispered.

"At least he knows I'm here now," I said.

"It would have been enough if you had fallen over," he said.

The sergeant turned back to us. "You'll be split up," he said. "Groups of ten. You'll eat together, sleep together, run together, swear together. Anyone who can't keep up will drag the others down, and for that, they'll get special treatment from me. I call it school. Others call it hell. They mean the same thing."

We were crammed into groups of ten with the sensitivity of a barn owner distributing hay. I ended up with Aidan, Tam, the skinny boy who had asked what we were fighting for, and a few others whose names I only learned later: Euan, who laughed too much; Donnach, who at 17 already looked like a washed-up farmhand; Murdo, who had more scars than words; and two brothers who were constantly arguing but together beat up anyone who interfered.

"You are now Squad Six," said the sergeant. "Squads One through Five will be the ones who think they're something special. Squads Seven through Ten are the ones who are just glad they didn't lose a leg on the march. You're in between. That gives you the wonderful opportunity to disappoint both those above and those below."

A huge man with shoulders like goalposts stepped up beside him. His face was a landscape of dents and bumps, his eyes small but alert.

"This is Broc," said the sergeant. "He's what your mother lacked on those nights when they hoped you'd be a girl. He shows you where to pee... I mean, where to relieve yourself, where to sleep, and where you can fight without me having to intervene."

Broc grinned, which didn't make his features any friendlier. "Come with me, you aspiring corpses," he grumbled. "Time to settle into the beautiful world of shit and sweat."

We followed him between the rows of tents. Everywhere there were men doing something, or pretending to be doing something. One was sharpening a blade that had seen a lot. Another was binding his feet with scraps of cloth. A third was simply sitting there, staring up into the air, as if he had hidden an answer up there.

"Get used to the noise," Broc said. "If it's quiet, something bad has happened."

He pointed to a few tattered tents at the edge of the camp, near a ditch filled with stagnant water that seemed undecided whether to flow or stagnate. "That's your corner," he said. "The king sleeps further up."

"Is he even sleeping?" Euan murmured.

"The king is always asleep," said Broc. "Otherwise he would realize what he's doing to you."

The tent, which was supposedly ours, was a patchwork of fabric and rope. The floor inside wasn't dry, just less wet than outside. It smelled of old feet and younger dreams. We stood in the entrance, one behind the other, peering inside as if it held a secret that would affect our lives. In reality, it was just another kind of hole.

"Four are asleep, the others are lying down," said Broc. "Take turns, cuddle, argue, I don't care. The main thing is that you don't snore so loudly that I can hear you."

Tam nudged me with his shoulder. "It's almost like home," he growled. "Only without mothers putting food in front of you."

"We'll replace them for you," said Broc. "You'll just have to force the food out of your own throats."

We threw in our meager bundles: bread, cheese, cloths, and the occasional dream we carried on our backs. I kept my piece of wood from the cradle in my pocket. It was the only thing that couldn't be lost.

"Today you'll learn the first rule," Broc said as we stood outside again. "You think the first rule is obedience. Wrong. The first rule is: Don't let them walk all over you, but choose the moments when you'll speak up. The second rule is: When I'm talking to you, you're quiet. The third rule is: When the sergeant's talking to you, you're even quieter."

"Is there a rule for the king too?" asked Euan.

"Yes," said Broc. "He's allowed to do anything."

He made us line up, a crooked series of small and medium-sized disasters. Then school began. Not with books, not with psalms, but with fists and curses.

"You can't fight," he stated after we had lashed out at each other a few times, more stumbling than aiming. "You swing like farmers tilling a field: broadly, inaccurately, and hoping that something will grow."

He went from one to the other, repositioning our feet, twisting our shoulders, punching one of us in the face to show us the gaps in our defense. He made no distinctions. Whether you had a big belly or skinny arms, everyone got their lesson in pain.

When he reached me, I had my fists raised, like I'd seen the boys in the village do when they were fighting. He looked at me, shook his head, and before I understood why, his palm smacked me against the forehead. Not hard enough to knock me over, but hard enough to make me see stars.

"You're thinking too much about what your face says," he growled. "What's down here is more important." He lightly kicked me. "Stand wider, weight forward, but not like you're offering your knees."

I did as he said. He nodded curtly. "Now go for it."

I punched. Not very well, not very fast. He dodged it effortlessly. I tried again; he blocked as if he'd only raised his hand to brush away a fly.

"You're angry," he said. "I can see it in your eyes. But anger is like beer. If you drink it all at once, you'll end up vomiting in the corner."

"What am I supposed to do then?" I asked, panting.

"Learn to dose them," he said. "Put them in your fist, not your lips."

He turned to the others. "This applies to all of you. He who fights with his mouth will have more teeth knocked out than he who fights with his hands. And he who fights with his head might still be standing in the end."

The day crawled along at a snail's pace. We were pushed, hit, corrected, yelled at. We learned how to fall without staying down. How not to pull your fists back before striking, because

otherwise you've already given away your intentions. How not to lower your gaze when someone is bigger. How to swear without begging the other person to hit you even harder.

During breaks, if you could call them that, we squatted on our butts, letting our bodies try to remember how not to hurt. Our hands trembled, our lips bled, our knees were split. But no one said they wanted to go back. Not yet. Pride was still too fresh.

"So this is what school is like," Aidan muttered as we stood briefly at the edge while Broc explained to another group how to deliver a punch to the stomach in such a way that the other person believes it's the end of him.

"What did you think?" I asked. "That they would give us books?"

"Perhaps Psalms," he said dryly.

"We already carry that around with us," I said. "Only we replace every 'Amen' with a curse."

The sergeant reappeared at some point, observing the whole scene with his arms folded. He didn't say much, but when he did, everyone listened. Broc was the hammer, he was the anvil. On one you get the blows, on the other the shape.

"Do you see that?" said the sergeant, as two of us stumbled into each other again and both landed in the mud. "This isn't a battle. This is child's play. In a battle, there's no one there to tell you when you can take a break."

He looked at me. "You want to be the big one, don't you?"

I knew what he meant. "I don't want to be the one who stays small," I said.

"That's enough to die," he said. "Not enough to lead. You want to make sure you're not just another dead boy that someone quickly pees on and moves on with? Then learn."

He grabbed my arm, twisted it, and positioned me in a way that felt both wrong and right. "Hit here," he said, pointing to a spot on Broc's chest, just below the ribs.

"If I hit him there, he'll kill me," I said.

"If you miss, yes," Broc said with a grin.

I drew back my fist, not too far as he had said, and struck. My fist didn't hit the spot exactly, but close enough. Broc growled, his face contorted, just enough to show: it had worked.

"Better," the sergeant muttered. "Now imagine there's a gap in a suit of armor. And behind it is someone you hate."

"Which one?" I asked.

"Any one," he said. "There will be enough."

When the sun disappeared again and the sky re-covered us with its gray blanket, I wasn't a good fighter. But I wasn't the same person who had marched out of the village either. My

anger had taken on a bit of structure. At least my fists knew roughly where they were going. And my body had learned that pain wasn't always the end, sometimes just the beginning.

In the corner of the camp, where the water in the ditch gradually darkened, stood a few men who were no longer training. Some had bandages on their legs, others were missing. One had only one arm. They stood there and watched us, young and more or less whole, as we tried to make ourselves into human beings who were more than just fodder for the soil.

One of them, a man with a scar across his face that looked like a badly drawn line, raised his hand as I walked by. "What's your name, boy?" he asked.

"William," I said. "William Wallace."

He nodded slowly. "I once knew someone with that name," he murmured. "He hit as if every blow was a sentence he couldn't say to anyone else."

"What became of him?" I asked.

He looked at his missing arm, then back at me. "He's said his part," he said. "The rest is out there somewhere, waiting."

Later, as I lay in my tent, a pleasantly anxious exhaustion settling in my bones, I heard cursing, laughter, arguing, dice rolling, and the dull thud of a fist landing somewhere outside. School of Fists and Curses: that wasn't just a saying. That was the curriculum. And right in the middle of it all was a boy with a name bigger than the hole he was lying in.

I turned the small piece of wood left over from the cradle between my fingers. I thought of my mother, the hut, the roof that I hoped was still holding. I thought of the man who was out there somewhere, perhaps not so far away. And I swore to myself that if I ever saw him one day, I would show him that the bastard in the rain had become more than just another wet body in the clay soil.

The next morning, my body was in complete protest. Everything ached, even places I didn't know had names. My hands felt like I'd spent the night hugging rocks. When I moved my fingers, they cracked, and tiny jolts of pain shot up to my shoulders. Next to me lay Aidan, half on his side, his mouth open as if searching in his sleep for air that didn't smell of smoke. Tam's snoring filled the tent like a bad joke that just wouldn't end.

Outside it wasn't quite light yet, but the camp was already awake. Voices, curses, the clanging of metal, the bellowing of a man who probably found the water in his bucket too cold. I felt a mixture of disgust and anticipation as the new day descended upon me. It would hurt again. And I would go back.

"Get up," Aidan murmured without opening his eyes. "Otherwise, the big stone will come with its shoulders and kick us awake."

"You first," I said, but I was already sitting up. The ground beneath me was damp and cold; the thin sheet we slept on had only pretended to be a boundary. Mud always finds a way.

I groped for my bag, felt the piece of wood, the remains of the cradle, and comforted myself with its presence. The belt dug into my hip as I stood up, a familiar pressure I was beginning to like. Some things offer support precisely because they are uncomfortable.

Broc was already standing outside, arms folded, the posture of a man who refuses to make excuses. His gaze swept over us, one tired, sleepy face after another. "You look like a bunch of old widows," he grunted. "And smell worse."

"Good morning," Euan murmured. "It's nice that you're being so friendly again."

Broc took a step towards him. "If you want a morning where someone looks at you with love, go back to your mother," he said. "Here, there are only days when you don't die. If you're lucky."

We lined up in a row, or something vaguely resembling one. My knees were stiff, but I tried not to show it. Everything here was a stage, no matter how shabby. If you limped, you got it. If you complained, you got it worse. Silence was a kind of armor.

"Today," said Broc, "we are learning how to stand still when everything inside you is screaming to run away. That's called courage if it turns out well. And stupidity if it turns out badly."

"How can you tell the difference?" asked Donnach.

"At the end," said Broc. "And you're not there yet."

He made us walk. Not run, just walk, in circles around a cluster of tents, through puddles, over roots, and through mud that splashed higher than our ankles. It wasn't a wartime run; it was a test of whether our hearts had even grasped what they were getting themselves into. After the second lap, my lungs were burning; after the third, my legs had a rhythm of their own; after the fourth, I wasn't sure whether I wanted to keep running or just fall.

Tam gasped beside me, his lips blue, his eyes narrowed. "He wants to kill us," he gasped.

"If he wanted to kill us, he'd do it differently," I said, between breaths. "This is just foreplay."

"You talk too much," he growled.

"You're breathing too loudly," I countered.

Broc stood in the middle of our circle, watching us as if we were rats being tested for fitness. He didn't call out numbers, distances. He simply let us run until the first ones slowed down. The skinny boy who had asked what we were fighting for eventually stumbled and fell to his knees. The men standing in the middle watched to see if Broc would do anything. He did nothing. So neither did they.

"Get up!", I snapped at him as I passed him.

His name was Ruairi, I knew that by now. He had a way of looking at everything as if he'd already been through it all. Right now, he looked as if he'd had enough.

"My legs...", he gasped.

"Your legs are there," I snarled. "Your will isn't. Lift that damned body!"

I grabbed his arm and yanked him up a bit, as much as I could without falling flat on my face. Aidan came from the other side, nudged him with his shoulder, and somehow he stumbled back into a run, half pulled, half pushed.

"If one of you stops, you all lose," Broc shouted. "Remember that. Battle isn't a carnival where everyone does what they want. If the man next to you falls over, that's your problem, not the king's."

After running, my legs felt like burning wood. We got a sip of water, nothing more. Then it was back to the beatings. Broc called it "form work." I called it "We beat each other until we forget how to walk normally."

We paired up. I got Aidan, Tam had to go with Euan, which clearly annoyed him. "I want someone stronger," he grumbled.

"You'll get what you deserve," said Broc.

Aidan was faster than me. Not stronger, but agile, with hands that knew where they were going, even if they didn't always get there. I took a few hits that weren't hard, but precise. It's worse to get ten small stabs than one big one. The big one numbs you for a moment, the small ones constantly remind you that you're vulnerable.

"You think too long before you punch," Aidan said, as my fist once again hung in the air where his head had been. "You want the perfect hit."

"And you?" I asked, as he punched me on the shoulder. "You hit like you're afraid of really hitting someone."

"I have," he said.

"Why?"

"Because I know what it feels like to be hit."

I laughed dryly, even though I didn't feel like laughing. "I know that too."

"Then get used to it," he said. "It won't get any better."

We switched partners. Suddenly, I was standing opposite Tam. His eye had yellowed a little again, his gaze darker. He didn't raise his fists particularly high, but his shoulders were those of a boy who had learned in the village to strike before being asked why.

"Well," he said. "Now without mud. Let's see if you're still so brave."

"Always," I said. "Sometimes even stupider."

We felt each other out, the first blows more for gauging than for landing. I felt his strength, raw, unfocused, but not to be underestimated. He leaped forward slightly, struck. I dodged. Not elegantly, but enough to prevent his bony fist from visiting my mouth again.

"No village here, Tam," I said. "No blacksmith to help you lie."

"For that, you get men who won't carry you home in the end," he growled. "Here, you're nothing special."

"Good," I said. "Then I can finally stop pretending to be me."

He punched. I blocked as best I could. He still landed. Ribs, shoulder, forearm. Nothing to knock me down, but enough to remind my body that it was made of vulnerable flesh. I waited until his punches became more erratic. Anger has a rhythm, and if you know it, you know when the opening will come.

When she arrived, I was ready. I placed a hook in his stomach, not hard enough to break it, but hard enough to take his breath away for a moment. His eyes widened, he gasped, and I could have placed another one, right when he was at his weakest. I didn't.

"Why are you stopping?" he gasped.

"Because I might need you tomorrow," I said. "As a shield."

He stared at me, for a moment more surprised than angry. Then he grinned crookedly. "You're sick," he said.

"You too," I said. "Otherwise you wouldn't be here."

Broc watched us, arms folded. "That," he said loudly enough for the others to hear, "that's almost like thinking. More of that, less of that stupid flailing around."

"Do you mean him or me?" Tam asked.

"Both of you," said Broc. "Two idiots who didn't immediately come to blows. A miracle."

The sergeant stood in a corner of the square, observing everything with an impassive expression. He didn't interfere as long as it was just a matter of scrapes and bruises. He was the man for the moments when it mattered whether we would become cannon fodder or tools.

"Why are you teaching us all this?" Ruairi asked during one of the short breaks, holding her nose, which was bleeding slightly. "If we're going to die anyway."

The sergeant looked at him as if considering whether a reply was worthwhile. "Because you might not all die," he said. "And those who don't should at least know how to strike when they get home."

"Do you think we'll ever see our houses again?" asked Euan.

"Not all of them," said the sergeant. "Maybe half. Maybe less if you keep hitting them like this."

As the day wore on, light crept over the piles of bodies, weapons, and rags. The camp was alive, it stank, it screamed. It was a place where you forgot yourself and yet simultaneously became acutely aware of yourself. We learned swear words that weren't even used in the village. Broc said that if you swear, it should hit you like a ton of bricks. No stammering, no hesitant half-swearing. Full force, or you might as well keep your mouth shut.

"Language is a weapon," he said. "Misused, it hurts you."

By evening, my ankles were raw, my fingers swollen, my lips scraped. I felt as if I'd been put through a meat grinder and then painstakingly pieced back together. Despite this, there was this small, ugly feeling inside that felt good: I was still alive. And I wasn't the first to fall.

After the meal—a thin gruel whose taste lay somewhere between "nothing" and "suffered"—we sat in front of the tent and watched the elders. Some played dice, some sharpened blades, others just stared into the fire, as if hoping to see a different future within it. Stories were told, half serious, half lies. Names of battles floated through the air, of places I couldn't have found on any map, even if I had known what a map looked like.

A man with a battered face sat down near us. He wasn't one of the very old ones, maybe thirty, but his eyes bore the age of a man who had woken up too often and realized that life goes on.

"You're the new number sixes, right?" he asked.

"That's what they call us," I said.

"I used to be on the threes," he said. "We were the ones who got to skate right at the front. Like heroes, they said. Do you know what that means?"

"That you fall first," Aidan said.

The man gave a dry laugh. "You're a quick learner, kid," he said. "Half the squad is lying dead somewhere in the ground. The rest are limping around, pretending they're still all right."

He looked at me. "You're wearing a belt that wasn't made here," he said. "Where did it come from?"

"From home," I said. "From someone who used to be here and isn't here now."

"Has he fallen?" the man asked.

"I don't know," I said. "Maybe. Maybe not."

He nodded slowly. "Sometimes that's worse than knowing for sure," he said. "A dead man is closed off. A missing one stays in your head, like a bad song."

I thought of my father, of the dream, of the vague hope of standing face to face with him in the mud. I didn't know whether I wanted to hit him or hug him, or both. Perhaps the moment would decide.

"What's your name?" the man asked.

“William Wallace,” I said.

He said nothing, but his gaze became more focused for a moment. “Wallace,” he muttered. “Those damned Wallaces. They attract trouble like flies to a dung heap.”

“Do you know any?” I asked.

“One,” he said after a while. “He stood next to me in a battle. Laughed while others were vomiting. Hit as if every blow was an excuse for not being home.”

“So?” I asked. “Is he still alive?”

The man looked into the fire. The flames reflected in his eyes, and for a moment I thought he was going to say, “Yes, he’s almost there, behind the next tent.” Instead, he said, “He once said to me, ‘If I ever end up lying in the dirt, I hope at least someone will yell my name before they piss on my stomach.’” He laughed briefly. “No one yelled his name. It was too loud.”

Something in my stomach tightened. “Was he...?” I began.

“You want to know if he was your father,” he said. “You want me to say yes. Or no. The main thing is an answer.”

I nodded, even though he hadn’t really asked a question.

“I don’t know,” he said. “He was mostly silent and explained little. He just hit and swore. He was like you. Only bigger. And dumber.”

The others laughed, and so did I, although the lump in my throat wouldn’t go away.

“What I’m trying to say,” the man continued, “is: Don’t drive yourself crazy with the thought that you’re walking in his shadow. Most of the shadows here already belong to the dead.”

Later, in the tent, when the noise of the camp had faded into a dull background hum, I lay there with my eyes open. My muscles still trembled from the day’s beatings, but my mind was alert. I thought about the school we were going through: blows, curses, blood, more curses. A school without books, where the homework was simply getting up again the next morning.

I turned the piece of wood between my fingers, feeling every crevice that filled with my sweat. I thought of my mother, the cabin, the rain, Fergus and his half-truths. And I thought of the man everyone only spoke of in fragments, but whom I already carried inside me like an unspoken insult.

Here, in this school of fists and curses, I didn’t just learn how to punch. I learned I wasn’t the only one walking around with a hole in my heart. Some filled it with stories, others with hate, still others with God. I hadn’t yet decided what I would fill mine with. But I knew one thing: if I fell, I didn’t want them to just say, “There lies the bastard.” I wanted at least one person to remember I had a name before the clay soil swallowed it up.

On the third day, I knew that hell wasn’t made of fire. Fire at least warms you sometimes. Hell was here: a gray sky, wet ground, a sergeant with eyes like two blunt knives, and a hulking

man named Broc who used his laughter like a weapon. When he laughed, you knew something was about to happen that you'd have a hard time explaining to your body later.

The morning was colder than the previous ones. The wind had shifted and was now coming from somewhere with even less to offer. It crept under shirts, between ribs, into the gaps between teeth. We stood again in the line that was never straight, but straight enough to avoid being shouted at, only growled at.

"Today," said the sergeant, "we are ending the children's theatre."

He stood before us, his coat open, as if he didn't care what the wind was doing to him. His face had turned grayer, or perhaps it had always been that way and I just hadn't noticed.

"The school of fists is nice," he said. "It tires you out, it makes you think you've learned something. But fists are only the beginning. You don't die from fists. You die from blades."

He nodded to Broc. Broc called over a few men who were hauling a crate. When they set it down in front of us and opened it, the air smelled of metal and old promises. Inside lay swords. Not those shiny, clean things bards sing about, but duller, worn blades that had seen things one can't put into songs.

"This," said the sergeant, "is your new language. Anyone who doesn't learn it fluently will die with a stutter."

He reached inside, pulled out a blade that had a small notch at the tip. "This," he said, pointing to the notch, "was once stuck in the neck of someone important. Important to someone I couldn't stand. That's why I kept it."

We lined up like children fetching bread. Everyone got a sword. Some were too long, others too heavy, a few so poorly balanced that you felt ridiculous just holding them. Mine was mediocre, like me. No special hilt, no decorations. Just steel that had seen enough blood to know it always looks the same.

I held it in my hand and felt its weight. It was different from the knife at home, different from fists. It was as if you suddenly thought a thought bigger than your own head. A sword can be anything: protection, threat, excuse, curse. It depends on who wields it and how much they believe in themselves.

"Before you try anything stupid," said Broc, "here's the first rule: You don't seriously behead anyone today. If you feel the urge, wait for the enemy. We haven't got him in line yet. Until then: wood. Flesh stays alive."

He pointed to a row of roughly hewn posts at the edge of the square. Rough circles were painted on them, some higher, some lower. "These are your best friends for the next few hours," he said. "They stay still. Later, when you get used to moving targets, you'll miss them."

We stepped forward one after the other, each to a post. I stood with my legs wide apart, just as Broc had taught us to do when fighting with our fists. The blade was heavy in my hand, the handle rubbing against the calluses that had only been growing for three days but felt as if they had been there for years.

"Don't lift that thing up like you're waving a flag," Broc growled behind me. "You're not a standard-bearer. You're a butcher."

I exhaled, drew back my arm, and struck. The steel hit the wood. It vibrated through my arm and up to my shoulder. The blow was too shallow, too hesitant. The notch in the post was small, laughable.

"My grandmother hits harder," said Broc. "And she's dead."

"Maybe she's practiced more," I said before I could stop myself.

A murmur rippled through the row. Broc stepped beside me and looked at me. Then he laughed, briefly, maliciously. "You really are one of those people who can't shut up," he said. "Good. The world needs people who talk too much. They make it easier for the others to die in the noise."

He reached for my arm, correcting my angle, stance, grip. "You're not just striking from the wrist," he said. "You're striking from your back, from your shoulders, from everything you are. Every strike is: 'I want you to disappear.' If you don't want someone to disappear, don't strike them with a sword. Strike them with words. Or not at all."

I tried again. This time the blade landed deeper. The wood splintered slightly, a sharp sound hanging in the air. It wasn't a good strike, but it was honest. I felt my body understand what the steel wanted from it.

All around us, the sounds were similar: metal on wood, sometimes pitiful, sometimes surprisingly harsh. Curses, instructions, Broc's barking, and the sergeant's shorter, harsher sentences. We learned how to handle the blade without mutilating ourselves. How to work not just with our arms, but with our legs, our whole body. How to strike not blindly, but where it counts.

"When you're facing a man," the sergeant said as he walked past us, "don't strike where his armor is thickest. He paid you to expend your energy there. Strike where the blacksmith was drunk when he measured him. Joints. Neck. Inner thighs. Under the ribs. Where the breath resides, and the fear."

I listened, absorbing every word. Not because I wanted to see blood. Because I knew that what he said would one day stand between me and the ground.

After a while, my hands hurt less, but my shoulders hurt more. Sweat mingled with the remaining cold, an unpleasant mixture that reminded my body it was neither inside nor outside. I noticed my movements becoming more fluid. The blade was still heavy, but it was slowly becoming part of my arm.

"You look like you're talking to an old friend," Aidan murmured beside me as we briefly drank water, leaving our swords stuck in the ground like crooked crosses.

"Maybe he is," I said. "Or he will be."

"Friend is a strange word for something that can kill you," he said.

"Friends can do that too," I said.

At midday, we had something they called "stew." It was more of a collection of things that no one wanted to eat individually anymore. But it was warm, and it settled over the hunger like a thin blanket. We sat in a circle, bowls in hand, swords beside us in the dirt. It looked like we were a group of boys who had gathered to play, only everyone knew that this game would leave real holes in our skin.

"What do you think?" asked Aidan, spooning the stuff into his mouth as if trying to drown the cold with it.

"I think they're training us like cattle for slaughter," I said. "Only with more swearing."

"Do you think we will see the king?" asked Ruairi, the thin boy whose courage oscillated somewhere between fear and curiosity.

"If you see him, you're too close," said Tam. "Then you're already somewhere you shouldn't be."

"I want to see him," Ruairi said. "If I'm going to die for someone, I want to know what his face looks like."

"Maybe he looks like us," Euan murmured. "Only cleaner."

"Maybe he's not even looking," I said. "Maybe he's only hearing numbers."

The afternoon brought a new level of schooling. Broc called us all together and had us stand in a large circle, swords in hand. The sergeant stood in the middle, as if he were the butt of a bad joke.

"Now comes the part," he said, "where you learn that fists and swords belong together. Battle isn't a pretty picture where everyone stays obediently in their place. It's a mess of dirt, blood, bodies, steel, and screams. Sometimes there's no room for the blade. Sometimes someone is so close you can smell them. Then you need your fists again."

He nodded to Broc. Broc snapped his fingers, and a few men brought out shield boards. Not those big, beautiful things with coats of arms you hear about in stories. They were rough wooden boards with handles, scratched, splintered, stained.

"Everyone takes one," said Broc. "Anyone who doesn't get one takes their own skull. It's hard enough too."

We took the shields, tried them out, sometimes holding them too high, sometimes too low, until Broc lost patience and kicked us in the right direction. It was a strange feeling to have something between you and the world that could actually stop you. I'd walked through rain my whole life without a roof, and now suddenly I was holding one in my hand.

"Sword in one, shield in the other," said the sergeant. "Forget your hands. You are now two edges. One arm blocks, the other writes a message in flesh."

He positioned two men facing each other. One struck, the other held up a shield. The blow bounced off, but the shield-man still stumbled back.

"Don't just hold," the sergeant growled. "Push. You don't want anything in front of you getting too close. Not in bed, not in battle."

We practiced. Strike, block, step. Step back, shield forward, blade out. It was a dance, but one where every beat could cost you a bone. Again and again, steel clashed against wood, the vibration radiating through my arm and up to my chest. I learned not to flinch at every blow, but to accept it, to let it flow through my body instead of resisting it.

"You're still overthinking it," the sergeant said, watching me. "You're trying to plan every move. This isn't a game of chess, kid. This is dice with knives."

"And what if I lose?" I asked.

"Then you only lose once," he said. "Most people lose several times before they die. Piece by piece."

It grew later, and we slowed down, but they didn't stop. Every time I thought my arm couldn't hold the sword any longer, I heard Broc's voice: "Three more. Then three more. And then we'll see." Three became six, six became nine. Numbers were as much lies here as words.

When the sun finally sank and the sky changed color, as if ashamed of having watched us for so long, we stopped. I felt every muscle, every tendon, every bone. My hands were covered in blisters, some already burst. Blood mingled with dirt, and the mixture formed a new skin, making us what we were destined to become: half-baked soldiers with more rage than sense.

Broc stepped in front of us, hands on his hips. "Good," he said, and this was perhaps the first time he'd ever said that word to us. "You've done less shit today than yesterday. That's all you can hope for. A little less shit every day."

The sergeant looked at us, a row of exhausted faces that were still surprisingly alert. "School of fists and curses," he said. "You might have thought that was some drunkard's saying. But this is your life as long as you breathe. You're learning to punch and curse because it's the only thing you'll have left when everything else fails. No god, no king, no mother will help you when the man in front of you raises his sword. Then it's your legs, your arms, your hatred, and maybe a few words you manage to slur through your teeth before you stab."

He paused, and in the silence one could hear a horse snorting somewhere, the rustling of a tent, the crackling of a fire.

"If you're lucky," he added, "this school will take you home. If you're unlucky, at least you won't be surprised when you fall."

That night, when the camp smelled of old meat, cold smoke, and fresh despair, I lay awake again. My fingers clenched around the small piece of wood that remained of my cradle. I thought of my mother, the hut, the rain. And I thought of my father, somewhere out there in the darkness, perhaps with a sword, perhaps without, perhaps already part of the clay soil they would soon show us.

This school didn't make us heroes. It made us men who knew how deep pain could go before you broke. Fists, curses, steel, sweat, blood. That was the curriculum. And I learned as best I could. Not because I wanted to. Because I had no other choice. Because I had decided not to stay small, even if the world would have preferred me to.

A dog barked at the edge of the camp. Somewhere someone was laughing too loudly, probably drunk. Another person was crying softly, so no one would hear. I turned onto my side, felt the belt at my waist, the blade beside me in the dirt, and I knew: there was no turning back. I was now enrolled in this school, paid for with my name and the face of my mother, which I carried within me in the firelight.

When the next day came, it would bring more fists, more curses, more steel. And eventually, I knew, they would release us from that school, without a diploma, without a certificate – just with marching orders to the front. To where the wet clay soil awaited us and fathers who might never have known their sons bore their names.

I swore to myself that if I were to fall out there somewhere, I wouldn't fall quietly. I would scream my name into the dirt, teeth or no teeth. So that at least the clay soil would know who had stained it red this time.

Whisky instead of prayers

There comes a point when even the toughest men can no longer pretend to be made of iron. A point where the body still punches, kicks, and swings, but the mind begins to rebel. Just before we reached that point, they brought the whiskey.

It was one of those gray afternoons when the clouds hung low like tired eyelids. We'd been hammering on posts again, as if they'd done something to us, chased across the square again until our lungs felt like burning rags in our chests. My hands felt like split animal hides, my back was one long cramp. I no longer thought about what it was like without pain. I thought about which pain was screaming louder right now.

Then the priest came.

Every troop has one, sooner or later. A man in cloth, while all the others wear leather and steel. One who speaks God as if he'd personally whispered it to him. Ours was small, too small for this world. He had a round face that must once have been friendly, before the wind and misery had worn it down. His hair had receded far back, as if the sky had been peeling away his roof piece by piece. In his hand he carried a small cross, more worn than his shoes.

"Brothers," he began, hardly had he reached the middle of the square.

"That's where it starts," Aidan murmured beside me. "I don't know him, and yet we're brothers."

We were still standing there with swords in our hands, sweat on our brows, blood on our knuckles. Broc wouldn't let us leave. He just folded his arms, as if he wanted to see two worlds collide: the world of fighting and the world of prayer.

"Brothers," the priest repeated when no one responded. "You are far from your homes, your fields, your families. But the Lord is with you."

"That's reassuring," Tam grumbled. "Maybe he can help me wipe my ass if I fall in the dirt again."

A few people laughed. Not because it was particularly funny, but because laughter is sometimes easier than crying. The priest pretended not to hear it. That was probably part of his training.

"A difficult time lies ahead of you," he continued. "Struggles, trials, and hardships. You will see things that no one should ever see. But you must know: You are not alone. The Lord watches over you, and whoever falls in his name does not fall in vain."

"He talks about traps," Euan murmured. "Not a word about stopping. That says it all."

The priest raised the cross a little higher, as if it were a shield against our faces. "I offer Mass every evening," he said. "Whoever wants to come is welcome. Whoever doesn't come is also welcome. The Lord forces no one."

"These ones already," said Aidan.

The priest blinked. Perhaps he wasn't entirely stupid. Perhaps he had simply tried too often to speak against something that had no ears. "I know," he said softly. "I cannot protect you from the commands of men. But perhaps I can help you not to be broken by them."

"How?" Ruairi asked suddenly. "With words? With songs? With stories?"

The priest looked at him, and for a moment there was something in his eyes that I would call "honesty." "With a place," he said. "A moment where you can briefly pretend to be more than meat with a weapon. A few minutes where you are not just sons, peasants, bastards, soldiers, but simply... you."

"I don't even know myself," I said. "Why should I go to a God who knows me even less?"

He turned his gaze towards me. "What's your name?"

The question stung, even though it was stupid. "William," I said. "William Wallace."

There it was again, that little twitch in the face that I've often seen in men lately when they hear the name. It was as if a chord was being struck somewhere, one they've heard far too often.

"William," said the priest, "God knows you better than you think."

"Then he would have put me somewhere else," I said. "For example, not here."

A few nodded. The priest sighed. "I will pray over there tonight," he said, pointing to a corner of the camp where a few stones were piled into a makeshift altar. "Whoever wants to come, may. Whoever doesn't want to can stay where they are. But let me tell you one thing: if you

carry horrors within you that you can't tell anyone, sometimes it's easier to scream them out into a darkness that you think will listen."

"I prefer to talk to someone I can see," said Tam. "For example, the man who sent me here. But he's sitting comfortably at home."

"He's not listening to you," the priest said dryly, and for a moment I almost liked him.

Once he was gone, Broc clapped his hands once. "There," he said. "You heard it. Tonight you can choose: pray or drink."

"Drinking?" Aidan repeated, and his eyes briefly brightened.

"Whisky," said Broc. "A barrel. Thin, but wet. The man up there might give you some comfort. The one in the barrel at least gives you the feeling that you're warm before you throw up."

"Which is better?" asked Ruairi.

"It depends on what you want to believe in," said Broc. "In heaven or in oblivion."

The sergeant approached, his hands clasped behind his back. "You won't get so much that you won't remember anything tomorrow," he said. "Just enough to realize what you're missing."

"What do we miss?" asked Euan.

"Everything," said the sergeant. "And everyone."

The rest of the day was a grind without any new tricks. Swords, shields, fists, curses. Eventually, the movements blurred. It was as if my body had taken over while my mind remained stationary. I no longer thought about my mother, my father, the hut, or the village. I thought about where I had to place my next step so I wouldn't end up in the dirt. You can get used to anything when you have no choice.

As the sun hid behind the clouds, leaving only a dim light from above, the fire in the camp burned higher than usual. Someone had dragged the barrel over. It stood there like a promise destined to end badly. Men crowded around it, not in panic, but rather with that quiet greed people get when they know there isn't enough for everyone. Wooden cups were passed from hand to hand. The smell of cheap whiskey mingled with smoke and sweat.

"Are you going to pray?" Aidan asked me as we stood at the edge.

"Where are you going?" I asked in return.

He looked first at the barrel, then at the corner where the priest was tending to his few stones. "I've talked to plenty of drunk men," he said. "Talked, shouted, vomited. They never explained anything to me. Maybe I'll try one who's sober this time."

"And you believe God is sober?" I asked.

"If he's drunk, I don't want to know who he's gotten into all this mess with," said Aidan.

Ruairi stood there for a moment, undecided, then with a curt nod he made his way toward the priest. Euan and the brothers headed straight for the barrel, as if they had a date. Tam stayed beside me. His eyes were fixed on the cups, but his body hadn't yet moved.

"You?" I asked.

"Both are lying," he said. "The whisky and the priest. But the whisky is more honest."

He said it, but didn't leave immediately. I took a deep breath. Night hadn't quite arrived yet, but it was already standing beside us, hands in pockets, a grin on its face.

"I'm going to get a cup," I said. "Not because I believe in the barrel god. Just to see if I still feel like praying afterwards."

Tam grinned crookedly. "Maybe you'll pray to the barrel afterwards," he said.

The whisky was thin, but it burned wherever it went. I raised the cup to my lips and took a quick sniff. It wasn't that rich, warm scent old men in taverns talk about when they reminisce about better times. It was something harsher, cheaper, with a hint of wood and something that, by the gods' sake, I hoped wasn't water they'd pulled from a ditch.

The first sip hit me like a punch to the throat. I coughed, my eyes watered, my lungs complained as if I'd filled them with fire. The second went down easier. With the third, I felt a thin veil settle between me and the world. Not enough to blur it completely. Just enough to soften the edges a little.

"Well then," said Tam, after he too had drunk. "Now you're officially a soldier."

"Why?" I asked. "Because I'm putting the same filth inside me as everyone else?"

"Because you started doing what they do when they realize they've lost their footing," he said. "Drinking, swearing, laughing. In that order."

A loose group had gathered around the edge of the fire. Men sat in a circle, some with cups, others just with their stories. One began a song, something about a woman and a ship and a harbor that probably had never existed. A few joined in, others rolled their eyes. I listened, and for a moment the camp was no longer a place of preparation, but a group of men who didn't know what to do with themselves.

I glanced across to the other side, where the priest stood. Only a few had gone to him. They were kneeling, heads bowed, while he murmured words I couldn't hear. His figure was small in the darkness, but persistent, like a spark that refuses to go out even though everything is wet.

"Do you think he's right?" Aidan asked suddenly, appearing next to me with an empty cup. His eyes were glazed over, but not completely blank.

"With what?" I asked.

"So that someone listens," he said.

I thought about it. The whisky didn't make my thoughts any wiser, but it did make them more honest. "Maybe someone's listening," I said. "But I don't think he'll jump in if we're sinking in the mud. He's watched us too often for that."

Aidan nodded. "Then I'd rather drink with those who go down with me," he said. "Still, it's nice to know that someone over there is trying to negotiate with God. Maybe something will come of it, and we won't even know about it."

A man I didn't know sat down next to us, the smell of whiskey on his breath, but his gaze surprisingly clear. "What are you talking about?" he asked.

"God," said Tam. "Whisky. All the usual crap."

The man laughed softly. "I once tried praying before a battle," he said. "Told God that if he saved me, I'd stop drinking and swearing."

"And?" I asked.

"It didn't work," he said. "I'm still alive."

All three of us laughed. It was a laugh that hung somewhere between mockery and despair. The man took the cup from our hands, drank the rest, and pushed it back.

"Remember one thing," he said. "Prayers are like bets. Whiskey is like an advance. In war, you usually lose both."

Later, when the barrel was nothing but an empty shadow and the voices had grown rougher, the laughter grew louder. One man told a story about a girl who was supposedly still waiting for him. Another swore that after all that crap, he would go north, steal his own piece of land, and chase away anyone who tried to stop him. Yet another started to cry, oblivious to the fact that the tears only shifted his filth, they didn't wash it away.

I sat there, the cup eventually empty in my hand, the wooden piece in my pocket, the taste of cheap whiskey in my mouth. I wasn't drunk. Not really. Just a little numb around the edges. The pain in my hands had receded somewhat, and my hunger had settled on the floor, pretending to be asleep.

I thought of my mother. How she was probably adding fuel to the fire, fetching water, cursing because the rain was making her life more difficult. I thought of the hut, the smell of smoke and wet wool. I thought of the priest over there, probably speaking words for all of us, while we tried to cope with our own.

Whisky instead of prayers. I didn't yet know which was better. I only knew which worked faster.

When I finally crawled into the tent, past bodies that snored, muttered, and twitched, I lay down without taking off my boots. My head throbbed slightly, my stomach wasn't satisfied, but not rebellious either. I closed my eyes and hoped for a dream without mud.

I got one in which it was raining.

The next morning, God felt further away than ever, and the whisky closer than I would have liked. I woke with a head that felt like someone had been living in it all night, moving furniture and starting a fire. My mouth was dry, my tongue furry, my stomach upset. My body protested, but not enough to allow me to stay in bed.

Aidan lay on his back, staring at the tent ceiling as if he had discovered the solution to a problem no one had asked. "So that's it?" he murmured. "Is that what sin feels like?"

"That's what cheap whiskey feels like," I said. "Sin smells better."

Tam lay half in the doorway, one leg dangling in the dirt, as if he'd tried to escape in his sleep and failed. He wasn't snoring, he was grunting. It sounded like someone was slowly dragging a sack of potatoes across the floor. I lightly kicked the sole of his foot.

"Get up," I said. "Before Broc comes and tells us we're incapable even in our sleep."

Tam blinked, pushed himself up, and held his head. "What ran me over?" he asked.

"A barrel of bad decisions," Aidan said.

Outside, the sounds of the new day were already audible: metal, voices, footsteps. Someone was arguing over a spoon. Someone was laughing too loudly, someone else was cursing because their pants had ripped. It was the same old story as yesterday, just with different undertones.

We crawled out, one after the other, and stood in the cold light. The air was harsh, but at least it was clear. The camp looked as if someone had turned their insides out: tents like slashed stomachs, smoke like steaming breath, men like too many thoughts crammed into too small a space.

Broc was already there, of course. He looked like always, as if he lived in a world where morning is never different from evening: just another pile of dirt with a bit of sky above it. His arms were folded, his eyes alert, his mouth crooked.

"Well, you faithful," he grumbled. "Have you all prayed to the barrel?"

"Some went to see the priest," Aidan said.

"At least they drank honestly," Broc remarked. "On bread and water."

He let his gaze sweep over us. "Good," he said finally. "You look awful. That means the whiskey has worked. Maybe you're now ready to get used to something worse than a hangover and cold air."

"Which is worse?" murmured Ruairi, the thin boy.

"Conscience," said Broc. "But you don't have that yet. Don't worry, it will come soon enough."

We lined up. The ranks were more crooked than usual, the eyes smaller, the movements slower. The sergeant joined us, as always a little to the side, as if he didn't want to be infected by our weariness. He didn't smell of whiskey. He smelled of cold determination.

"You drank yesterday," he said bluntly. "Some of you prayed. Most of you did both badly. Understand this: This was not a gift. This was a test."

"Testing for what?" asked Euan hoarsely.

"Can you fight with a mind that holds more than bravery?" the sergeant said. "Guilt. Hunger. Doubt. Alcohol. All of that will be with you out there. If half a cup of whiskey throws you off balance, a battle will tear you apart."

"At least I can see the battle," Tam murmured.

"You won't see them if you're standing in the middle of it," said the sergeant. "Then you'll only see individual pieces. An arm here, a leg there, a face you know, on a body you don't recognize."

He didn't let us stand still for long. Standing still was a luxury. We started walking again, this time not in circles, but in diagonal lines through the camp, between tents, over ditches, past horses that looked at us as if they knew better. The whiskey in my blood swayed along with us, making the world a little softer and at the same time more dangerous. Every step was a brief deal with the ground: I'll step on you, you won't let me fall right away.

The third time I crossed the ditch, I almost slipped. My foot slid, my knees buckled, my arms flailed like a drowning person. A hand grabbed my collar and pulled me back up. It was Broc. He held me for a moment, as if testing my weight, then he let go.

"If you're going to fall flat on your face," he said, "then at least do it somewhere worthwhile. Not in the shit ditch behind the camp."

"I'm just practicing," I gasped.

"It starts with practice," he said. "It ends with dying."

The run was pure torture. My head was pounding, my stomach was churning, my lungs were burning as if someone had shoved hot coals into them. But somewhere in the midst of this misery, I felt the whiskey slowly leaving my bones, leaving something else in its wake: a dull, viscous determination. If I could make it through this, maybe I could make it through the rest. Maybe.

After the run, there was no mercy. Broc lined us up, swords in hand, shields raised. "Today you'll learn how to fight when your head isn't clear," he said. "It's not just after whiskey. Sometimes it's after a bad dream, a bad letter, a bad look. The world doesn't ask if you're ready before it tears you to bits."

We practiced formations. A word that sounded strange in our mouths, as if a gentleman had lost his way. "Line up!" Broc roared. "Shield up! Sword out! Step forward! Another step forward! Halt!"

He pushed us, shoved us, adjusted us as if we were furniture he wanted to rearrange. The sergeant watched, nodding occasionally, sometimes shaking his head. We pressed shoulder to shoulder, shield to shield. I felt Tam's arm against mine, Aidan's shoulder blade against my back, Ruairi's breathing on my neck. It was an odd closeness. Men who would have been fighting in the village were standing here so close together, as if they'd woken up in a bed that was too small.

"This is your second skin," the sergeant said. "Not the leather kind, not the cloth kind. This." He pointed to the row of our shields, to our folded shoulders. "If you fall, you'll take the ones next to you down with you. If you stand, you'll help keep them steady."

"And what if I can't stand the person next to me?" Tam asked.

"Then hope he likes you," said the sergeant. "Otherwise you'll find out how hard clay soil can be."

We advanced. One step, shield, sword. Another step, shield, sword. The movements were rough, uncoordinated. One stepped too far, pushed into the line, another lagged behind, tearing a hole in the formation. Broc cursed, the sergeant growled, we started again.

"You are no heroes," the sergeant said as we marched through the same formation for the twentieth time. "You are a wall. An ugly, stinking wall that moves slowly. If any of you thinks you have to rush to the front to claim glory, you'll just die at the front. And you with you."

I tried to feel what it was like not to be me, but to be part of something bigger. Not William with his anger and the hole in his heart, but just a piece of meat in a line. It was difficult. Part of me wanted to go forward, always had. The part that was fed up with others talking about it. The other part wanted to go back, back to the hut, to the rain, to my mother. I stood in between, trying to hold up the shield.

During one of the short breaks, I sat with my back against my shield and closed my eyes for a moment. The sounds of the camp became muffled, as if someone had placed a cloth over them. I thought about the evening's mass. I hadn't gone. Ruairi had been. He was sitting next to me now, his hands wrapped around his knees.

"So?" I asked. "Was it nice with the Lord?"

He shrugged. "He talked a lot," he said. "About redemption. About guilt. About the afterlife."

"And?" I asked.

"I listened to him," said Ruairi. "And at some point realized that I wasn't talking to him at all, but to my father."

"Is he dead?" I asked.

"No," he said. "He sent me here."

I remained silent. Sometimes silence was the most honest answer.

“The priest says God forgives everything,” Ruairi murmured. “I asked if he also forgives if you don’t come back. If he explains to the families that it was the right thing to do. He didn’t answer directly.”

“Because he doesn’t know,” I said. “He’s just a man in the dirt, with a little more fabric around his neck.”

Ruairi nodded. “Still, it was good to talk to someone who doesn’t talk about beatings and dying all the time.”

“He’s talking about the same thing,” I said. “Just in different words.”

We fell silent again. A man knelt before us, gasping and vomiting between two tent poles. Another man held his back. It wasn’t a pretty sight, but more honest than any sermon.

In the afternoon, the tone changed. The sergeant had us all fall in, this time all the squads. A long, crooked line of men, boys, half-men, old boys. The camp fell silent for a moment. Even the crows fell silent.

“You have learned fists,” said the sergeant. “You have learned curses. You have handled steel. Today you will learn what all of that feels like when you are facing someone who really wants to hurt you.”

He made a gesture, and other men came over from a corner of the camp. They wore similar armor to our instructors, but their faces were different. Harder. More reserved. Some had scars, others simply had the way they walked, the way you knew: they’d already marched off more than once and hadn’t brought back everyone who went with them.

“Veterans,” Aidan murmured.

“What does that mean?” asked Ruairi.

“That they’re still here,” said Tam.

The men stood facing us, spaced apart. Each of us now had a “teacher” who wasn’t Broc. My counterpart was a man with a dark beard and eyes so tired they had long since stopped widening. In his right hand he held a sword so worn that the hilt was almost smooth.

“I am Seoras,” he said, without raising his voice. “I have seen more people die than I have fingers. This is not boasting. This is an apology.”

“What for?” I asked.

“For hurting you right now,” he said.

He attacked without warning. Not a slow, demonstrative strike, but a swift, precise blow against my shield. The force shot through my arm, all the way to my spine. I stumbled backward, one foot slipping in the dirt, barely managing to regain my balance.

“Too high,” he said. “Your shield was too high. Your stomach is open. You’re letting someone in who wants more than your laughter.”

He attacked again. I blocked better, this time more tightly, the wood howling. I did what we'd been taught: shield against him, sword slightly back, ready. But my arms were slower than his, my head full of questions.

"You're thinking about something else," he said. "What?"

"Too many things," I said.

"Then do fewer of them," he said. "In battle, you only have room for two: the one in front of you and the one behind you. Anything else will kill you."

He pushed me, step by step. Not with all his might, I realized, but always enough to keep me on the edge. My arms burned, my legs trembled, my back screamed. Twice he came so close I could smell his breath. He didn't stink. He was just warm. A living man who had decided to stay alive, no matter how much he had to destroy to do so.

"Why are you still here?" I gasped between two blows.

"Because I was always just one step behind the person who was hit," he said. "And because I've learned to hate more than to hope."

"What do you hate?" I asked, raising my shield, blocking, the blow vibrating through me.

"Those who sent us here," he said. "And myself, because I'm still participating."

There was something so raw in his voice that for a moment I forgot to move my sword. He could have hit me there, maybe even cleanly. He didn't. Instead, he struck my shield, not hard, just enough to set me moving again.

"You drink?" he asked, after we had pretended for a few minutes that I was giving him a run for his money.

"Yesterday," I said.

"Pray?" he asked.

"No," I said. "Not yet."

"Good," he said. "Whisky tells you the truth faster. God takes his time."

Later, as the day drew to a close and the sky darkened, we sat around the fire as we had the evening before. The barrel was less full, the priest less loud, the men more tired. A few had begun talking to the dice as if they were living beings. Others looked at their swords as if afraid of losing them in the dark.

I held back. Yesterday's whiskey was still in my blood, somewhere deep in my bones. I didn't want to bury my few clear thoughts under a veil again. Instead, I sat there, my hands around a glass of water, listening to men trying to explain themselves.

"You know what I've noticed?" Aidan said beside me, after he'd finished half of his whiskey. "That I talk to strange men here more than I ever did to my own father."

"Perhaps he wasn't very talkative," I said.

"Maybe I wasn't the son he wanted," he murmured.

Tam poked at the fire with a stick. Sparks flew, rose, and died away. "I was thinking this while running today," he said.

"That's dangerous," I said.

"I thought," he continued, without paying attention to me, "that it might be better to die here than to grow old in the village and watch the others slowly forget you."

"They'll forget you faster if you die here," said Euan. "At least down there they have a grave."

"Graves are for people with money," said Tam. "For everyone else, there's soil. And a few bad memories, until they too weather away."

The priest was just beginning his mass, his voice murmuring something about grace, light, eternal rest. I wasn't really listening. Seoras, the veteran, sat down opposite me, a cup in his hand, but not the one from the tap. He had his own bottle. It smelled stronger.

"Whiskey instead of prayers," he said. "Do you see how they decide?"

I glanced at the fire, then at the few figures in the corner by the priest. "Some take both," I said.

"They will be the most disappointed," he said. "They hope twice and only get their ass kicked once."

"What do you believe in?" I asked.

He thought for a moment, looked into the flames as if they had to give him the answer. "I think the earth is never satisfied," he said. "That men invent all sorts of things to avoid admitting that they're really just afraid. And that in the end, all that's left of each of us are a few words that others use to make their own stories bigger."

"Beautiful view," I said.

"Honest," he said. "And you? What do you believe in, William Wallace?"

I turned the cup in my hands; it didn't smell of whiskey. I thought of my mother, the rain, the belt, the knife, the small piece of wood in my pocket. I thought of my father, who might be standing somewhere, staring up at a sky that looked just like ours.

"I think," I said slowly, "that I would rather die with a full mouth than with empty hands."

"What does that mean?" he asked.

"I don't want to die quietly," I said. "When I go, I want them to hear my name on their lips. Whether they curse it or whisper it, I don't care. The main thing is that it sticks in their throats for a moment."

Seoras looked at me, for a long time, without blinking. Then he raised his cup. "You can drink whisky to this," he said. "Or pray to it. It all comes down to the same thing in the end."

I took a small sip from his cup. It burned more than the beer from the barrel, but it tasted more authentic too. Like a punch that lands. Like a word that can't be taken back.

That night I didn't dream of rain. I dreamt of a battlefield that smelled of whiskey and metal and something vaguely reminiscent of incense. Men fell, cursed, prayed, laughed, died. And somewhere in between, I stood with a sword in one hand and a cup in the other, unable to decide whom to grab first.

When I woke up, the sky was still dark. Somewhere in the camp a dog barked, a horse neighed softly, a man groaned in his sleep. I reached for my bag, felt the small piece of wood, and I knew: as long as I could still hold this in my hand, I wasn't just part of the ground.

Whisky or prayers – it didn't matter. In the end, there was only the next day, the next order, the next blow. And somewhere, far behind the camp, a Scotland that had no clear idea how much its freedom would cost.

The day we ran out of whisky was the day they told us we'd be leaving soon. That was fitting. Whenever something is running low, some new kind of trouble always crops up to keep you busy.

The sky hung low again, but it wasn't raining. That was worse than if it had simply soaked us. The air was thick with the promise that it would soon happen again. The tents stood crooked, as if they too had a hangover. Men paced back and forth, doing things that were meant to look important. Ropes were tightened, blades sharpened, horses groomed, even though the next mud bath was already waiting for them.

I stood with Aidan, Tam, and a few of the others by a half-fallen fence post, pulling my boots tighter. They were old, thin, in places more patchwork than leather. If you stared at them long enough, you could see the spots where they'd already given way. Just like the men's boots here.

"They said tomorrow or the day after," Ruairi murmured. "What does that mean?"

"That they have no idea," said Tam. "Or that they do know and aren't telling us."

"Perhaps they are waiting for an order from higher up," Aidan said.

"Further up," I said. "Where the ground is dry, you mean."

We were silent for a moment. In the distance, we could hear a blacksmith hammering. The sound was steady, soothing, almost as if there were a rhythm somewhere that made sense. Out here, everything was just beat without melody.

The sergeant called for us. His voice was like a hook that ran through the day. "Six! Come here! Everyone!"

We left. You learn quickly to respond to shouts when the alternative is fists or worse. Squad Six lined up, hunched over, tired, breathing heavily. The sergeant stood in front of us, his hands clasped behind his back, looking as if he'd already lost before we even started.

"You've done what could be made of you without being killed outright," he said. "Fists, curses, steel, shield. Some of you can now land a punch without getting hit yourself. Applause."

Nobody clapped, nobody grinned. It wasn't a day for humor, not even bad humor.

"In a few days, maybe tomorrow, maybe in three, we'll march," he continued. "Until then, you'll continue learning how not to die immediately. But today..."

He paused briefly. Broc stepped beside him, a sort of crooked grin on his face. He already knew what was coming.

"...today you have a different duty," said the sergeant. "Today you will write home."

It was like a punch to the gut. Not so much the words themselves, but the underlying message. Writing home. As if this were all just a day trip, a chance to tell those back home how beautiful the scenery was.

"I have nothing to write," Tam murmured. "My father knows where I am. He sent me himself."

"I can't write," said Ruairi.

"Me neither," said Euan. "My hand can only hit and hold."

The sergeant raised his hand slightly. "You write what you can," he said. "Those who can't write, find someone who can. I want each of you to have a name, a place, anything on a piece of parchment. If you fall, at least someone should know where the filth we're throwing you into comes from."

"Romantic," said Aidan.

"Practical," said the sergeant. "The dead forget themselves quickly. The living need paper to remember them."

They handed us small, dirty pieces of parchment. None of those large sheets on which priests scribble their sermons. Small, narrow strips that looked as if they themselves were already half-rotted. Along with them were a few feathers that had once held proud wings, and ink, thick, viscous, almost black like dried blood.

We sat down somewhere that was reasonably dry. I squatted on an overturned bucket, the parchment on my knees, the quill in my hand. Aidan sat down next to me, Ruairi opposite. Tam stood at first, then sat down after all.

"And now?" he asked.

"Now you're getting poetic," Aidan said.

"I can barely scribble my own name," grunted Tam. "Poetic writing will be difficult."

I looked at the blank parchment. It stared back, a small, white hole amidst all the filth. Writing home. What was that, anyway? A place? A hut? A smell? A person?

"You can write," Ruairi told me. "I saw you making the marks when the sergeant showed us the numbers."

"A little," I said. "Big enough that the priest once snapped at me because I marked the wrong line in the book."

"Write for me," he said.

"For whom?" I asked.

He stared at his hands. "For my mother," he said. "She doesn't know I'm scared."

I nodded. He wasn't the only one. I placed the pen against the page, hesitated. My hand suddenly felt too large, too rough for this narrow line.

"What should I write?" I asked.

"Tell her..." he began, then fell silent. "Tell her I'm brave."

"Is that you?" asked Tam.

Ruairi looked at him, and for a moment there was something hard in his thin features. "Not yet," he said. "But if she reads it, maybe I will be by then."

I wrote: "Mother, I'm fine, I'm strong, and I'm doing what a man has to do." The letters were crooked, but they stood out. Ruairi nodded. He didn't want any more. Sometimes lies are enough, if they're the right ones.

Tam was still staring at his blank parchment. "I have no one to read this," he said. "My mother is dead. My father is a pig. My sister... if they read it to her, she'll just laugh and say I deserve it."

"Then don't write anything at all," I said.

He shook his head. "No. When I die, I want it written somewhere that I wasn't quiet."

He took the quill from my hand, holding it awkwardly, as if it were a tiny spear. Slowly, through clenched teeth, he scratched letters onto the parchment. T – A – M. Then he paused.

"That's it," he said.

"Just your name?" Aidan asked.

"That's enough," Tam replied. "They can imagine everything else."

I thought of my mother, the cabin, the rain dripping from the roof like a perpetual visitor. What should I write to her? "I'm fine" would be an insult. "I might die" would be a cruelty she wasn't prepared for. And anything in between would be just another one of those half-truths that life was full of.

I applied the quill again. The ink trembled before it touched the parchment.

"Mother," I wrote, "there is a lot of dirt here and even more men. Some are worse than the English, they say. I'm learning how to hit without falling first. I'm wearing the belt he left behind. It doesn't fit properly, but I'm working on it. When I come back, I want you to look at me and not just at the boy they call a bastard."

I paused, breathed out. Too much. Too little. I didn't know. I continued writing: "If he was with you and asked if I was alive, tell him I'm holding the sword tight. And that I don't want to remain small. If I don't come back, burn this letter so the rain can't read it."

Towards the end, the letters became more hurried, the ink flowing too thickly. It looked like something written by someone who didn't have time. Perhaps that was fitting.

"Show me," Aidan said, leaning forward. I held the parchment but let him read. His eyes scanned the lines, his lips moved slightly, but no sound came out.

"Beautiful," he said finally. "Perhaps too honest."

"I don't know how else to write it," I said.

"Better not learn it," he said. "The world already has enough people who sugarcoat everything."

Aidan wrote too. Not much. He wrote his mother's name and that of a brother he rarely spoke of. A few words about the sky, which was the same gray everywhere, about men who swear like cows moo at home. He left some blanks. Perhaps so that he could fill in the gaps himself when he read it later.

When we were finished, the sergeant gathered up the strips of parchment. He handled them carefully, almost reverently. "They're going with a messenger," he said. "If he gets through, your men will read them. If not, they'll eventually end up lying in a ditch somewhere. It's a kind of archive, too."

"Nice," Tam murmured. "Warm greetings from the front."

The rest of the day was like any other, only with the knowledge that our words were now somewhere other than in our heads. We banged on wood again, ran, held shields, cursed when Broc didn't hear us, and cursed louder when he did. The priest's men got a few disdainful looks, the men by the barrel a few envious ones. In the end, everyone looks the same: tired.

As darkness fell, I sat alone at the edge of the camp, a little way from the fire. My sword lay beside me, half in the dirt, half on a dry patch. I looked up at the sky, which was slowly

turning black, and wondered where exactly up there was the god the priest had spoken of. And whether he must be laughing or vomiting when he looked down at us.

Someone sat down next to me. It wasn't Aidan, not Tam. It was the priest. The man with the round face and tired eyes. He was still carrying his cross, as if it were the only thing he had left.

"You weren't at the fair," he said.

"I was writing," I said.

"That's also a kind of prayer," he said.

I snorted. "I wasn't talking to God. I was talking to my mother."

"Sometimes it's the same thing," he said.

We were silent for a while. The camp breathed behind us. A horse pawed the ground, a man chuckled briefly, another snapped at him. The fire crackled as if it were listening to the conversations.

"You don't believe me when I talk about him," the priest finally said. "I can see it in your eyes."

"I believe you believe," I said. "That's more than I give many people here credit for."

He smiled weakly. "That's more politeness than I'm used to."

"Why are you here?" I asked. "You can't fight. At least you don't look like you can."

"I'm not a good fighter," he corrected. "I've tried. I'm better at listening."

"Are you listening to him too?" I asked, gesturing vaguely upwards.

"Sometimes," he said. "Sometimes he's quiet. Sometimes he's so loud I can't stand him. Sometimes I'm not sure if I'm talking to him or to myself."

"Do you want to be here?" I asked.

He thought for a moment. "Wanting is a big word," he said. "I don't want you to die. I don't want any more mothers to receive letters. But I know it's happening. And when it happens, I don't want you to think you were just numbers."

"We are just numbers," I said. "On lists, in reports, in the minds of those who sent us here."

"Yes," he said. "But you are also more than that. For someone. For yourself. For the ground you'll fall on when it happens. I talk to God so I can bear it. You drink so you can bear it. In the end, we're doing the same thing: looking for a way to pack the madness into something you can endure for a day."

I looked at him. He looked ridiculous in his robe amidst all that leather and steel, but he was there. Not at home, not somewhere in a warm church. Here, in the dirt.

"If we meet the English," I said quietly, "will your God be on our side?"

He smiled sadly. "He will not stand on the side of the flags," he said. "He will stand with those who shout. No matter what color their coats are."

"Then he'll have a lot to do," I said.

"Yes," he said.

He stood up, brushed the dust off his robe, as if that had any meaning in this camp. "If you ever want to talk," he said, "and not just to your mother on paper, come. I'm not a good fighter. But I can stay silent when someone has something important to say."

He left. I stayed seated. The wind grew colder, but I was too tired to shiver. I placed my hand on the belt, feeling the leather that had belonged to a man who was out there somewhere. Or no longer. I thought of the English, whom everyone talked about, though I had never seen one. They were like a shadow at the edge of my vision. Soon they would draw nearer.

Whisky instead of prayers, I'd thought. But perhaps one needed both. The alcohol to keep one's hands steady when raising the sword. And a few words spoken into the void, so as not to completely believe that one was just another body to be swallowed by the clay soil.

In the distance, a wolf howled. Or a dog. Or a man, lost in his sleep, thinking of something he couldn't speak during the day. I lay down, the sword beside me, the piece of wood in my hand, the sky for a blanket. And I knew: the next step after this school of fists, curses, and whiskey would be the first toward those they said reeked of power.

And that would be a different stench than here. A new one. One I would get to know.

The English reek of power

The morning we marched out had no particular flavor. No thunder, no ray of light, no omen. Just the same pale gray that had accompanied us for weeks, and a wind that brushed across the camp like an old dog too tired to bite. We stood there, squad after squad, a mass of men pretending not to be nervous. Some cursed under their breath, others prayed, still others just stared straight ahead as if they were already half gone.

Broc walked past us, inspecting sword hilts, shields, boots. He looked like a butcher inspecting a whole stable of cattle, knowing full well that not all of them would make it to the door. The sergeant stood a little further back, arms folded, his expression as calm as ever, almost bored. But I had seen enough of him by now to know that behind this calm lay a storm waiting, just hoping to be unleashed.

"Saddle up!" someone yelled, even though there were hardly any horses. Most of us only had two legs, and even those wobbly. We were handed bread as hard as old wood and cheese that

smelled like a foot that hadn't seen a stream in weeks. I took a bite, chewed for a long time until the taste finally registered. Food wasn't enjoyable, just fuel.

Aidan stepped next to me, tightened his belt, and took a deep breath. "Here we go," he said.

"Where to?" asked Ruairi.

"To death if things go badly," said Tam. "To fame if things go well."

"And what is more likely?" asked Ruairi.

I looked into his eyes. "That you realize along the way that fame is nothing more than death with a prettier story."

Ruairi nodded. He was less pale now, but thinner. As if the war was already gnawing at him before it had even begun.

A horn sounded, not a celebratory one, but rather a disgruntled one. Like a mule that's been kicked. The ranks began to move. Not in an orderly fashion, more like a long worm hoping its head knows where it's crawling.

The first steps felt strange. The ground was cold, the world wide open. I had always thought my mother's hut was small, cramped, a hole. Now I realized: it had been shelter. Out here, there was only vastness and the thought that somewhere ahead of us stood an enemy none of us had ever seen.

"What do English people even look like?" asked Euan as we marched through a muddy patch.

"Like men," said Broc, who heard us. "Only too close together and too high up in their heads."

"Seriously," said Aidan. "Do they have heavy armor? Helmets? Shields?"

"All of that," Broc grumbled. "And a stench you won't forget."

"What stench?" asked Ruairi.

"Power," said Broc. "They smell of power. Not of sweat or steel. Power stinks differently. Sweeter. Rotter. Like a fruit basket where the most beautiful fruit is rotting from the inside out."

He looked at us, and for a moment there was no mockery in his face. Only a truth he couldn't sugarcoat.

"You'll recognize him when he gets under your nose," he said. "The stench will tell you: They believe they have a right to your death."

The march lasted for hours. At first, we still talked. Later, all that remained was the sound of our footsteps, the metallic clang, the gasping of our breath. The landscape became more open, more barren. Hills that looked as if they had waited too long to hear screams again. The wind grew sharper, the cold bit into our skin, which felt sticky with sweat.

Eventually the procession stopped. The sergeant – one of the few on horseback – rode to the front, spoke to some man in dark clothing, then came back.

"The vanguard saw something," he said.

"What?", Tam asked.

"Tracks," said the sergeant. "Hoofprints. Ruts in the ground. Dirt that had been plowed up as if someone had been in a hurry. English riders."

A blast of cold air swept through the row. No wind this time. Something else. A realization that suddenly sank into our bones.

"Are there many of them?" asked Euan.

"More than we want," said the sergeant. "Less than we will encounter later."

We advanced, but more slowly, more cautiously. The conversations died down; even those who were never silent had lost their words. I heard my own heart beating faster, heard the breathing of the men around me, the click of weapons ready to be used.

After a while, they appeared – not the English themselves, but their traces. Torn scraps of cloth hanging from bushes. A broken spear. A dead raven, its belly slashed open as if someone had been bored. All signs of men who not only smelled power, but exhaled it.

"What do we do?" Ruairi asked quietly.

The sergeant heard it and didn't turn around, but he replied. "We'll keep marching," he said. "We're doing what men do when they have no other choice."

"Why are we doing all this?" Ruairi continued.

"Because they told us to do it," Tam said bitterly.

"Because one of you might become the man who makes the difference," the sergeant said suddenly. "Sometimes one is enough."

I felt a gaze on me. Not sure if I was imagining it. But Seoras, the veteran who had accompanied us, was riding nearby, looking at me as if he were considering me a question whose answer he had sought but not yet found.

"What are you staring at?" I asked.

"I wonder," he said calmly, "whether your name carries you or you carry it."

"Both," I said.

"We'll see," he murmured.

We marched on until the sun began to sink. The sky turned a delicate red, as if warning us. Camp was pitched quickly, hastily. No one wanted to stand outside for long. The English

weren't there yet, but their scent was already in the air: that strange, invisible pressure that told you someone was looking down on you, even if you didn't recognize them.

We sat close together by the fire. The wind whipped our faces. Broc was unusually quiet. The sergeant spoke little, but he saw a great deal.

"They are close," was all he said.

Nobody objected.

I stared into the flames. They danced, devoured wood, and spat sparks. And suddenly I understood that no matter how many men sat beside me, I was on the path to something I would have to face alone.

The English reeked of power, they had said. But at that moment I smelled something else – my own fear.

And damn it, she didn't smell any worse.

The night smelled of cold smoke, horse sweat, and fear. Not a loud, tangible thing—more a subtle, bitter taste in the air, settling on the tongue like dust. The camp was quieter than usual. Not peacefully quiet. Expectantly quiet. Like a breath held, knowing that the next breath will burn.

I lay in the tent, but I wasn't asleep. Aidan lay beside me, tossing and turning, Tam snored softly, Ruairi stared wide-eyed into the darkness as if trying to count them. I heard every sound: the cracking of twigs outside, the rustling of fabric, the clang of a blade nervously moved by someone. Each of these sounds was a reminder that the world was testing us, like a blacksmith checking if the steel was ready for the fire.

"Can't you sleep either?" whispered Aidan.

"I am asleep," I murmured. "Just with my eyes open."

"Did your mother teach you that?" he asked.

"No," I said. "I've learned that since I've been here."

He laughed softly, but the sound was nervous. "Do you think they'll come tomorrow?"

"If not tomorrow, then soon," I said. "Enemies that stink don't keep us waiting long."

Ruairi turned his head. "Do you really think they stink?"

"Everything stinks," I said. "That's the first thing you learn when you're far from home. Men, horses, war. Power just stinks differently."

"How so?", asked Ruairi.

"Like something that thinks it's above everything else," I said. "As if the sky belonged to them."

He was silent. And I knew he was thinking of his mother, who might be missing him right now, unaware that he was under a strange sky wondering how a man who had far more than him could smell so bad.

The wind picked up. It stung the tent walls, making them tremble like thin skin over too many bones. Somewhere a dog barked, somewhere a man shouted, followed by laughter. Not a joyful laugh. More like that harsh, staccato sound men make when they'd rather cry.

"We're not ready," Aidan murmured suddenly. "Never."

"No one is ready," I said. "Not even those who pretend to be."

I thought of Broc, of the sergeant, of Seoras. Men who had seen friends fall and the ground simply accept them without a thank you. Even they had that weariness in their eyes that had nothing to do with sleep.

"I used to think war was loud," Ruairi whispered. "With drums and horns and shouting."

"He is," said Tam, who suddenly stirred. "But before that, he's silent. So silent that you can almost clearly hear your heart trying to jump out of your chest."

We fell silent again. And in that silence, something strange happened: you could almost feel each other's thoughts. Aidan thought of his brother. Tam of his father, whom he wanted to bury but wasn't allowed to. Ruairi of his village. I myself thought of my mother and how she was probably sitting by the hearth, adding fuel to the fire, rubbing her hands because the wind whistled through the cracks. I wondered if she suspected that I was no longer the same boy who had left.

Suddenly, a short shout rang out from outside. A wake-up call, sharp, just one word. No panic, but no calm either. The whole camp flinched.

"What is it?" Ruairi asked in a panic.

"Some sort of shadow," said Tam. "Or an animal. Or an Englishman who got lost."

We crawled to the tent's exit. The sky was black; only the fire cast reddish hues across the men's faces. The guard stood tense, his hand on his sword hilt.

"Just some movement at the edge of the forest," one said. "Nothing more specific."

"Not yet," murmured Seoras, leaning a few meters away. "They're testing us."

"Or they're watching us," said Broc, emerging from the darkness like an animal that never truly slept. "They like to do that. English people rarely just show up. They count first. Then they come."

The sergeant appeared as if the wind had brought him. "Everyone to the tents," he said calmly. "We'll continue marching in daylight."

No one objected.

We hid again. This time, sleep seemed further away than before. The thought of eyes watching us from afar was like cold fingers on our throats.

"If I die," Aidan whispered, "I at least want to know that it will be quick."

"It won't happen," said Tam.

"Sometimes, yes," I said. "Sometimes one good blow is enough."

"And sometimes it takes time," Ruairi said in a shaky voice.

"Then hope that someone is there to finish it," said Tam.

Ruairi swallowed audibly.

I didn't know if I was that kind of person. If I could take away a friend's pain if the time came. I only knew that I didn't want Aidan or Ruairi to have to do it for me.

When I finally dozed off briefly, I dreamt of footsteps. Heavy footsteps. Not ours. From a distance. As if they were slowly, deliberately approaching.

I woke with a jolt. It was still dark. The wind was blowing, but there was no unusual noise. Only my heart, beating as if it were a hammer and I the anvil.

We packed up early in the morning. Quickly, without a word. The sky was a cold sheet of metal. The ground was hard. The men looked like shadows of their former selves.

"Go," said Broc. "You're supposed to hit enemies, not pillows."

We marched again. The landscape became more barren. Fewer trees, more open views. That was precisely what I didn't like. An enemy in the woods is bad. An enemy in an open field is worse. He sees you first. He weighs his options. He decides.

"Do you see that?" Aidan asked at one point, pointing forward.

We all saw it.

Dust.

Not much. A thin, light brown line on the horizon. But definitely dust. Dust made by riders. Many riders.

"That's them," whispered Ruairi.

"That's not many," said Tam.

"That's enough," I said.

The sergeant raised his hand. We halted. Our ranks formed up as best as a group of men who had marched all morning could.

"Don't be stupid," Broc said, walking past us. "If they look at you, look back. If they charge, keep your shields up. If they kill you, at least shout my name so I know who did it."

"Very comforting," Aidan murmured.

The dust cloud grew larger. Closer. More distinct.

And then we saw her.

English.

Not in full battle formation. No drums, no flags proudly carried by the wind. Just a dozen horsemen, maybe fifteen. They didn't ride fast, more casually. Like men who believed no one could harm them.

"They look like they're taking a walk," said Euan.

"Take a closer look," Seoras said. "They are not strolling. They are inspecting."

"What are they checking?" Ruairi asked.

"Are you afraid?" the sergeant asked.

The English were approaching us. Their horses were large, strong, and better fed than ours. The men wore lighter-colored armor, cleaner. Their helmets had a slight sheen. Not ostentatious. Simply well-maintained.

And then I smelled it.

It wasn't really a smell. More a mixture of leather, metal, oil, and something indescribable. Pride, perhaps. Arrogance. The feeling that the world owes you something.

The stench of power.

He wasn't strong, more subtle. But he crept into the nose, the throat, into the thoughts.

And I understood what Broc had meant.

The English didn't reek of sweat. Not yet. They reeked of the unwavering belief that they were superior to us. That Scotland lay beneath them, as naturally as a dog beneath a table.

One of the riders stopped, a few meters away. His horse snorted. He looked at us, not individually, but as a group. He said nothing. He didn't need to say anything. His gaze was enough.

"Doesn't your custom dictate that you welcome travelers?" he finally asked. His voice was calm, clear. It cut through the silence like a knife.

No one answered.

The sergeant stepped forward. "We welcome guests," he said. "Not minders."

The Englishman smiled. A thin, bad smile.

"Then pretend we are guests."

I looked at him and felt, for the first time in my life, true hatred, clear as water. Not the childish rage I had felt toward farmers. Not the silent anger I felt toward my father. This was a sharp, resolute coldness.

I said nothing.

Not yet.

But I knew: Soon I would not remain silent.

The Englishman on his horse looked as if he were made of a different cloth than we were. Not tougher—just more self-assured. As if someone had told him at breakfast that the land he stood on belonged to him. And he had believed it without question. His armor wasn't ostentatious, just well-maintained. His horse stood still, as if it had learned that you don't have to sweat if you don't need to. The other riders behind him kept their distance, but not out of respect—more out of a kind of polite arrogance that says: He's talking. We'll let him.

The man looked at us like a farmer inspecting a flock of sheep before deciding which meat was good and which wasn't. "You're standing far out," he said. "Too far for ordinary farmers. Too close for ordinary soldiers."

The sergeant moved closer. Not much, just a tiny step, but enough for everyone to know: he wouldn't back down. "We are where we need to be," he said. His voice sounded calm, but I heard the sharpness in it. Like a knife that someone has used for a long time and yet still keeps sharp.

The Englishman inclined his head slightly. "An interesting answer for men without banners." He studied us again. "Are you rebels?"

"Are you a priest?" asked the sergeant.

A few of us giggled nervously. The Englishman didn't flinch. "I am a lieutenant in the Crown."

"The crown is far away," said the sergeant. "And out here it shines less brightly."

A rider behind the Englishman chuckled briefly. Another gave him a look that said: Shut up. Clearly, not everyone in their own ranks was equally clever.

I had the feeling that we all stumbled across the same thought at the same time: Now it's happening. Right now. But nothing happened. Not yet.

The Englishman looked up, glanced past us as if searching for something he couldn't find. "I smell fire," he said finally. "Not the fire at your camp. Another one. An old one. A dangerous one."

I didn't know if he was trying to provoke us, or if the English just sometimes got poetic when they saw a hill or a bunch of poor Scotsmen. But one thing I did know: his words burrowed into my bones. Because yes – something was burning inside us. Anger, fear, pride, whatever it was. It was there. And he could smell it.

Ruairi stood beside me, shivering slightly. Not from the cold. "What... what does he want?" he whispered.

"Power," I said. "That's what they always want."

The Englishman straightened up in the saddle, his gaze cutting. "Who is leading you?"

The sergeant stood his ground. "No one is leading us. We are going together."

It was one of those answers that was both true and a lie. The Englishman snorted. "Together? Scots?" He smiled thinly. "One of you leads. One shouts first. One dies last."

Seoras, the veteran, stepped forward, his gaze hard. "And what about you? Do you never die?"

The Englishman didn't answer immediately. Then he said: "We are dying... but we are leaving behind more than a hole in the ground."

I felt my fingers tingle. My grip tightened around the sword that still hung at my side. I knew it would have been stupid to draw it now. But stupidity was a pleasant thought in that moment. Something pure. Something that didn't reek of politics.

The sergeant raised his hand slightly – a gesture only we noticed. A: Wait.

The Englishman looked at us – no longer like cattle, but like something that irritated him. Perhaps even amused him a little. "There aren't many of you," he said.

"That's enough," said Broc, with his arms folded.

The Englishman raised an eyebrow. "For what?"

"For what comes next," Broc grumbled.

It was as if Broc had opened a door that had been just waiting to be thrown open. The Englishman smiled—a smile that wasn't warm, but frosty, calculating. "I like your courage," he said. "It will sound fine when I tell the tale later."

He gently pulled on the reins. His horse pawed the ground impatiently. Then he said, "We'll be back."

"We are waiting," said the sergeant.

And with that, they turned away. No trumpet fanfare, no heroic turn of the horses. Just a simple turn, calm, confident. They rode off like men who knew they would return. And who believed we would be fewer in number then.

As the dust slowly settled, the whole camp was silent. Even the wind paused for a moment, as if it knew we had something to digest.

Aidan exhaled loudly. "I already hate her," he said.

"You haven't seen anything yet," Seoras said.

"I know," said Aidan. "That's exactly why."

The sergeant turned to us. His voice was calm, but I heard something in it that was rare: a kind of respect. Not for the English – for us.

"They wanted to intimidate you," he said. "Or test you. Or both. And you stopped."

He paused.

"That was the easy part."

Broc walked past us, patted Tam and Euan on the shoulder, firmly but not unkindly. "You heard it," he said. "Now the learning really begins."

We gathered together again. Not entirely voluntarily – more instinctively, like animals that huddle closer together when they know the wolf is lurking somewhere in the forest.

I let my gaze sweep over each of us. Aidan, his forehead glistening. Tam, grinding his teeth angrily. Ruairi, looking as if he were about to spit or cry, or both. Euan, laughing, but his laughter sounded off-key.

Then I looked ahead.

To the place where the English had disappeared.

And then I felt something I had rarely felt before: a clear, firm line within me. No trembling. No hesitation. Just a silent, cold thought: If they come back, I want to be standing. And not hidden at the back of the line.

I didn't know if it was courage or madness. Maybe both. But I knew that after that day I would never be the same again. Because for the first time I understood what an enemy truly looks like when they believe they are superior to you.

And how he smells.

For power. For arrogance. For something I wanted to break one day.

No matter how many bones it would cost.

A kiss, a vow, a knife

There are moments that begin so gently that you have no idea how sharply they will end. And sometimes they aren't grand, elaborate events, no battles, no fires, no horsemen. Sometimes they are small things. A glance. A touch. A breath. Things that no camp, no order, no sergeant can prevent. Things that happen even though everything else seems to contradict them.

The morning after meeting the English was difficult. Not physically—sleep had eased some of the fatigue—but mentally. The ground seemed harder, the sky lower, the world smaller. Every step felt like preparation for something that was just around the next bend. Something that would challenge us. Something that could break us.

But before life finally tore us to pieces, there was a small, awkward moment that brought warmth once more – or something that pretended to be warmth.

We had stopped at a stream. The sergeant wanted to read maps, Broc wanted to swear, Aidan wanted to smoke, Tam wanted to eat—and I just wanted to breathe. I walked a little way from the camp, far enough that I couldn't hear the voices clearly anymore, but close enough that I wasn't considered a deserter. The trees were thin, their branches like hands that were more pleading than grasping. The water was clear, cold, fresh. I knelt down, scooped some up, and washed the dust from my face.

"You look like you're trying to become a different person."

I turned around.

She stood there as if she had always been in that forest, just waiting for someone to pass by and see her. I didn't know her—at least not consciously. But she didn't seem like she was there by chance. A slender body, arms covered in scratches, as if she had fought her way through undergrowth. Her dress was simple, brown, and tattered. Her hair was dark, but it caught the light like wet wood. She didn't look like a lady-in-waiting, nor like a beggar. More like someone who had experienced more than was good for her.

"Who are you?" I asked cautiously.

"Someone who has no business being here," she replied. "Just like you."

I stood up slowly. Not threateningly, not shyly – just alert. "We're heading south," I said. "English sighting. We should be careful."

"I'm always careful," she said. "Otherwise I would have been dead long ago."

She came closer. Not quickly. Not hesitantly. Simply at a pace as if she wanted to determine the distance between us herself. Her eyes studied me, first fleetingly, then more intensely.

"You're no peasant," she said.

"Sometimes I wish I did," I replied.

She smiled briefly, but it was a sad smile. "Farmers are less likely to die from steel."

I didn't know what to say. Sometimes words are inappropriate. Sometimes silence is enough.

"My name is Moira," she finally said.

"William," I replied.

She nodded as if the name sounded familiar—or as if she never wanted to forget it. "Why are you here, William? Why not at home?"

I thought of my mother, of the village, of the rain beating on the roof like impatient fingers. I thought of my father, wandering somewhere in the world, probably unaware that his son carried a sword.

"Because at some point I have to stop running away," I said.

Moira walked past me to the water, knelt down, dipped her hands in, and splashed water on her face. Tiny drops fell over her cheeks, glistening in the light before disappearing. "Running away isn't cowardly," she said. "It's smart. Fighting is stupid."

"Then I must be very stupid," I said.

"No," she said, slowly standing up again. "You're just too young to know that courage is often just another word for despair."

She came close to me. So close I could feel her breath. It didn't smell of perfume or sweet milk. It smelled of forest, of earth, of life. And damn it—amidst all the mud, sweat, and fear, it was suddenly a scent that lodged itself in my mind like a sharp thought.

"Why are you here?" I asked.

She looked around briefly, then said quietly, "I'm looking for someone."

"Who?"

"Someone who took something from me."

I wanted to ask who. I wanted to ask what. But she raised her hand as if to say: Not now. Her fingers touched my breast, just briefly, barely a touch, but enough to freeze me. It wasn't a demand. Not an invitation. Just a statement: You are real.

"You're not an ordinary boy," she murmured. "You carry something inside you. Something heavy."

"Everyone is carrying something heavy," I said.

"No," she whispered. "Not like that."

And then it happened.

A kiss.

Not long. Not soft. Not a fairytale. More like two stones briefly touching and sparking. A kiss that spoke volumes like a scream. One that didn't ask if it was right, but simply happened because, for a fleeting moment, the world ceased to resist.

When she broke free, my breath caught in my throat for a moment.

"Why?" I asked.

She looked at me. For a long time. And in her eyes was something I hadn't seen before – a mixture of sadness, anger, hope, and something that one would probably call courage in men.

"Because you'll soon have to forget how to hesitate," she said. "And because I wanted to kiss someone who isn't dead yet."

She reached down to her hip and pulled out a small knife. Thin, sharp, and simple. She pressed it into my hand.

"Take it," she said.

"Why?"

"Because the world will soon take something from you," she said. "So take something away from it beforehand."

"What?"

She smiled that sad, knowing smile. "Soon blood will flow. Yours or hers. And you will have to decide how much of it you can bear."

I looked at the knife. It was light, but cold. A tool. A weapon. A promise.

"Is this a gift?" I asked.

"No," she said. "It's an oath."

"Between us?"

"Between you and what you have to become."

I wanted to reply, but she shook her head. "Say nothing. Words weaken everything."

She touched my face – with just two fingers, carefully, as if I were a clay pot that would break easily – and then stepped back.

"We'll see each other again," she said.

"Where?"

"Perhaps in life. Perhaps in death."

And like a shadow between two trees, she was gone.

No trace. No sound. Only the knife in my hand and the taste of her kiss on my mouth. A taste like earth and wind and a touch of guilt.

As I walked back to the camp, I felt strange. Not stronger. Not weaker. Just... different. As if a door inside me had creaked and opened a crack. A door to something I hadn't sought, but which had found me.

Aidan saw me when I arrived. "Where have you been?" he asked.

"By the stream."

"Alone?"

I hesitated. "No."

"Who was with you?"

I looked at him, then I saw the knife, which I had unconsciously gripped tighter. A small, silent promise.

"Someone," I said. "Who knows what's coming."

Aidan wanted to ask more questions, but Broc yelled that we should move on, and the conversation was over.

But the kiss remained.

The vow remained.

And the knife remained in my hand like a heartbeat of steel.

The march after that encounter felt different. Not because the route had changed or the air had become milder. No—I myself was different. The knife at my side weighed almost nothing, but it felt heavier than the sword I'd been carrying for weeks. It wasn't the weight of the metal, but the weight of what it represented. A stranger's gift. A vow. A reminder that life was more than sweat, mud, and the death that lurked beyond every hill.

Of course, no one asked about the knife. Men rarely ask about things that are newly attached to someone else. Perhaps because they themselves carry too many secrets in their belts. Perhaps because some truths only endure if they remain unspoken.

The path led us through a hollow, its edges lined with ancient stones—remnants of something that must once have been important. Broc claimed they were druid stones. The sergeant said they were just stones. And Seoras remarked that the stones were probably as tired as we were.

I walked between Aidan and Tam, the knife hidden under my coat. Ruairi trotted behind us, pale as ever, but with a look that showed his thoughts weren't on the march. Perhaps he was continuing to write the letter to his mother, in his mind. Perhaps he was imagining her reading his words, unaware of the signs under which her son was marching.

"You're being very quiet today," Aidan said to me at one point.

"I think."

"I do that sometimes too," he said. "But most of the time I come to the conclusion that it only confuses me."

Tam snorted. "Thinking is dangerous," he grumbled. "You end up realizing where you really stand."

"And where do we stand?" asked Ruairi.

Tam paused briefly, then said dryly: "In the way."

We laughed. Not loudly, not heartily – but we laughed. And that felt good. Because the land before us was growing more restless. The ground softer. The wind more biting. It was the land where men die without the world taking the time to mourn.

When we stopped at a hill to check the riders' progress, I sat down a little to the side. Not far – just far enough to hear the voices more faintly. I loosened my belt, took out my knife, and examined it in the better light.

It was simple, but forged by someone who knew what they were doing. The blade wasn't decorated, just sharp. The handle was made of wood, smooth but not polished. A tool. Not jewelry. And yet it had something... personal about it. As if someone had carried it for a long time. Someone who hadn't lost it by chance.

"Beautiful piece."

I flinched slightly—not from fear, but because I'd been lost in thought. Seoras stood behind me, arms folded, eyes narrowed. He was quiet for a man of his stature. Like someone who knew how to move without being noticed.

"Where did you get that?" he asked.

I looked at him, then at the knife. "Someone gave it to me."

Seoras sat down next to me without asking. "A woman?"

I said nothing.

"Then it was a woman," he said calmly. "Men don't put a knife in your hand without demanding something in return. Women, on the other hand, do it if they believe you are something you don't yet know yourself."

He looked at me appraisingly. "Was she pretty?"

"She was..." I searched for a word. "Real."

Seoras nodded. "That's rare. Most people are just copies of copies until someone tells them who they're supposed to be."

I turned the knife over in my hand. "She said it's an oath."

"Then it is one," Seoras said. "Oaths are just words until you live them."

"And how does one live with something like that?" I asked.

Seoras picked up a stone and weighed it in her hand. "By remembering who you are when the first blow is struck. And by not transforming into someone you don't want to be."

I thought of Moira. Her gaze, which had been both soft and hard. The brief kiss. Her words: You won't be able to hesitate much longer.

"She said someone is going to take something from me," I said.

Seoras chewed on his lower lip. Then he said quietly, "She wasn't referring to the enemy."

"Then who?"

"Yourself," he said. "Wars take pieces of yourself that you didn't know you needed."

I glanced at the camp. Men were drinking water, sharpening blades, telling lies to bolster their courage. They were doing the things one does when one knows one might soon lose something – perhaps an arm, perhaps a friend, perhaps one's own thoughts.

"And what will I lose first?" I asked.

"The doubts," Seoras said. "Then the fear. Then something you'll miss later."

I wanted to ask more questions, but Broc's voice broke the silence. "Everyone stand up! Move on! If you stay standing still, you'll become tree trunks! And I hate trees!"

We stood up. I put the knife away again, feeling it at my side like a second pulse.

The march became steeper. The sky darker. The air tighter. And then, at some point – in the middle of a nameless hill that no one would paint because it had nothing beautiful about it – we heard it.

A scream.

Not human. Or maybe it is.

He came from beyond the next slope, sharp, raw, full of pain or rage or both. We froze. Even the wind held its breath for a moment.

"What was that?" whispered Ruairi.

The sergeant stepped forward, his hand on his sword. "What lies ahead of us."

"An enemy?" Aidan asked.

"Perhaps."

"An animal?" Tam asked.

"Perhaps."

"A man?" I asked.

The sergeant looked at me. His gaze was heavy.

"Perhaps."

We moved closer. Step by step. As if we were approaching a door behind which no one knew what shadows awaited.

And as I walked there, I could still feel Moira's kiss on my lips, the knife at my hip, and a strange certainty within me:

Something has been set in motion. Something I cannot stop.

And I didn't yet know if it had happened because of me.

Or because of her.

But the next hill would prove it.

The scream came again. This time closer. Raw, hoarse, a sound that wasn't simply pain, but something deeper—rage that could no longer contain itself. We stopped, not because someone had shouted "Stop!", but because our bodies themselves understood that the next step might be one too many.

The sergeant raised his hand. Broc squinted, as if trying to see through the hill. Seoras took a step forward, like a dog testing the wind.

"Wait," the sergeant said softly, and the word settled over us like a heavy blanket.

We waited.

The wind cut across the hill, carrying a scent – iron. Old, dried steel. Blood. Perhaps animal. Perhaps human. The distinction quickly blurs when the sun shines on it long enough.

"Something is injured," Ruairi murmured.

Tam snorted. "Something is always hurt."

The sergeant nodded to Broc. "Three men with me," he said. "The rest stay here."

But before anyone could move, the shadow appeared.

He appeared from behind the crest of the hill like a ghost that had forgotten it was supposed to be dead. First a dark smudge, then a trembling outline, then the figure of a man—a tall man, barefoot, blood-smeared, with wide-open eyes. He stumbled, grabbed his knee, half fell, then got back up.

And then he saw us.

Broc cursed. The sergeant tensed. Seoras made a movement as if he would catch the man if he took another step.

I recognized that look. Not personally, but I recognized it. It was the look of a man who had seen something beyond words. The look of a man who was running because stopping meant grabbing death.

"Help... me..." he managed to say before his legs gave way and he tumbled down the slope like a sack of wet grain.

We started running because we had no choice. Even Tam, who always acted like he was at odds with his own life, ran. The man was heavy when I grabbed his arm. Heavy as a full bucket of stone. His body was steaming, his breath smelled of copper and animal matter.

"By the gods," Aidan murmured. "What could have done to him like that?"

The man gasped, coughed, and spat out dark blood. His body was covered in scratches and cuts, some fresh, others old. No armor. No sword. Just a scrap of cloth around his hip.

"What happened?" asked the sergeant as we half carried, half pulled him.

The man tried to speak. "They... they have... they..." He choked, as if he had something in his throat that wasn't a word.

"Who?" Broc asked sharply.

The man's eyes widened. "Men... but not... men..." He swallowed. "Englishmen... but not..." Then he slumped down.

Dead?

No. Not yet. But his body had decided that it would no longer serve him for a while.

"Take him to camp," the sergeant ordered. "Seoras, look around. Tam, William – with him. Aidan, Ruairi – keep your eyes open."

We dragged the man back over the hill. I felt his weight, felt his fever, felt his struggle to breathe. His body was like a battlefield, where too many boots had already stood.

When we arrived at the camp, we laid him on a blanket. The priest immediately knelt beside him, his hands steady, his gaze focused. He had this way of looking at things as if they were people and not problems.

"He's alive," he said. "For now."

"What happened to him?" Tam asked.

The priest shook his head. "The wounds... are strange. Not clean. Not deliberate. More like..." He searched for a word. "Like from something that wanted too much."

I thought of Moira's words: Someone will take something from you.

I thought of the scream. Of the blood in the air.

And I knew that the man hadn't been fleeing from wild animals. Not from a single blade.

It was something different.

The man wheezed. His hand grasped at nothing. Then, suddenly, it grabbed my shoulder. Hard. Painfully. I flinched, almost striking him, but his eyes bored into mine.

"You..." he gasped. "You must... listen..."

I knelt down closer.

"They... are coming," he whispered. "Not... Englishmen. Not... men. Something... different..."

"Who?" I asked.

His body tensed, his back arched like a bow.

"They take... everything..." he whispered. "They take... souls..."

Then he fell back and was silent.

This time for good.

The priest bowed his head. "He is dead."

"He's crazy," said Tam. "What do you mean—they're taking souls?"

Broc looked up the hill from which the man had come. His gaze hardened, darker than usual. "Englishmen, animals, madmen—it didn't matter. Something was chasing him."

The sergeant turned to Seoras. "What did you see?"

Seoras came down the slope, his face grim. "Tracks," he said. "Deep prints. Large. And they're moving fast. Much faster than a normal man."

"Animals? Wolves?" Aidan asked.

"Much too big," said Seoras. "Much too heavy."

We looked at each other. A small, complicated silence spread. One that says: Whatever that was – we don't want to see it. But we will have to.

The sergeant stepped in front of the dead man. "Let's bury him," he said. "Before night falls."

We lifted the body. It was lighter than I had expected. Perhaps because he had lost something before he died.

As we laid him in the ground, I thought of Moira's words. Something is being taken from you. I thought of the knife. The kiss. The man who now lay underground, without us knowing his name.

And something like a quiet, dark suspicion grew within me:

The English were not the only ones who smelled power in this country.

And perhaps something smelled even worse than her.

When they took her veil

The death of the unknown man ran like a thin, dark thread through our camp. No one spoke of it openly, but everyone carried a piece of it inside, like a stone in their boot. We kept going, we carried on, we did what Broc commanded—but beneath it all vibrated something we didn't understand, yet felt: there was something out there that didn't fit our idea of war.

“Taking souls...” Aidan murmured once, as we camped and stared at dry wood that wouldn't burn properly. “Only crackpots talk like that,” Tam said. But his voice wasn't convinced, more weary, worn. “Maybe he meant they take people,” Ruairi said. “The English take villages. Countries. Why not—” “He wasn't a villager who got lost,” I interrupted. “He looked like someone who knew what he was doing until he didn't know how to run anymore.”

Nobody had an answer to that. Some questions shouldn't be asked aloud, because even the gods look away when they are spoken.

When morning came, the shadows were even longer than usual.

We marched again. The sergeant said we had to continue south, deeper inland, before we regrouped. “We're not here to chase ghosts,” he said. “We're here to meet an army.” An army. Englishmen.

Meat, steel, horses. That was something you could grasp. The other things you couldn't.

The path led us to a village. Small, scattered, huts made of wattle and daub. A stream ran along the edge, a few goats grazed, and a scrawny dog barked at us as if it had never seen soldiers before. The sergeant raised his hand to signal us to halt.

“We need water. Bread, if there is any. And news.” News meant: Who has died, who has disappeared, who is coming, who is going.

We entered the village like men who knew they weren't welcome. The villagers stared at us. Some suspiciously, some exhausted, some simply blankly. Old men with shoulders like thin branches. Women whose eyes had seen too much. Children who didn't seem like children.

But nobody spoke.

Then a woman entered. She was young, younger than most there. Her dark hair was tied in a knot, more out of necessity than vanity. Her eyes were red—not from crying, more from lack of sleep, pain, perhaps both.

"You're too late," she said quietly.

The sergeant stepped forward. "Too late for what?"

She looked at him. And then at us. As if she were searching to see if any of us already knew the answer. "Too late to save her."

The dog growled, as if to emphasize the words.

"Who?" Seoras asked calmly.

The woman raised her hand and pointed to a hut on the edge of the village. The door hung crookedly on its hinges. Someone hadn't opened it, but had ripped it off. A torn scrap of fabric hung in the doorway—a piece of clothing, perhaps a veil.

A veil.

The woman closed her eyes, as if forcing herself to speak. "They took her," she said. "My sister. Last night."

Ruairi swallowed. "Englishman?"

The woman shook her head so violently that her hair came loose. "No. I know English people. I know their horses, their smell, their voices. These weren't English people."

That was the moment my skin started to tingle.

"How many were there?" the sergeant asked calmly.

"Three. Or four. Or... I don't know." Her hands trembled. "They moved like men. But they weren't. They were too big. Too fast. And they spoke..." She pressed her lips together. "...not like humans."

Broc exhaled. "Englishmen without manners are still Englishmen."

"They weren't Englishmen!" she suddenly screamed. Her composure broke. Her voice was like a stone finally falling. "Englishmen don't tear doors open. They cut them open. Englishmen beat women. But they..." She paused, choking. "...they carried her. Just like that. As if she were a bundle of straw."

I thought of the man from the day before.
They take souls.

"What did they do?" I asked, without recognizing my own voice.

The woman looked at me as if I had just exposed a wound. "You took her veil."

Tam frowned. "The veil? Why is that important?"

The woman took a deep breath. "Because... it wasn't a veil, as you think. It was... her sign. Her protection."

The priest stepped forward. "Protection? From what?"

She looked at him, and in that look lay a story older than all of us. "Before those who hunt in the night when no man sees them."

Aidan whispered: "This can't be—"

"Show us," the sergeant said tersely.

The woman led us to the hut. The ground in front of it was churned up as if after a battle. Tracks – deep indentations, large as if made by heavy boots, but with a strange shape. Not round. Not human. Something else.

The veil hung on the doorframe. White. Or it had once been white. Now it was torn, stained with dirt and blood. Finely crafted, almost too beautiful for such a poor village.

"What does the veil mean?" I asked.

The woman didn't answer at first. Then she said quietly:

"When a woman here comes of age, she receives a veil. A consecrated one. The elders say it protects her. Not from England's men. From other things."
She trembled. "And last night... the veil fell."

The priest murmured a word that sounded like a prayer. The sergeant knelt down and examined the footprints in the floor. Broc stared silently into the open doorway. The wind rushed through as if trying to draw something out of the house.

I stepped closer, looked inside. Dark. Cold. And something... was missing. Not just my sister. Something was missing from the room. Something alive. Something that should have stayed.

"What was her name?" I asked.

"Fiona," the woman said. "She was... she was the best of us."

I looked at the veil. The torn threads. The trail of blood on the wood.

And suddenly I thought of Moira.

Her gaze. Her kiss. Her words: Something is being taken from you.

Was this the same thing?

The sergeant stood up. His voice was calm, but I heard it—the spark of anger in it. "We're staying here tonight," he said. "We're keeping watch. And we're going to find out what this was."

"If they come back..." the woman whispered.

"Then they will find someone who won't run away," said the sergeant.

I thought:

Then they will find someone who will no longer hesitate.

Because suddenly I understood something I hadn't grasped before: Sometimes something is taken from you so that you can find something else within yourself. Something you didn't know before.

Something sharp. Something dark. Something ready to hurt before it is hurt.

And I suspected: The kiss was only the beginning.

The afternoon in the village hung over us like a heavy, uncomfortable blanket. No one knew how to move. The men in the village stood around as if awaiting judgment. The women spoke softly, but their glances were loud. Children peeked out from behind doorframes and disappeared again whenever one of us soldiers moved. We were strangers, and strangers rarely bring good things. But what they feared wasn't us.

It was what had come last night. The ones who had taken Fiona.

"We're setting up guards," the sergeant said. "Three groups. Rotating every two hours. No one will be alone." He looked at each of us individually, as if to make sure we understood: Not because of England's men. Not because of robbers. Because of something else.

"What if it doesn't come back?" Aidan asked.

Broc sighed. "Then we'll drink the villagers' supplies and march on."

"And what if it comes back?" asked Ruairi.

"Then we'll show him how to fear men," Broc growled. It sounded brave, but I heard the crack in his voice. He didn't quite believe himself.

The villagers set out bowls of thin soup. Bread so hard it could have been thrown against a tree. We ate in silence, each lost in our own thoughts. The priest went from hut to hut, speaking softly to the women who had opened their doors. He blessed three children who didn't understand why they were being blessed. Perhaps because the elders knew that sometimes a blessing is the only thing that can stand against the darkness.

I stood a little apart and watched the veil. The wind barely moved it. As if it had become heavy. As if something invisible lay upon it.

Moira wouldn't leave my mind. Her gaze, as if she had seen something we were yet to see. Her kiss, like a spark in a world full of cold stones. Her knife, hanging at my side like a second conscience.

Something will be taken away from you.

Maybe she didn't just mean me. Maybe she meant everyone here.

The sergeant beckoned me over. "We need to know what happened in that cabin," he said. "You're coming with us."

I followed him, along with Broc and Seoras. The hut was dark; only a narrow strip of light filtered through the open door. The floor was uneven, ragged, as if someone had fought back. The table was overturned. A chair was broken. A clay pot lay in pieces.

But there was no blood. Only the veil outside was bloody. That made it worse.

"This dent here," Seoras said, pointing at the wall. "Someone was pushed against it. Hard. But not thrown – just held down."

The sergeant knelt down and examined the ground. "The fight didn't last long."

"If it was even a fight," Broc muttered.

I looked around. The air was stifling. Something wasn't right. It didn't feel like a place where someone had disappeared. It felt like a place where something had been missing before Fiona vanished.

Seoras picked up a small, shiny object from the floor. A piece of metal, round, flat, about the size of a thumbnail.

"What is it?" I asked.

"Not a Scottish tool," Seoras said. "Not an English one either."

The sergeant took it between two fingers and turned it in the light. "Looks like... something broken off. From a weapon?"

"No," said Seoras. "From a shield, perhaps. But the material..." He sniffed it. "Doesn't smell like iron. Smells like..." He paused. "Like nothing."

"Nothing?" asked Broc. "How can metal smell of nothing?"

"Metal always smells," Seoras said. "But this... doesn't."

I felt the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end.

"We should close the hut for today," said the sergeant. "And barricade the door. No one is sleeping there tonight."

"No one should be sleeping here at all," Broc growled.

We stepped outside. The woman – Fiona's sister – was waiting there. Her fingers were clutching her apron.

"Did you find anything?"

The sergeant thought for a moment. Then he said, "We've found something. But we don't know what it means."

The woman nodded slowly. "I'll tell you something my grandmother always said." Her voice trembled. "When a veil falls, it's not the fabric that tears. It's the protection that breaks."

The priest, who had returned, placed a hand on her shoulder. "We are with you tonight. We will not leave you alone."

"But what if you don't understand what's out there?" she whispered.

The priest looked at her with that gaze that always seemed to speak to something invisible. "Then I will learn it."

The sun slowly set, and the village crept into its shadows like a wounded animal hoping to go unnoticed by the night. We erected stakes, lit fires, and formed a rough triangle to gather us in case of emergency.

"No going it alone," the sergeant ordered. "If you need to pee, pee in groups."

"It will be a beautiful spectacle," Aidan murmured.

"If you laugh while what's coming for you, at least you'll die funny," said Tam.

A heavy, cold breath of darkness settled over us. The villagers closed their doors. Some locked them with furniture. Others with prayers.

I sat down by a fire, next to Ruairi. He looked pale, his fingers intertwined.

"William," he said quietly. "Do you think she'll still come?"

"Who?"

"The sister. Fiona."

I stared into the flames. "No. Not the way you mean."

He nodded as if he already knew the answer and only needed me to say it.

Seoras approached and sat heavily on a log. He regarded the fire like an old enemy.

"I know many sounds," he said. "The scream of a dying horse. The cracking of a ribcage. The whimpering of men who believe their gods have forgotten them."

He looked up. "But what we heard today... that was something else."

Aidan swallowed. "An animal?"

"If it was an animal," Seoras said, "then it was one that had learned how to take people with it."

We were silent for a while. The fire crackled, sparks rose, and burned up in the air.

I placed my hand on Moira's knife. And suddenly something became clear to me.

She knew I'd end up in something like this. Not England's steel. Not an ordinary war.

But into something old. Something that was there before the English. Something that perhaps had always been there.

"I think the knife isn't just meant for humans," I murmured.

"What do you mean?" asked Ruairi.

I shook my head. "I don't know yet."

And then – just when I thought the evening would simply rot away in this threatening silence – the village dog began to growl.

He stared towards the edge of the forest. His teeth bared. Without barking.

Dogs bark at people. Dogs bark at animals.

But if they only growl, without making a sound – then there is something there that they cannot assess.

"Everyone awake!" the sergeant shouted immediately.

We rose up. Shields. Spears. Swords.

Night fell over the village – and somewhere in the shadows there was movement.

Slow. Heavy. Non-human. Non-animal.

Something in between. Something that knew how to use the darkness.

I could feel my heartbeat right down to my fingertips.

And I knew: The veil was only the beginning.

The night wasn't a black cloak that settled over the village. It was more like a damp, cold hand that slid slowly across your face, asking: Are you ready? The dog continued to growl, its lips curled back, its body tense like a taut rope, about to snap. In the darkness behind it, something moved. Not quickly. Not hesitantly. Just deliberately. Exactly the way something moves that knows it has nothing to fear.

The sergeant raised his hand, a silent order: don't run, don't talk, don't breathe unless absolutely necessary. The villagers had retreated to their huts, and through the cracks, you could sometimes see eyes flickering – frightened, hopeful, praying. We stood outside, in the cold wind, men pretending to be more than they were.

"Where does it come from?" whispered Ruairi.

"From the forest," Seoras said softly. "But I can't hear anything. That's the problem. If something is big, it has to make noise. If it doesn't, it's worse."

The dog took two steps forward. His fur stood on end, his body trembled. And suddenly he fell silent. Not because he calmed down—no. Because he saw something that silenced him. Animals know a kind of fear that runs deeper than ours. They don't call it fear. They call it instinct.

I looked in the same direction and saw... nothing at first. An abyss of darkness that moved without any visible movement. But then, as the clouds briefly parted to reveal the moon, something shimmered. An outline. Large. Too large. Shoulders broader than a man's. Arms longer than they should be. But no clear contours—more like a shadow casting its own shadow.

“Holy...”, Aidan murmured, but the sergeant cut him off with a gesture.

The thing stopped at the edge of the woods. It was close enough that we felt its presence, but far enough that we couldn't clearly see it. Exactly the kind of distance at which things are most dangerous.

"Don't move," the sergeant said, barely audible.

We didn't move.

The creature—if it was one—raised its head. The movement was slow, deliberate, like someone sitting at a table, checking who has taken the seat opposite them. Then there was a sound.

No scream. No roar. No hiss.

A deep, vibrating throbbing sound emanated from the creature's chest, as if someone were dragging a stone across a drumhead. It wasn't loud, but it crept into your bones. The dog whimpered and lay down as if it had been struck.

"By the gods," whispered Ruairi. "That's not a human."

“People don't hum like that,” said Tam, and for the first time since I had known him, his voice sounded small.

The figure took a step forward. The ground crunched, but not as loudly as it should have. It sounded more like the earth itself was making way for it. Only now did I see the outline more clearly—broad shoulders, a long body, arms that reached almost to the knees. But the posture was human. And that was the worst part.

"Get ready!" shouted the sergeant, but quietly, as if he feared provoking it too much.

We drew our swords. Shields were raised. I instinctively reached for the knife Moira had given me. It felt warm, as if it knew why it was there. Or what it had been forged for.

The creature stood still. Seconds passed. Or minutes. Time lost its meaning here. Then the sound again—that vibrating, bass-heavy wheeze. And then—

— she turned around.

Not hastily. Not panicking. Just... gone. A few steps back into the woods, and then the darkness swallowed him up, as if it had brought back an old friend.

We were still standing with our weapons raised when Broc broke the spell. "What the hell was that?!"

The sergeant took a deep breath. "I don't know."

"Was that what Fiona got?" Aidan asked.

The sergeant remained silent. A dangerous silence. The silence of a man who knows the truth but cannot speak it because it is worse when spoken.

"Why didn't it come?" asked Ruairi.

"Because we were here," Seoras said. "Or because we weren't the ones who wanted us here."

"And who does it want?" asked Tam.

I looked at the veil. It was still hanging on the doorframe, barely moved by the wind. A tear ran through the middle like a gaping wound.

"It wants women," I said quietly. "Or... souls."

The men looked at me, some in horror, some incomprehension. But no one contradicted me. They had seen the creature's gaze—not with their eyes, but with the feeling it left behind. It wasn't the gaze of a predator. Not the gaze of a warrior. It was the gaze of something that gathers.

The sergeant ordered us to stand watch all night. None of us sat down. We stood as if we were trees ourselves, our roots firmly planted in the earth to avoid being blown away. Every slight movement in the forest made us flinch. Every gust of wind sounded like a breath.

But the creature did not return.

Not tonight.

As dawn broke, the village looked like someone who had spent a night fighting a fever. Everyone was pale. Everyone was exhausted. But everyone was alive.

Fiona's sister stepped out. Her eyes were red, but not from recent tears. She looked at us, then at the veil, then at the forest.

"You saw it," she said.

"Yes," replied the sergeant.

"Will you be leaving? Like everyone else?"

The sergeant thought for a long time. Then he said, "No. We're not going. Not yet."

She nodded. But she didn't seem relieved.

It's more like she only now truly feels sorry for us.

I looked at the edge of the woods where the figure had stood. I felt the weight of the knife at my side, Moira's fingertips on my face, her kiss on my lips. I thought of the man who had died yesterday, the one who had said: They take souls.

Perhaps he didn't mean souls in the divine sense. Perhaps he meant that which makes people alive.

And something told me: We hadn't driven the creature away. We had only made it curious.

"William," Aidan said quietly. "What do you think that was?"

I looked into his eyes. And I spoke the truth I felt, without being able to prove it:

"Something that comes back."

The first death remains in the mind.

The morning after the encounter with the creature—or the shadow, or the thing we couldn't name without our voices faltering—was the kind that feels as if someone had repainted the world, but with the wrong color. The sky was too bright, the ground too dull, even the air seemed to rustle. We had survived the night, but none of us felt like victors. More like men who had awakened uneasily from a fever dream, unsure if they were truly awake.

The villagers cautiously emerged from their huts, as if we ourselves were part of this horror. Perhaps we were. Men with weapons rarely bring good, even when they claim to offer protection. Fiona's sister stood in front of her hut, her arms wrapped around herself as if holding her together. Her eyes were empty. Empty like a house from which someone has removed everything that could be called life.

The sergeant spoke to her. Not loudly, not harshly, but with that washed-out calm he sometimes had when he understood that his anger was useless. "We're moving on," he said. "But we'll send you men from the clan if we can."

"What if it comes back?" she asked.

He gave a barely perceptible twitch of his hand. "Then you won't be alone."

A lie that likes to disguise itself as comfort.

We packed our gear. No one spoke much, and when they did, their words sounded like old coins that had been handled far too often. I felt the knife at my side, and every time my fingers touched it, I thought of Moira. Of her gaze. Of her saying, "Something will be taken from you." It echoed within me like a memory from another life.

"You look like you've eaten a ghost," Aidan said beside me as he tightened his bag.

"Perhaps a ghost has eaten me," I replied.

He grinned crookedly. "You're joking. That's reassuring. Maybe all is not lost after all."

"Perhaps."

But the truth was: I wasn't joking. Not really. Something had taken root inside me—a feeling that wouldn't go away, no matter how often I wiped the sweat from my face. The figure in the woods hadn't just frightened us. It had taken something away. Perhaps a remnant of innocence. Perhaps just our illusion that we knew what we were fighting against.

We left the village. The path led over a range of hills that looked as if they had lain there for centuries, wondering why people still tried to cross them. The wind whistled against us. Not sweet, not gentle. More like a reminder that the world owed us nothing.

"First rest stop by the river," the sergeant called out. "We're marching fast, but not stupidly."

"What would be stupid?" asked Tam.

"March fast and die tired," Broc growled.

I walked next to Ruairi. He looked paler than usual. "You hardly spoke yesterday," I said.

"Because..." He paused. "William, I saw him."

"Who?"

"The man. The dead man. When we buried him."

I nodded. "We all saw him."

"No," he said, his voice trembling. "I mean... I saw him. Last night. On the threshold of the cabin."

I stopped. "What do you mean by that?"

Ruairi looked at the ground as if he would find an explanation there. "I'm not sure. Maybe it was a dream. Maybe it was the shadow of the fire. But I saw him standing there. The man. The one we buried. And he had no eyes."

A chill ran down my spine. "Why didn't you say anything?"

"Because I didn't even know if it was real." He rubbed his hands together. "And because I thought you'd laugh at me."

"We haven't laughed since yesterday," I said quietly.

We continued on. The path became muddier, the ground softer. The woods denser. Sometimes we heard a crackling sound, sometimes a rustling. And we always wondered whether it was an animal or something else.

After an hour we came to a river. The water was cold, clear, and fast-flowing. The sergeant signaled for a break. Men sat down, drank, sharpened their blades, and acted as if there was only the next march, not what lay behind us.

I sat down on a rock, my feet in the water. The river flowed on as if there were no death, no creature, no missing girl. Water doesn't ask about people.

"William."

The sergeant approached me. He had this look – not stern, not harsh, more like a blacksmith checking if an iron is hot enough.

"You were the first to see her yesterday," he said. "That figure."

"I was only there by chance."

"Nothing happens by chance," he said. "Not on nights like these."

I didn't know whether to believe him. But I remained silent.

"I'm asking you as a man," he said. "Not as a fighter. Not as a commander. As a man." He sat down next to me. "What did you feel when you saw her?"

I stared into the water.

Then I told the truth: "Fear."

"Good," he said. "That's correct."

"And something else."

The sergeant raised an eyebrow. "What?"

I instinctively reached for the knife without pulling it out. "I didn't want to run away."

He nodded. "Then you will go far, William. Far enough to suffer, and far enough to make something of this country."

I didn't know if that was a compliment.

Then we heard it.

A scream.

Not like the man's two days ago. Not like the humming of the figure in the woods. But the scream of a soldier.

One of our men.

We jumped up, the sergeant started running, Broc behind him, the others followed. I was on my feet immediately.

The scream came from the lower bank, where two men had been gathering wood. When we arrived, one of them was kneeling in the grass, trembling, while the other stood beside a fallen tree trunk. And I saw it immediately:

There was a dead man lying there.

One of us. Young, fair hair, thin as a beanpole. His face was contorted, his mouth open as if he had tried to say something. But that wasn't the worst of it.

The worst part was the wound in his chest.

A clean cut, but not by a sword. Too wide. Too deep. Too unfamiliar.

"By hell," Seoras muttered. "That's no English blow."

The sergeant knelt down. His breathing was calm, but his hands were tense. He didn't touch the wound, but he looked at it for a long time.

"When did this happen?" he asked.

The soldier, who had been trembling, replied. "Just now. Just now. We heard nothing. No fighting. No shouting. No... nothing at all. I turned around, and he was lying there like that."

"And you didn't see anyone?" Broc asked.

The man shook his head. "Nobody! Not even an animal! It was as if he... just fell."

"It didn't fall," said the sergeant. "It was opened."

We remained silent.

I thought of Moira. Of her vow. Of the knife. Of the figure in the forest who had been far too quiet.

And I understood: The first death stays in your mind.

Not because he's the first. But because he shows you that nothing is the same as yesterday.

The death of this boy—we barely knew his name, perhaps we'd heard it once, perhaps not—lay like a cold stone in our stomachs. Not because of his youth, though that was painful, not because of the way he lay there, though that was horrific. It was the absence of a struggle that shook us. No noise, no scuffling, no hoarse gasp. He had simply been...open. And we hadn't heard it. None of it. And that was worse than if he had fallen amid screams. Screams are human. Silence is not.

The sergeant straightened up, slowly, as if gravity were pressing down on him twice. "We'll bury him," he said quietly. "But not until we know what's going on."

"What's going on here?" Broc laughed, but it was a hard, brittle laugh. "There's a damn monster on the loose! One that slashes boys open without you even hearing it! What do you want to know before we get out of here? Do you want an invitation with a crest?"

The sergeant took a half step towards him. Not threateningly. Just close enough for Broc to understand: Not now.

"We're not running," said the sergeant. "Not until we know where we're going."

"Get away from that thing!" Broc snarled, but he lowered his gaze.

I looked at the boy. His body was still warm. His face was frozen in an expression that showed so much confusion it made me sick. As if he hadn't even been dying—just surprised. Suddenly in the ground. And then... gone.

Ruairi stood beside me, pale as fresh snow. "William..." he said softly. "Do you see this?"

He pointed to the ground beneath the boy.

It was barely visible. Just a fine, narrow mark. As if someone had pressed a finger into the earth and drawn it in a line. Not deep. But strangely smooth.

"What is it?" asked Aidan.

"A skid mark?" Tam asked.

"No." Ruairi knelt down. "Look."

The track wasn't continuous. It consisted of small, even impressions. Round. Smooth. Not an animal hoof, not a human step, not a shoe any of us had ever seen.

"That... doesn't fit with anything I know," Seoras murmured. "Not even with anything I know but don't like."

The sergeant stood there silently. Only his eyes moved, as if he were asking every tree if it had seen something.

"We're moving on," he finally said. "But we'll stay in close formation. Nobody goes alone. Not even to take a shit."

"I'll just shit in the grass," Tam muttered. "Everything here sucks anyway."

We lifted the boy onto a blanket. His arms dangled. He seemed lighter than a person should be. Perhaps because death always takes something with it that you can't grasp.

We set off again – but the march had changed. The men were no longer looking ahead, but to the sides. Into the woods. Up into the sky. Down at the ground. As if searching for an explanation that would never be found there.

The river rushed beside us. Normally a soothing sound, but today it sounded like someone laughing even though nothing was funny.

After a while, Aidan began to speak. Not loudly, more to himself: "It's not a human. It's not an animal. It's... something in between."

Seoras snorted. "The worst things are the ones in between."

"Do you think it's hunting us?" Ruairi asked.

Broc glanced at him. "Everything is hunting us. You should know that by now."

After an hour, the sergeant stopped. "We're taking a short break," he said. You could hear how difficult it was for him. "Just ten minutes."

We sat down. Or knelt. Or stood. Nobody really rested. The country seemed to want to eavesdrop on us.

The priest cleaned the dead boy's hands, as if he could give something back to him. He murmured words I didn't recognize. Words that were perhaps older than the priest himself.

I stood a few steps away. Moira's knife at my side felt warm. Too warm. As if it were alive. I pulled it a little from its sheath. Just a little. A glimmer of metal. And I saw it:

The metal was no longer pure. It was no longer just iron.

It had a thin, dark tinge. Almost black. Almost like a shadow that had settled on the blade.

I pulled it all the way out.

Aidan saw it first. "William. What about your knife?"

"I don't know," I said.

The blade was silent. But it vibrated. Invisibly. Only in my hand. As if it heard something I didn't.

"This is not normal," Ruairi said. "This is—"

"It's just a knife," I said. But I didn't believe it.

"This is not just," said Aidan.

Seoras approached us. He looked at the blade for a long time. Then at me.

"Who gave you this?"

I wanted to lie. I wanted to say: A trader. A villager. A brother. But the truth forced its way to the surface like water in a broken barrel.

"A woman," I said. "Yesterday. By the stream."

Seora's eyes narrowed. "What was her name?"

"Moir.".

The priest who had covered the boy abruptly raised his head. "Excuse me?"

"Moir," I repeated.

He stood up. Quickly. Too quickly for a man his age. "What did she look like?"

I described her. And as I spoke, his face grew paler and paler.

"What?" I asked.

The priest took a deep breath. "Moir is dead."

The word fell like a stone.

"For two years," he said. "She was from a village south of here. She disappeared. Just like Fiona. We found her veil, but never her body."

My heart skipped a beat.

"That's impossible," I said. "I saw her. I spoke to her. She—"

I paused.

She kissed me.

She gave me this knife.

She made me swear an oath.

"Moir is dead," the priest repeated. "And if you have seen anyone who looked like her, then..."

He looked into the forest. Not out of fear. But out of understanding.

"...then she chose you."

I felt the ground sway beneath me.

"Chosen... for what?" I asked.

The priest turned to me, slowly, deliberately, as if each of his words were a heavy stone.

"For what hunts here."

It became silent. Icy silent. The river seemed to hold its breath.

And then the sergeant said: "We're marching on. Immediately."

Everyone jumped up. No one asked the question that was burning in all our minds:

Why is something hunting a girl like Moira – and why did it notice me in particular?

But as we moved on – faster, more restlessly, our hands on our weapons – I felt something growing in my chest:

Not just fear. Not just anger.

A feeling that knew both, but lay deeper:

This will not be the last death.

And I will no longer be the person I was yesterday.

The march after the revelation about Moira was no longer a march at all. It was a stagger. A moving on, because stopping meant facing the fear that was hot on our heels. Every step felt heavy, as if the ground were growing sticky the deeper we marched into this land. The sergeant led us into a tighter formation, denser than before, almost like a herd that knows it is accompanied by a wolf it cannot see.

“William,” Aidan said at some point beside me, quietly, as if he were afraid the trees might be listening. “If that’s true... if Moira is dead...” He paused, catching his breath. “What kissed you yesterday?”

I didn’t know the answer. And I didn’t really want to say it, even if I had. I felt like a man whose heart had been ignited with a spark, just to see when he’d notice it. The coldness of the knife, the warmth I felt when I held it—none of it felt human. But Moira had felt human. Warm. Real. And that kiss... It hadn’t been like a ghost’s kiss. More like a promise from someone who knew the world was about to fall apart.

“I don’t know,” I finally said. “But it wasn’t... wrong. Not like something that wanted to kill me.”

“Maybe it doesn’t want that,” said Ruairi, who had overheard us unnoticed. “Maybe it just wants to pull you somewhere else.”

"Where to?" asked Aidan.

Ruairi looked into the forest as if he would find an answer there. "To where the others disappeared."

I wanted to argue. I wanted to scream at him. But the words stuck in my throat like stones. Because deep down, I’d had the same thought. Moira hadn’t simply been a girl who had disappeared. Maybe she was a sign. Maybe she was part of that thing out there. Or something opposed to it.

I rubbed my forehead, as if I could somehow organize my thoughts, but it was no use. The march dragged on, the sun shifted, and eventually we reached a hollow where the wind settled strangely gently, as if afraid of waking a sleeping beast.

“We’re resting here,” the sergeant said. It didn’t sound like an order, more like a necessity.

We sat in a circle. Close together. Too close. No one wanted any space. The dead boy lay further back, wrapped in a cloth. No one spoke his name. As if he had never existed. As if he had only been a warning whispered to us by the forest.

Broc sat silently for a while, then said dryly: "I've seen a lot of shit. Men without heads. Horses that still walk even though they're half-cut open. But this... this is different."

"Because you can't do anything about it," Seoras said. "Because it doesn't even give you the chance to do anything about it."

"Because it doesn't fight," Aidan murmured. "It just takes."

The word got stuck in a circle. Takes.

"We need to consider who we might encounter next," the sergeant finally said. "There are Englishmen here. Bandits. And..." He paused only briefly, but we heard it clearly. "...and other things."

"Say it," Broc demanded. "Say what you think."

The sergeant exhaled. "There are things in these woods that men talk about when they drink too much. Things older than kingdoms. I never took them seriously. But this—"

"This place takes women and slashes soldiers," Tam said. "So you have to take something seriously."

The priest clasped his hands. "Perhaps something will be asked of us. Perhaps this is—"

"Not a divine test," Broc growled. "If it were a test, he wouldn't bring in the wrong people."

The priest seemed about to reply, but he paused. One could see a doubt growing within him like a thorn bush.

"Perhaps it's an old curse," Ruairi said quietly.

Aidan snorted. "A curse?"

"Why not?" replied Ruairi. "Curses have to come from somewhere. Something must have happened a long time ago."

"Like Moira," I murmured.

Everyone looked at me.

I swallowed. "Maybe she was part of it too. Maybe this... thing didn't kill her. Maybe it changed her."

Seoras nodded slowly. "That's possible."

"Possible?" Aidan snarled. "We're talking about a woman who's been dead for two years kissing William yesterday! How is that even possible?!"

Seoras looked at him calmly. "Because yesterday we saw something that shouldn't exist. And if that exists, then maybe the other thing exists too."

A long, difficult moment followed. The wind, the river, the crack of a branch could be heard. And then the sergeant said:

"We march on. But we no longer march as men who only await England's steel. We march as men who know that we are not alone here."

With these words, we set off. The forest felt narrower. The trees stood closer together, as if watching us. I walked in front, closer to the sergeant than usual. Moira's knife pulsed slightly. Not strongly. Just enough to make me feel as if it were reminding me of something.

After a while, we reached an old path, barely visible. The priest stopped. "I know this way."

"Where does it lead?" asked the sergeant.

The priest pointed south, his finger trembling slightly. "To an old chapel. Abandoned. For a long time. It was there that they used to bless girls. When they came of age."

I felt like I couldn't breathe.

The Veil. Moira. Fiona. The Vanished Women. The Trail in the Earth. The Thing in the Woods.

Everything tightened like a fist.

"We're going there," the sergeant said immediately.

"Why?" asked Broc. "No one has prayed there for years."

"That's exactly why," said the sergeant. "Because it's a place that has answers."

We marched towards the chapel. The path became steeper, the ground softer, and the wind picked up again. As we climbed the last hill, we saw it.

A small, crumbling chapel made of grey stones, with a collapsed roof that looked like a cracked skull.

And before that –

A series of veils. Torn. Intertwined in the brambles. At least a dozen.

"Holy Mother of God," whispered the priest.

But I didn't see the veils at first.

I saw the tracks. The same ones we had discovered on the dead boy.

And I saw something else.

Fresh earth. And something white sticking out of it.

A bone.

Maybe an arm. Maybe a leg. Maybe something else.

“Seoras,” said the sergeant in a shaky voice.

Seoras knelt down and touched the earth.

“Someone has been digging here,” he said. “Someone... or something.”

I saw the bone. I saw the veils. I felt the knife at my side.

And I knew:

The first death stays in your mind. But he doesn't stay alone.

Something old was here. Something that took. Something that waited.

And perhaps – something Moira knew.

Fire in the fields, fire in the breast

The chapel didn't look like a sacred place. It looked like an old maw that hadn't swallowed anything for years and was now rotting away, offended. The stones were wet, moss-covered, and cracked in places. The roof had collapsed on one side, leaving a gap that resembled a poorly healed wound. And everywhere, in the thorns and on the scree, hung these veils. Torn, frayed scraps of fabric, stirred by the wind now and then like ghosts undecided about whether to stay or leave. White, bloody, gray with the grime of years—as if someone had hung the innocence of a dozen women out to dry like laundry and then forgotten about it.

The priest stood there looking as if someone had hammered the air out of his chest. His fingers gripped the small cross on his chest so tightly that his knuckles turned pale. “Here...” he whispered, “this is where girls used to be blessed. Before their weddings. Before their first child. Before the life that would consume them. They said the chapel was a place of refuge.” He gave a short, bitter laugh. “Refuge. Look at this.”

The sergeant walked between the veils as if wading through memories that weren't his. Seoras followed him, her eyes fixed on the ground. Fresh earth everywhere, disturbed, unfinished. Not proper graves, more like holes quickly filled in so no one would ask why they were there in the first place. And from one of those holes protruded this bone, white and dull, as if it had already lost all desire for this world.

"Count them," the sergeant said tersely.

"What?", asked Aidan.

"The veils," he said. "Everything that hangs. Everything that is torn. Everything that once belonged to someone you loved or wanted to love."

We counted. I heard my own voice counting in my head, not loud, but clearly. One. Two. Five. Eight. Twelve. Thirteen. Thirteen veils, trembling in the wind like final questions. The priest closed his eyes, as if the number itself possessed a blade.

"Thirteen," said Seoras.

"Thirteen women," the priest murmured. "Or more. Not all of them wear veils. Some only wear fear."

Ruairi stood beside one of the thorn bushes, where a veil fluttered particularly high. He reached out, about to touch it, then withdrew his hand. "Do you think...", he began, "that one of them was Moira?"

The priest nodded slowly. "I recognize the embroidery on one of them. Yes. One is hers. Or was."

The knife at my side grew heavier. It pulled at me, as if drawing me closer to this dilapidated chapel, closer to the earth, closer to the bones. I took a few steps forward until I was almost standing under the gap in the eaves. From there, the light streamed in at an angle, striking the old stone altar, which looked as if it hadn't been used for years to bless bread and wine. Now it was just a surface covered with dust, dirt, and what looked like burnt flower petals.

"Fire," I murmured.

The sergeant looked at me. "What?"

I pointed at the altar. "Someone has burned something here. Not just wood. That's not ordinary soot."

Seoras stepped forward and rubbed it a little with two fingers. "It smells different," he said. "Not like wood. Like oil. Like herbs. Like..." He sniffed. "...like fear."

Broc snorted. "Since when can fear burn?"

"Ever since people started stuffing them into rituals," the priest said wearily, "and then blaming them on God."

There was something in the air, heavier than the humidity. A pressure, as if the air itself were pressing down on us. I felt my heart race, even though I was standing still. I thought of Moira, of her gaze, of the kiss that didn't feel lifeless. And of the knife, which suddenly wasn't just metal anymore, but a key, a pledge, an oath. Maybe all of them at once.

"We can't stay here," Aidan said quietly. "Not anywhere near this place."

The sergeant nodded. "We're not staying either. This isn't a campsite. It's a mass grave with decorations." He pointed in the direction we had come from. "We're moving on. But first – clear our backs."

"What do you mean?" asked Tam.

The sergeant looked at the marks on the ground, those strange round impressions that belonged to nothing and no one we knew. "We're not the only ones finding our way here," he said. "And I don't want that thing, whatever it is, catching us off guard from behind. So we're burning the chapel down."

The priest flinched. "No," he exclaimed. "That's..."

"A place the thing knows," the sergeant interrupted. "And if we've learned one thing, it's that it steals its places. Women. Men. Veils. Souls. Whatever you want to call it."

"It is still a house of God," said the priest, but his voice was no longer steady.

"If it's a house of God," Broc growled, "then God hasn't paid the rent for a long time."

I looked at the chapel. It no longer seemed like a sacred place. It seemed like a hole inhabited by something that enjoyed seeing people kneeling there. A place where hope had been transformed into fear, piece by piece, veil by veil.

"Is she burning?" I said quietly.

The priest looked at me, surprised, hurt, as if I had just insulted his mother. "You too, William?"

"If the thing has places where it thinks we're not looking," I said, "then that's exactly where we should bring the fire."

Seoras nodded. "Fire takes and gives," he said. "It consumes, but it also makes visible. And sometimes that's the only thing that remains."

The sergeant gave the order. Men gathered dry wood, as dry as could be found in this damp world. They brought old blankets, straw scraps, anything that would burn. The priest stood for a moment, lost amidst the veils that trembled above him. Then he stepped to the altar, placed his hand on the cold stone, and whispered a few words I didn't understand. Perhaps a farewell. Perhaps an apology. Perhaps both.

Broc lit the first torch. The wind hesitated, as if deciding whether to help or hinder. Then the fire took the torch, climbed it, and greedily devoured whatever was thrown to it. The first flame touched the old wood of the door. It crackled. It smelled of dust, of cobwebs, of old promises no one had kept.

"Do it properly," said the sergeant. "We don't need a sad flicker. We need a clear signal."

It wasn't long before the chapel was ablaze. First tentatively, then more wildly. The roof, already half-rotted, began to glow, then to burn, then to collapse in on itself. Sparks flew into the sky, mingling with the veils that now caught fire. One after another, they began to burn, like small, angry white birds that rose briefly and then perished.

Fiona's sister wasn't here, but I thought of her. Of all the women who had disappeared somewhere in these hills. Perhaps underground. Perhaps inside something that didn't deserve

the name we wanted to give it. And for the first time, I felt a fire inside me that wasn't just anger.

It was something else. A mixture of guilt and determination. As if someone had plunged a torch into my core and said: There. Now you're burning too.

The priest stood with his head bowed, then raised it and looked into the flames. "If this is a mistake," he said hoarsely, "then I pray that it is at least an honest one."

"Honest mistakes are the only ones I can tolerate," said the sergeant.

We stepped back as the roof finally collapsed, sending a cloud of sparks and smoke shooting into the sky. It looked as if someone had tried to set fire to a piece of the night. I placed my hand on my chest, felt my heart pounding, rough and hard, as if it wanted to burst from my ribs and burn up there with me.

"Fire in the fields," Seoras murmured, more to himself. "And fire in the men. Sometimes you need both to change things."

The wind shifted, caught the smoke, and carried it south. To where the English were. To where battles awaited, battles in which the enemy had names and flags. A different war. More tangible. More predictable. Almost friendly compared to what lurked here in these hills.

"We're leaving," the sergeant said curtly. "Now."

We left the burning chapel behind. No song. No prayer. Only the taste of soot in our mouths and the thought that we had set fire to something that might burn longer than we lived. In the fields beside the hill stood dry grass, which caught fire alarmingly easily when a spark drifted over. A small flame devoured the yellow, like a thought growing ever larger.

"Will the village survive this?" Aidan asked.

"The village, yes," said Seoras. "The church, no. Perhaps it's better that way."

I looked back. Fire in the fields. Fire in the sky. And in my chest, something that wouldn't go out. Not a beautiful, warm fireplace. More like a low, stubbornly burning core of embers. The thought that there were things I no longer wanted to allow. Not while I was still standing. Not while I could still hold a sword. Or that damned knife.

We marched on south, towards the other war. But no matter how many more Englishmen might fall victim to our blades, I knew: what remained here in the hills was perhaps worse. And it had seen me. About Moira. About a kiss. About a vow of steel.

I was no longer just a bastard who had screamed into the rain. I was now someone touched by something outside of all this. And although I hated it, I had to admit it: I was burning. Not visibly, not loudly. Inside. Silently. And this fire would either make me strong.

Or eventually eat them from the inside out.

The smoke from the burning chapel still clung to our clothes as we continued marching south. It was that sweet, heavy smell of burning that seeps into fabric, skin, and memory. You can't

get it out, no matter how often you wash. If you wash at all. Behind us, the hill flickered as if someone had cut a wound into the landscape and stuffed it with fire. Not a pleasant farewell, but an honest one. At least we knew that whatever was up there now had one less place to make itself comfortable.

The landscape opened up before us. Fewer trees, more fields. Or what had once been fields. The earth looked tired, trampled, torn by too many boots. Here and there, a few rows of grain still stood, half-dead, yellowish, bent. Other fields had already been burned, leaving only black stubble sticking out of the ground like charred fingers. In the distance, I saw plumes of smoke. Not from us. Not from the chapel anymore. Other fires. Other stories.

"Englishmen," Seoras said at one point, more to himself than to us. "That's their writing: fire on foreign fields."

"They write in capital letters," Aidan murmured.

The sergeant raised his hand, the order rippling through the ranks like a jolt. Halt. We stopped. No neighing, no shouts, no clanging of metal. Only the wind, rustling through the burnt stalks, as if searching for what had once grown there.

"This is fresh," said Broc, kneeling down. He took some ash between his fingers and rubbed it. "Still warm."

"Maybe half a day," Seoras said. "Maybe less."

"Then they're not far," the sergeant said. His voice was matter-of-fact, but I heard that slight, almost hungry twang beneath it. The twang of a man who would rather strike than wait.

We moved closer together, marched on, slower, more anxiously. Between two fields, a farmhouse appeared – a pitiful structure of wood and clay, with a crooked roof and a fenced-in patch of earth where livestock might once have grazed. Now there was nothing there. The gate hung open, as if someone had not only opened it but had also made it impossible to close.

"Attention," said the sergeant. "No one runs ahead. No one falls behind."

We approached the farmyard. No smoke from the chimney. No chickens fluttering about. No dogs. Everything seemed like a stage where the play had already been performed, and only the scenery remained to tell the story of how awful the ending was.

The courtyard was burned. Not completely, just in streaks, as if fires had been set here and there to create panic. A wooden cart lay overturned, its wheel broken. The door of the hut had been kicked in. The wood was splintered, a few dark stains ran across the floor. Blood. Not much, but enough to say: This place had been more than just fire.

"Form up," the sergeant ordered. "Two men on the right, two on the left, the rest in the middle."

We spread out as we'd been taught. Shields raised, swords loose, eyes open. I felt the knife at my side, as if it had tilted slightly forward. I didn't like it, but I couldn't change it.

The sergeant was the first to enter the hut. The stench hit him—cold smoke, sweat, something old and metallic. I followed him in, along with Seoras. The light was dim. Clutter everywhere. Overturned stools, a shattered jug, scattered rags. Two simple crosses hung on the wall. One had been torn down and lay broken on the floor.

There was a body lying in the corner.

An old man, gray beard, thin, almost translucent. His eyes were open, but they could see nothing. His chest was crushed, as if someone had stepped on it with full force. No clean cut, no stab wound. Just raw violence. Next to him lay a woman, perhaps his wife, perhaps a daughter; it was impossible to tell from that angle. Her face was blue, her neck discolored. Marks of strangulation. Fingers. Too thick, too strong for her slender hands.

“Englishmen,” Seoras said quietly. No question mark.

“Yes,” said the sergeant. “This is their style.”

"They didn't even loot," I said. "They just destroyed things."

“Power is sometimes exactly that,” the sergeant said. “Not taking what you want, but destroying what you don’t need.”

Someone outside shouted, "Sergeant!"

We turned around and stepped out into the yard. Tam and Aidan stood at the edge of the field, their arms tense, their faces unsure whether to be angry or disgusted. Beside them lay a body in the grass. Not a Scotsman. An Englishman.

He lay on his back, eyes wide open, mouth slightly ajar. His armor was half-charred, his chainmail ripped open at one side. His skin was burned, but not by fire alone. His hands were clenched, his fingers digging into the ground like claws. A gaping hole yawned between his ribs and stomach. Not from a sword. Again, that thing too broad, too deep, too unnaturally smooth.

"Not him," said Tam. "You didn't kill him, did you?"

“It wasn’t me,” said Aidan. “At least I can’t remember it.”

Seoras knelt down, his face hardening even more than usual. "This isn't an English wound again," he said. "They usually die more beautifully. With their neat cuts and tidy stitches. This... is something else."

“He was writhing around as he died,” said the sergeant. “Do you see the marks?” He pointed to the ground. Again those fine, round impressions, as if someone had drawn through the earth with a strange rod or a series of small wheels. “And it went right into the man’s armor like a bullet.”

"So it doesn't just eat ours," Broc said. "It eats theirs too."

A lousy consolation. But at least some kind of compensation.

“If the thing takes the English,” said Aidan, “why are they still burning the fields?”

“Because they don’t know they’re being hunted,” the sergeant said. “Or because they don’t care. To those at the top, we’re all just food. And to that thing... too.”

The priest came closer and looked at the dead Englishman. “Perhaps this is justice,” he said softly. “Perhaps what hunts here is the answer to everything they did to us.”

“I don’t want justice that has no face,” Broc growled. “I want an enemy where I know where to strike.”

I understood him. I, too, wanted someone I could hate without having to worry about whether they even thought like us. The English were pigs, but understandable pigs. They had voices, hands, faces, bones that broke. And I felt something stir within me, a gratitude that they existed. That there was an enemy that wasn’t made of shadows and sounds.

“We have to find them,” said the sergeant. “The English. And convince them that they are not the only ones who can burn.”

The plan, if you can call it that, was simply a slap in the face: We would continue south, come across the road the English used for their troops, and meet them there. Not an ambush in the classic sense, more like an ugly encounter between two groups of men who had plenty of reason to hate each other. And looming over everything was this invisible thing, lurking somewhere, perhaps even laughing.

The march dragged on, but this time there was something sharp in the air. The fire at our backs, the dead in the hut, the dead Englishman in the field – it all burned within us. Ruairi walked beside me, his face pinched, his hands clenched into fists.

"I'm scared," he said suddenly. Just like that. Without any hesitation.

"Good," I said. "Then you're not dead yet."

“I’m afraid of that thing,” he said. “But of the English... I’m afraid of something else.”

"What?"

He thought for a moment. "Anger."

I had to grin. "That's a start."

When we reached the road—a rutted strip of earth where wagon wheels had left deep tracks—we saw them. At first, just as dust. Then as dark specks. Then as a line of men, suits of armor, horses. Not many. Fewer than you need for a major battle. But enough for a taste.

“Vanguard,” said the sergeant. “If we catch them, we’ll get their eyes before they betray us to the rest.”

He gave orders, short and to the point. Shield line in the trench, spearmen on the sides, archers – the few we had – a little further back. No elaborate plan, just what always remains: men in ranks, hoping they don't make the wrong decision at the right moment.

I stood at the front. Next to Tam, next to Aidan. My heart was pounding, but not like the creature in the woods. It wasn't a paralyzing fear. It was a different kind of fire. One I knew. One that said: Now you can make someone pay for what they think they're entitled to do with your land.

The English were drawing nearer. Their faces were visible. Dusty, but arrogant. Their flag was visible, a piece of cloth pretending to be more than just woven yarn. Their horses were visible, proud and well-fed. Their weapons were visible.

"You can see us," Aidan said.

"Good," I said. "Then we don't need to introduce her."

The sergeant raised his sword. No grand speech. No god, no king, no glory. Just: "Hold the line."

When the English were close enough, one of them shouted something. I didn't understand the words, but the tone was universal: mockery, condescension. They still thought this was going to be a warm-up.

I felt my grip tighten. I felt the sword in my right hand, the knife on my left. I felt Tam's back against my shield, Aidan beside me, Ruairi behind us. A chain of flesh, fear, and rage.

Then they met us.

The impact was a sound of wood, metal, bone, and curses. Shields clashed, horses neighed, men roared. The Englishman in front of me was taller than I was, but his expression was one of surprise when the line of "wild Scots" didn't give way. His sword came from above; I raised my shield, the blow vibrating through my arm. He wound up again, but this time I was quicker. I stepped forward, shoving him in the chest with my shield, barely a step, but enough to make him stagger.

There it was, that small window of time, that hole in the moment in which you decide whether you live or die.

My sword came from below, finding the gap between his chainmail and the leather. I didn't feel it pierce. I only felt his weight suddenly fall against me. A warm rush ran over my hand, my fingers, the sword.

Blood.

He looked at me. For just a heartbeat. No long monologue, no final curse. Just a brief, surprised, almost offended glance. Then he slumped away, disappeared into the chaos of legs, collapses, and jolts.

That was my first Englishman.

I thought I would feel something. Guilt. Triumph. Disgust. None of that came as I had imagined. What came was a hot, wild surge in my chest. A fire that spread from my stomach up to my throat, into my head. Not beautiful. Not noble. Just raw.

“One more!” Tam yelled beside me, pulling a rider off his horse who had drifted into the second row.

I roared back. Not with words. Just with my throat. The air tasted of iron and dust and fear, but I was right in the thick of it. And in that moment, I didn't care about the creatures in the forest. Veils. Chapels. Curses. There was only steel, flesh, and the simple, ugly thought: You or me.

When we finally broke the English—and we did break them, though it was a close call—the last of them ran off south. Back to their masters, back to their army, back to those men who think the world is theirs. Some of our men wanted to follow, but the sergeant held them back.

“We are not dogs,” he said. “We showed them we have fire. That’s enough for today.”

I stood there, breathing heavily, my sword dripping, my legs weak. The dead Englishman at my feet looked like all the other dead men. The color of his flag made no difference.

My chest was burning.

Not just because I had lived.

But because I had realized: I could kill. And it didn't feel as wrong as it perhaps should have.

I wiped the sword on the man's cloak, sheathed it, and instinctively placed my hand on Moira's knife. It was cool. Quieter. As if this part of the evening hadn't been necessary.

“Fire in the fields,” I thought. “Fire on the tongue. Fire in the chest.”

And somewhere back there in the north, the chapel was still burning.

That was Scotland at that moment: a land ablaze on all sides. Some were lighting fires, others were burning. And I was right in the middle of it, a bastard with a sword and a knife from a dead woman who might not have been dead.

I knew this was only the beginning. The first Englishman falls, then the others become easier. Just like the first death in your own camp. You get used to it. You become numb. Or you become more hardened. I didn't yet know what would become of me. But I suspected that the spark they had lit in me—Moira, the thing in the woods, the English, the burned farm—would never go out.

It was burning. And I burned with it.

After the battle, the silence was the worst part. Not the screams, not the clang of metal, not the groans of the wounded—all of that was as much a part of it as rain is to our cursed land. But when all that slowly subsided and only this dull, distorted silence remained, then the reckoning truly came. The English lay in the dirt, some motionless, others still trembling like fish that hadn't realized the stream had long since stopped flowing. A few of ours lay there too. Some just sat, their backs against a stone, their hands on a wound they ignored until their bodies forced them to take it seriously. Blood everywhere, in dark, already thickening stains. The ground took it as it always had, as if it had never done anything else.

The sergeant moved through the chaos like someone sorting through the remnants of a disastrous market day. He checked who was still standing, who was still breathing, who was merely pretending. Names were called out, some answered, some not. If someone didn't respond, they were called a second time. If there was still no answer, it was clear that the earth had claimed them. No drumming, no fanfare, just a mental checkmark: one less. Broc counted quietly, as if trying to reassure himself that there weren't that many. "Four," he murmured. "Five. Five of us." He glanced at the English. "But there are more of them down." The sergeant nodded, but it was clear: numbers don't make death any easier, they just make it more manageable in your own mind.

I stood there, the sword still in my hand, even though there was no longer any reason to. My fingers wouldn't let go of the hilt, as if afraid that without steel between them they might begin to tremble. The Englishman I had captured lay before me. He looked smaller now. The pride had drained from his face; all that remained was a man who had thought his side was in the right. Just like us. I waited for something. Regret, perhaps. Disgust. A kind of nausea that reminded me that I had once been nothing more than the bastard in a hut. But nothing came. Only a dull, quiet emptiness—and beneath it, that flickering in my chest, as if someone had lit a stove and forgotten to close the damper.

"You should wipe the sword," Seoras said beside me. "If the blood dries, it'll tell you you're an idiot the next time you strike." I looked at the blade. It still gleamed, red, moist, alive in a way. I knelt down, grabbed the Englishman's cloak, pulled it toward me, and ran the blade over it until the steel was clean. The blood clung to the fabric, as if the man's only purpose now was to keep my tool clean. It felt brutal, but honest. Maybe this was what honesty in war meant.

Tam sat a few steps away on a rock, his hand on his shoulder where a sword had grazed him. He grimaced, but he didn't curse much. "It burns," he said when I sat down beside him. "But at least I wasn't ripped open like that boy by the river." He looked at me, and for a moment there was something soft behind the hardness in his gaze that he couldn't hide very well. "That thing out there," he murmured, "it won't eat us all. Not yet. Perhaps we should be grateful to the English for giving us something familiar every now and then."

Aidan arrived, sweaty, with a crack in his helmet, but otherwise unharmed. He simply sat down in the dirt, letting himself fall as if his legs weren't quite sure they still belonged to him. "I punched him in the face," he said quietly. "The rider. First with the shield, then with the sword hilt. I didn't think I could do that before. You know, just like that. In the face. Without asking." He laughed briefly, the fake, nervous laugh you learn when you don't want to burst into tears. "Now I know I can do it." His eyes glazed over for a moment. "I don't know if that's a good thing."

"Good or bad is over," I said. "Now it's just: can you or can't you. The rest comes later, when you get old. When you get old." The "when" stood there like a wall no one likes to run into. Some of us would get old, most wouldn't. The difference often lay in half a step, a flat stone, an unraveled blade.

Ruairi stood slightly apart, sword in hand, but clean. He hadn't engaged a direct opponent, just held his position as best he could. Sweat beaded on his forehead, his eyes far too large. He didn't look like a fellow fighter, more like someone who had woken up by chance next to a battle. "I didn't kill anyone," he said when I approached. "Is that bad?" "No," I said. "It becomes bad when you start wanting to." He nodded, but I could see that this consolation

didn't do him much good. He didn't want to be a coward, but he didn't want to become a murderer either. Life had placed him between two roles and said: Choose. Except he wasn't ready to.

The sergeant had the dead collected. Ours were given blankets, names, and quiet words. The English were given earth. "Bury them shallowly," he said. "Not out of respect, but so the ravens know where to begin." The priest gave him a brief, painful look but said nothing. He murmured his prayers in his head, and the gods could choose whose side they wanted to be on today, if they even felt like listening.

We made camp at the edge of the field, away from the dead, but close enough that we wouldn't forget them. The fire was small, economical, didn't need much wood because it had enough else to burn: our thoughts, our remaining morale, the last vestige of belief that anything could be done right here. Broc handed out water, no rations from the barrel. "No whiskey today," he said. "You're already hot enough." Some grumbled, but no one really objected. Throats were dry, but they always were. I sat there, the sword beside me, the knife in my hand. I turned it between my fingers, slowly, as if trying to ask the blade what it wanted from me. The dark vein I'd seen earlier was still there. Not large, not noticeable, but there. A shadow in the metal. I ran my thumb over it. It was smoother than the rest of the blade, almost like glass. It didn't feel like something the smith had intended.

The priest eventually sat down beside me, heavy, tired, as if he had aged inside more than his face showed. "This is her knife," he said. "Moira's. I saw it before she disappeared. She carried it like others carry a cross." I looked at him. "Why did she give it to me?" He didn't answer at first. Instead, he looked across at the fields where the earth was still dark from the English fire. "Some people sense things before they happen," he said then. "They know something is coming. A war. A man. A death. Maybe she sensed she was falling and passed the knife to someone who would still be standing." "That sounds like she knew she was dying." "Perhaps she didn't die," he said, quietly, almost reluctantly. "Perhaps she only went where the thing that's stalking our land reigns." "And me?" I asked. "What am I then? A messenger?" The priest looked at my hands, at my scars, at my eyes. "Perhaps you are the one it has chosen. Or the one who stands in its way. Perhaps both."

Theories are of little help when night falls. Eventually, we lay down, as far as lying down could be called. More like falling. The weariness wasn't ordinary weariness. It was heavy, tenacious, sitting on my chest. I lay on my back, gazing at the sky, which always remained the same, regardless of whether someone below was dying or laughing. Stars were barely visible; the clouds held sway. I groped for the piece of wood from my cradle, which I still carried in my pocket, and for Moira's knife. An old memory and a new vow, side by side in a dirty hand.

Sleep didn't come right away. When it did, it was fragmented. I dreamed of fire—not the chapel, not the fields, but flames coming from people, from their eyes, their mouths, their wounds. I dreamed of a shadow that passed through the fire without being burned. It stopped, right in front of me, and I recognized Moira's face in the darkness. Not beautiful, not soft. Just serious. "You're burning," she said. "But you don't know what for yet." I wanted to ask her something, but the shadow behind her grew larger, swallowing her and the fire and everything, until only that vibrating hum remained, the same one I'd heard in the village that night.

I woke with a pounding heart, my mouth dry, my hands clenched. It was still dark, the camp half asleep, half awake, as it eventually learns to be. The dog, who hadn't left us since the

village, lay at the edge of the fire, his eyes open. He stared north. Away from the English. Towards where the chapel had burned. Towards where we had set fire to something, something no one knew whether it was just stone and wood or something more.

Fire in the fields, fire in my chest. The thought wouldn't leave me. We were no longer just men running towards an army. We were part of something bigger than flags and orders. Something that moved in the forests, in old chapels, in veils, in knives, in the minds of those who could no longer sleep at night.

In the morning, the sergeant would wake us, urge us on, drive us south again, after the English, towards the next battle, the next attempt to prove something to the king. But deep down, I knew: the war against the English was only half the story. The other half was the thing lurking in the shadows. And I was now tied to it by a thread, whether I liked it or not.

I turned onto my side, pulled my coat tighter around me, felt the knife at my hip and the small piece of wood against my heart. I thought of my mother. My father. Moira. Fiona. The boy by the river. The Englishman at my feet. They were all part of the fire that now burned within me. It wasn't a beautiful, warm flicker. It was a hungry, impatient light that asked: When will we continue?

And I knew: It would continue. With mud, blood, and brothers in the dirt.

Bandits, peasants, brothers in the dirt

The next morning didn't begin with a bugle, not with a grand command, but with a curse. Broc kicked the sole of someone's foot who'd been pretending to be dead for too long, and somewhere in the camp, someone's knee slammed against a pot. That was our wake-up call: metal on tin, a shout, a curse, a few tired laughs. That's what the army sounded like when it was honest. No drums, no fanfares, just men who couldn't remember whether they'd seen too much blood or slept too little the night before.

I woke with a body that felt as if someone had reassembled it in the night, but forgotten a few pieces. Every muscle protested, my shoulder ached even though there was no wound, and the afterglow of yesterday still burned in my chest. The Englishman was no longer lying in front of me, but he was still there, somewhere behind my eyes, a ghostly outline. Not powerful, not tall. Just a face I recognized now. Most men carry their dead around with them, their whole lives, like stones in a pocket, which they claim are keepsakes.

"Get up, you heroes," Broc growled, kicking Tam in the sole of his foot once more. "The world won't wait until you're well-rested."

"The world can go fuck itself," Tam muttered, but sat up anyway. He rubbed his eyes, then his shoulder, then his neck, as if checking to make sure everything was still attached. "Am I still alive?"

"Yes," I said. "Unfortunately."

"Good," he said. "Then I can disappoint someone again today."

We packed up. It never took long – we never carried much. A few blankets, a few pots, weapons that we stroked more than ourselves because they were the only things that really mattered around here. The sergeant was already standing, as if he'd spent the night on his feet, his gaze fixed south, where the road cut a brown scar across the land.

"Today we're staying away from the road," he said. "English people aren't the only ones out there."

"Oh, do we have competition now?" Aidan mocked.

"Bandits," said the sergeant. "People who don't carry a flag, but are just as happy to kill. Sometimes worse, because they have no king to prove anything to."

"Bandits are more likely to steal than to kill," Tam said. "At least the clever ones are."

Seoras snorted. "There aren't many clever bandits."

We left the field, the road remaining a safe distance to our right, a constant companion we didn't want to let get any closer. The ground became uneven again, full of holes and small hills that could twist your foot if you weren't careful. The land was full of traps, even though not a single one was made of rope or iron. The mere presence of gravity was enough.

The sun struggled to break through the clouds, but didn't penetrate properly. That greasy, gray light remained, making everything look the same: trees, sky, faces. You could have hidden the dead among the living today, and some wouldn't have been noticed.

We marched in a loose formation, shields at our sides, swords at the ready, spears over our shoulders. Everyone kept a little more distance than usual, because everyone knew that today it wasn't just the English who were our problem. Scotsmen could be scoundrels too, if they were far enough from their own village.

"Bandits," Ruairi muttered beside me. "Aren't we bandits ourselves?"

"We're not stealing anyone's last loaf of bread," I said. "At most, we're stealing the English's breath."

"Bandits say that too," he said quietly.

I didn't have an answer to that that I liked.

At midday we stopped at a ruined wall that had once belonged to a farmyard. Now it was just a pile of stones lying in the grass like teeth knocked out of a ruin. The sergeant signaled for a short rest, and we sat down, drank water, and chewed on hard bread that was more suitable as a weapon.

That's when we saw her.

At first I thought they were farmers, simply too curious to ignore us. Three figures, at the edge of a small hill, slow, cautious, observant. No armor, just rough clothing, coats, hoods. One carried something over his shoulder that looked like a spade. They stopped when they

realized we had seen them. One of those silent seconds when the world briefly pretends to be breathless.

"Friends of yours?" Tam murmured.

"If these were my friends, I wouldn't be here," I said.

The sergeant stood up without moving his hand towards his sword. Not yet. "Come closer!" he shouted. "Or get out! I don't do things halfway!"

The men looked at each other as if they were voting. Then one of them approached. Slowly, his hands visible, open but not raised. A thin fellow, with a bushy beard, he had seen better days. His eyes were narrow, alert, accustomed to assessing danger.

"We are just farmers," he said when he was close enough.

"Then you have damn hungry fields," said Broc. "They look like they haven't eaten in weeks."

The man smiled crookedly. "Farmers without fields are just beggars with dirt on their boots."

"What do you want?" asked the sergeant, matter-of-factly.

The man looked past us, taking in the weapons, our armor, the way we sat: never completely relaxed, always half-asleep. "We want to know if you'll kill us," he said. "Or if you have the same enemy as us."

"Englishmen?" Seoras asked.

"Among others," the man said.

That didn't sound good.

"What's your name?" I asked.

He looked at me as if he hadn't expected anyone to ask his name. "Dougal," he said after a short pause. "I'm from back there." He gestured vaguely north. "It used to be a farm. Now it's... ash with memories."

"Englishmen?" Aidan asked.

"Some," said Dougal. "The others were..." He paused. "...I don't know what they were."

We knew better than we would have liked.

The sergeant beckoned him closer. "Sit down," he said. "Eat. And talk."

Dougal ducked his head slightly, as if fearing a trap, but then approached anyway. Two of the men in the background stopped, one kneeling, the other half-hidden behind a rock. They weren't stupid. Trust was a luxury here.

Dougal sat down on a stone, took the bread Tam offered him, and bit into it as if he hadn't had a proper meal in days. His jaw was working, but his eyes remained alert, scanning our faces as if searching for something to soothe him. He wouldn't find it here.

"You fought against them, didn't you?" he asked. "Against the English."

"Just now," said the sergeant. "They burned the field and the people. We gave something back to them."

Dougal nodded slowly. "They took everything," he said. "First wood. Then grain. Then cattle. Then children for their work. Then men for the war. And when there was nothing left to take, they set fire to what was still standing."

"That's how they like to do it," Broc grumbled.

"And when they were gone," Dougal continued, "the others came."

"What does 'the others' mean?" I asked, even though I already knew the answer.

Dougal looked at me, and in his gaze was something I'd recognized since The Man by the River: that faint flicker between madness and lucidity. "I don't know how to tell them," he murmured. "They're... too big. Too fast. Too quiet. They don't talk. They smell of—"

"Power," I blurted out before I could stop myself.

He shook his head. "No. Different. English people smell of power. Those people smell of... hunger."

It was just one word. But it hit home. Hunger is something we all knew. Hunger doesn't just eat your stomach, it eats your thoughts, your pride, your faith. When it grows strong enough, you do things you never thought you'd do. And that's exactly what he was describing.

"Have you seen her?" Ruairi asked quietly.

Dougal nodded. "I've seen one," he said. "One. And that's enough for the rest of my life."

"What did he look like?" asked the priest.

"Like three men stacked on top of each other," Dougal said. "Shoulders like tree trunks. Arms like branches. Legs like posts. But not heavy. He moved like a man who knows where his foot is going before he puts it down." He shuddered. "He took my brother. Not just punched or cut him. He took him like he was picking up a child. And then... he was gone. Into the darkness."

"Have you found his brother again?" Seoras asked.

Dougal looked at him, and his answer was in a way worse than any yes or no.

"Only parts."

Silence. Again, that damned, sticky silence.

“And you?” Dougal then asked, as if he wanted to move away from his own images. “You are not peasants. Not bandits. None of those who only plunder because they don’t know what else to do. You look like you know where you’re going.”

"When you find that out, tell me," said Tam.

The sergeant took over. “We’re marching south. Against an army that thinks it can divide our country like a piece of bread. But the road there is full of... other things.”

“You saw them too,” Dougal said. No question mark.

I nodded. "In the village. At night. At the chapel. By the boy by the river."

Dougal breathed heavily. "Then it's not a figment of my imagination. Not a curse that only exists in my head."

“No,” I said. “If so, then we are all cursed.”

“There are bandits around here too,” Seoras interjected. “People who like to ransack farms and streets alike. You’re not one of them, are you?”

Dougal sighed. "Bandits have something we don't: choice."

That was one of those answers that briefly makes you feel like the world is even more complicated than you thought.

"You can come with us," said the sergeant. "If you want. Peasants can become fighters."

"And then what?" asked Dougal. "Do you die for someone whose name you don't know?"

The sergeant barely shrugged. "In the end, you always die for someone you don't know. Or for something that doesn't thank you."

Dougal thought for a moment. “We have no more fields,” he said. “No farm. No animals. If we stay here, either the English or the others will eat us. Or starve. Perhaps it’s better to die with men who still know what they are.”

“And what are we?” asked Aidan, half mockingly, half seriously.

Seoras answered before the sergeant could. "Brothers in the dirt," he said. "It won't get any better in this life."

Dougal looked at his hands. Calloused, cracked, covered in dirt and old bloodstains. Then he looked at ours. And for the first time, he grinned properly. Not a pretty grin, but a genuine one. "Then I guess we're halfway there," he said.

And so they became part of our group. Farmers who no longer had fields. Men who had too little to live on and too much to die from. Some called them bandits right away, others saw them as just extra mouths. I looked at them and thought: There's not much difference between us anymore. Farmers, bandits, soldiers—we all lay in the same filth, we shared it, we froze in

it, we bled into it. And if we were lucky, one day we would disappear into it before anything more was taken from us.

In the afternoon, a rain began that didn't want to be a rain at all—just a fine, sticky drizzle, not enough to clear the air, but enough to make our clothes heavier. We trudged on, nothing major happened, no battle, no monster, just this constant awareness: It's there. Englishmen. Bandits. The Thing in the Shadows. The world full of teeth, and we right in the middle of it, brothers in the dirt, pretending to still be whole human beings.

And deep in my chest, that fire continued to smolder. Calmly. Tenaciously. It waited. For the next encounter. For the next decision. For the moment when peasants and bastards would have to become something more than just fodder.

The rain didn't stay gentle and polite for long. After an hour, it fell in thick, dull drops that felt as if the sky were trying to send us home—except none of us knew where "home" was anymore. The earth soon transformed into a single gray-brown mass that clung to our boots like a memory that wouldn't let go. We kept walking, more swimming than marching, and each of us slowly began to look like a sack full of wet stones.

Dougal and his two men were now walking with us. One was named Murn—a taciturn fellow with a face that looked like a poorly carved wooden figure. The other was barely twenty, a lanky boy named Cailean who hadn't yet grasped that this country wouldn't respect his youth. He carried a stick he called a "spear," and although I didn't laugh at him for it, I had to fight back a grin. When I was his age, I'd thought a stick would save my life, too. They sometimes do, but not in the way you'd like.

"How much further to Stirling?" Aidan asked at one point, while rubbing the rain out of his eyes.

The sergeant gave him a look that spoke volumes, even without words: We'll arrive when we arrive. "A few days," he said tersely. "If nothing stops us."

"And what could possibly stop us?" Tam asked mockingly, as if he had forgotten what chapter of our lives we were in.

"Englishmen," said Broc. "Bandits," said Seoras. "The thing," I said.

All three were correct.

We marched through an area that must once have been fields, but now resembled a battlefield that had been forgotten and left uncleaned. Burnt tree stumps jutted from the earth like finger joints, and among them lay broken clay pots, half a wheel, a piece of shoe that no one seemed to miss. Farmland—but without farmers. It was as if someone had simply sucked the life out of it, leaving only the framework.

"Someone worked here once," Dougal murmured. "Children played here. Someone sowed seeds here, hoping that something would come back."

"Some hopes are stupid," said Broc.

"Some are necessary," Dougal replied. "If you lose them, all that's left is stealing and killing."

"Then welcome to the club," said Tam.

We reached a spot where the ground was unusually flat, almost leveled. The grass was trampled down, but not in the way hooves or boots would. Rather, it looked as if something heavy had moved back and forth without any clear purpose or direction. The earth was dark, damp, almost muddy, but not because of the rain.

"There's no fire here," Seoras said, kneeling down. "And yet the earth is black."

"What does that mean?" asked Cailean.

Seoras smelled it and grimaced. "That's not firebrand. That's... burnt moisture. As if the earth had been boiled."

"Of what?" asked the boy.

"Of something that has time," Seoras said.

A shiver ran down my spine. I thought of the veil. The chapel. The bone protruding from the earth like an unfinished sentence. Yes, something had time. More time than we did. And it was using it.

We marched on, and at some point the rain became a curtain behind which visibility was barely three meters. If the forest could be counted, it was now just a gray shadow with trunks that looked like dark lines. But the sounds became clearer: raindrops hitting leaves; the breath of twenty men; a distant cry of an animal—or what we convinced ourselves was an animal.

"It smells like death in here," Broc said suddenly.

"You say that everywhere," Tam growled.

"Because that's how it is everywhere," said Broc.

He was right.

The sergeant raised his hand. "Halt."

We stopped. The world stopped. Only the rain continued.

Ahead of us, between two crooked trees, lay something in the mud. Large. Dark. Motionless. At first, I thought it was a fallen tree trunk or perhaps a dead horse. But horses look different when they're dead. They lose their dignity. That thing up ahead never had any.

We approached. Cautiously. Shields raised. Swords ready. Slow steps.

It was a body.

A large body.

A man, perhaps. Or what was left of a man after something had been done to him that language is not designed to do.

He lay on his back, arms stretched out as if pleading with heaven for help. His face was unrecognizable. Not because it had been severed—but because it was missing. Cleanly torn away, but not with a blade. More like a fruit that had been scooped out. His throat was open, but not ripped. Too clean. Too round. Too... wrong.

"Holy shit," whispered Aidan.

"No," the priest said tonelessly. "There was nothing holy here."

Dougal knelt down, though I didn't understand why he had to do that to himself. Maybe because he wanted to know if it was someone he knew. Maybe because he needed to find out if his brother had ended up like that.

"This isn't English work," Dougal said. His voice was firm, but it vibrated. "This isn't bandit work either."

"No," I said. "That's..."

The words never came.

"That's it," Cailean said suddenly. The boy's voice was thin, but clear.

"You say that as if you've seen it," said Tam.

"I did," whispered the boy. "At night. When we still tried to sleep in the woods. My father said I was dreaming. But dreams don't leave tracks in the mud."

He pointed at the ground.

And there they were again. Those round, unnatural impressions. Not deep. Not shallow. Just... wrong. Regular. Like a pattern. But without meaning.

The sergeant knelt beside the tracks. "Fresh," he said. "Very fresh."

Seoras nodded. "Maybe hours."

The rain intensified, but the traces remained visible, as if the thing itself had altered the earth so that it ignored water.

"It was here," Ruairi said. "Not long ago."

"And maybe it's still here," Broc said.

We raised our shields. The swords clashed as we lifted them. The forest wasn't silent – but it was different. Something was breathing within it. And it wasn't the wind.

"We have to keep going," the sergeant said calmly. He had that kind of calm that men cultivate when they have to convince themselves that panic is a luxury they can't afford.

"We're leaving him here?" asked Cailean, looking at the disfigured body.

“Yes,” said the sergeant. “We don’t bury men who have already been taken by something else.”

The priest glanced at him briefly, wanted to object, but then refrained. I understood him. Anyone who wants to bless the dead needs a face, a name, at least a trace of humanity. This man had none of that.

We started moving again. And as we passed that body, I felt the knife at my side vibrate. Not strongly. Not visible. It was a tremor, barely a whisper, but enough to make my heart skip a beat.

Moirá. The chapel. The shadow. The kiss. The dead boy. Now this man.

I felt something I couldn't categorize. Not fear. Not courage. Not anger. Something else. Something that said: It won't be long now.

We marched on, the rain lashing our faces, but no one spoke. Everyone was thinking about the body. About the missing identity. About the traces that couldn't be washed away. And about the fact that this thing no longer only hunted at night or in deserted places. It was now on the paths. On our paths. It might even be following us.

“We are brothers in the dirt,” Dougal said suddenly. “But the thing... the thing is the dirt.”

“No,” I said. “It’s what lives in the dirt when we don’t look.”

And for the first time in days, the sergeant nodded seriously, without any trace of doubt.

“It hunts,” he said. “And it chooses.”

I felt the cold in my chest. I knew who it had chosen. And I knew it wouldn't stop.

We pressed on past the mutilated body like men who really wanted to stop. It was that feeling of having a stone stuck in your stomach that you couldn't spit out. The rain seeped into the cracks of our armor, crept into our boots, and ran down our backs. Every step made a squelching sound, as if the ground were warning us: Just a little further, just a bit more, and I'll drag you in, you idiots. But nobody turned back. Where would they go? North, back to burned villages, into the haze and shadows? Or south, straight into the arms of the English? Ahead was death, behind was death, and in the middle was us. Brothers in the dirt, without a map, which was worse.

After a while, the rain stopped, but not the mud. The clouds hung in the sky like gray planks, heavy, low, bored. The light broadened, flattening everything. Ruins looked like hills, hills like graves, men like shadows who had forgotten they were once human. The road had crept closer to us again, as if afraid of being alone, and now ran alongside us like a third line. Ours, the forest, and the road. Three strands, each distrusting the other.

“Up ahead,” Seoras said eventually, nodding. On the horizon, on a slight rise, something was moving. Not like the thing in the woods, not so deep and silent. More hectic, jerky, human. A few figures, maybe ten, maybe fifteen. They were too far away to make out faces, but close enough to understand: they weren't just wandering around. They were looking for something. Or someone.

"Bandits," Dougal said. "Or men who pretend they aren't."

The sergeant made us slow down. "We'll make the decision for them," he said calmly. "If they're farmers, let them walk past us and look at us like we're a plague. If they're not, let them come towards us."

It didn't take long. The group above saw us, paused briefly, like a herd that sees the wolf but doesn't know if it's full. Then one of them broke away, a man with broad shoulders and fur that definitely wasn't sheep's. He had an axe slung over his shoulder, so large it looked almost comical. He raised his hand, as if this were a polite meeting at a market and not a possible prelude to a massacre.

"You are far from your farms," he shouted.

"You too, I'm sure," replied the sergeant.

The men behind him laughed, but it was the short, harsh laugh of people who have laughed many times before, just before they've swindled someone. The kind of laugh that has more to do with the teeth than the gut.

The man with the axe approached, not quickly, but just enough to test our nerves. His men remained standing above, forming a loose line, weapons visible but not yet raised. A few had bows, a few clubs, one a rusty halberd that looked as if it had been left over from another war.

When the man was close enough, I saw his face. Scars, a beard, eyes like two nails. Not completely dead in there, but far from warm. "I'm Fergus," he said. "I don't ask for your names. Names rarely put bread on the table."

"We are warriors on the way south," the sergeant said. "We have nothing to give away, but we also have nothing to hide."

Fergus grinned crookedly. "Everyone has something to give away. Gold, bread, meat, blood, stories." He looked past us, scrutinizing Dougal and the other two. "Farmers," he said. No question mark.

"Former farmers," Dougal corrected.

"Those are the best," said Fergus. "They've already learned that the earth gives nothing back when you ask politely."

I didn't like him. But I recognized something in him that felt uncomfortably familiar. That mixture of tiredness and hunger. Not just for food. For more. For anything, anything at all. As long as it felt like life.

"What do you want?" asked the sergeant.

"Information," said Fergus. "And maybe a little bit of your armor, if you no longer need it."

"The armor thing is off the table," Broc growled.

Fergus laughed. "You still have some."

The sergeant folded his arms. "You and your troops are traveling armed, far from fields, far from villages, far from anything that could be called home. You use names impractically. You say you want information. What should I call you then – friend or robber?"

"You can call me whatever you like," said Fergus. "The English call me a bandit. The peasants call me a bastard. I don't care. I call myself alive, and that's enough."

"So, Bandit," Tam said dryly.

"Bandit is a word used by people who still believe the land belongs to someone," Fergus said. "It doesn't. It belongs to whoever is old enough to stand on it."

"What do you want to talk about?" I asked before the sergeant could say anything.

Fergus looked at me. "About what you have seen."

"Englishmen?" Aidan asked.

"The others," said Fergus.

There was one of those moments when you realize several men are having the same thought at once. Everything inside me tensed. Dougal went pale. Cailean opened his mouth and closed it again. The priest closed his eyes briefly.

"You saw it too," I said.

Fergus nodded. "If you say 'it' and I immediately know what you mean, then you've answered the question yourself."

"How were things with you?" Seoras asked.

"Ugly," said Fergus. "At first we thought they were English. Then we thought they were wild animals. Then we realized that neither of those was enough." He shrugged as if his back was cold. "It pulls people out of the darkness. Men, women, it doesn't matter. It takes them as if they'd never had any weight."

"It hunts Englishmen and Scotsmen alike," said the priest.

"It hunts everything that has blood," Fergus said. "And perhaps also that which no longer has any."

We stood there, a bunch of men in the mud, talking about something that didn't even have a name, but left traces everywhere. And for a moment, bandits, farmers, soldiers, bastards were simply a collection of bodies that didn't want to be eaten.

"Why loot if this thing will get you just like it will get us?" Aidan asked.

Fergus looked at him, and there was something in his eyes I hadn't expected. No arrogance. No mockery. Just stark honesty. "Because I'd rather die with a full stomach than an empty one," he said. "Because I'd rather steal someone's bread than watch hunger take it from us all. And because, if I'm going to die, I want someone to curse my name instead of forgetting it."

"You're an asshole," said Tam, "but at least an honest one."

Fergus grinned. "That's the best thing I've heard in weeks."

The sergeant paused to consider. One could see his thoughts grinding like millstones. "We're heading south," he said then. "English vanguard defeated, more to come. We've picked a fight with this thing unintentionally. We burned a chapel it liked. And we've seen what it's capable of."

Fergus raised his eyebrows. "You burned down one of his seats?"

"Perhaps," I said. "Perhaps it was just a coincidence that thirteen veils were hanging in the thorns."

Fergus whistled softly through his teeth. "You are either very brave or very stupid."

"Both," Seoras said.

"So," the sergeant continued, "you can rob us, try it, spill a little blood, take some weapons, if you survive. And then the thing will keep hunting you. And the English will keep hunting you. And there'll still be hunger. Or..."

He let the word hang, like meat on a hook.

"...or?" asked Fergus.

"Or you can come with me," said the sergeant. "We're not friends. Those days are over. But we have the same enemy. Two of them, in fact. And I've rarely said of bandits that there are too few of them when it comes to ruining the day for Brits."

A few of us looked surprised. Broc grimaced as if he'd bitten into a sour fruit. Dougal said nothing, but his gaze sharpened. Bandits at our backs, Englishmen in front, monsters lurking in the shadows – a wonderful mix.

Fergus scratched his beard. "Going off with a bunch of clanmen who'll betray me at the first opportunity as soon as they know my name?"

"I said I wasn't going to ask for your name," the sergeant reminded him.

"You already have him," Fergus muttered. "Damn it."

He thought for a moment, looked at his own people. A few were clearly against it, others saw us more as another bulwark against the unknown.

"What do we get?" he finally asked.

"Blood and labor," Broc said immediately.

"English heads," Seoras added.

I said, "Perhaps this is a chance to confront this thing instead of just running away from it."

Fergus looked at me for a long time. "What are you?" he asked.

"A bastard with bad timing," I said.

He laughed. This time genuinely. "I like that."

Then he nodded slowly. "Good," he said. "We'll walk with you. But no whining if we pick up things that are left behind."

"If it's English, take what you want," said the sergeant. "If it's Scottish, ask beforehand. At least briefly."

"I've never seen anyone ask a corpse for permission to take off its belt," Fergus murmured.

"Then start learning something new," said the sergeant.

So the bandits became our neighbors in the row. Some of us kept our distance, others spoke to them quietly as if they'd always been there. Men are strangely simple in that respect: if you're fighting next to one tomorrow, it doesn't matter a damn whether he'd raided your chicken coop yesterday.

We moved on. The column had grown longer, louder, more dangerous. Farmers, bandits, bastards, warriors, priests, a few boys who still thought they had something to prove to someone. All in the same mud. All with the same stains on their boots. Above us, a sky that took no sides. Beneath us, ground that made no distinction between who landed in it.

Sometime in the late afternoon, as the light began to fade again like a cowardly dog, Dougal said quietly: "I used to think there were good people and bad people. Farmers who are honest. Bandits who steal. Soldiers who kill. Priests who pray."

"And now?" I asked.

"Now all I see are men with dirt on their hands," he said. "The only difference is where it comes from."

I looked at my hands. Calloused, cracked, blood under the nails, dirt in the lines. I wouldn't have been able to list all the places that had caused it.

"Bandits, peasants, brothers in the dirt," I said. "Sounds like a nice title for a bad dream."

"This is not a dream," Dougal said. "This is filth itself."

And as we continued walking, I felt something harden inside me. Not cold stone. More like charred wood. Still glowing inside, black on the outside. I knew: The war to the south wouldn't make us heroes. It would only show us how many layers you can peel away from a person before only something remains. And somewhere out there, something else was walking, also stripping away layers—only faster, more thoroughly, more hungrily.

There were many of us. Farmers. Bandits. Warriors. But compared to what followed us in the shadows, we were all the same: flesh on legs. Hopefully, difficult to digest.

Freedom between two sips

The evening smelled of cheap smoke and wet wool, and that was almost a relief. No blood in the air, no burnt wood, no sweetish stench of entrails still festering in the soil. Just men steaming like poorly aged cattle, and a few scrawny fires that pretended to warm rather than actually do. Freedom, I thought, if you take the word seriously, is probably an overpriced song for people who've never slept in the dirt. We never called this freedom. We called it: Live today, maybe still tomorrow.

We'd found a halfway dry spot, a small hollow between two low hills that looked like untrustworthy shoulders. There were a few crooked trees whose branches pretended to offer protection. Broc had wood hauled over, as much as the area could provide; not much, but enough to feed a handful of fires. Bandits, farmers, warriors—in the end, they all sat in a circle, as if they'd spent their whole lives waiting to end up in this damp hole and pretend they'd had a choice.

Fergus and his men had settled not far from us, but not quite among us either. Their own little circle on the edge, a small courtyard of mistrust. It was like in the villages: the rich farmers lived by the well, the poor on the outskirts, the dung heap in between. Except here no one was rich, except Death, who held shares everywhere. Dougal sat a little closer to us with Murn and Cailean, as if he'd decided that bandits were fine as long as they didn't breathe right behind him.

Broc produced a jug that had emerged from some dark corner of his luggage. The smell said: not a good whisky, but real. Nothing watered down, no thin swill. More like: if you drink enough of this, you can even stand yourself.

"One at a time," he said, and you could tell this wasn't going to be a drunken revelry. More like a ritual. A short, concise act to remind us that we had something more inside us than blood and fear.

The mug was passed around. The sergeant took a sip, not a large one, not a small one. No ceremonial gesture. Just a warming drink. Seoras took one, his face only slightly contorted, as if he were passing judgment on the taste, a judgment no one needed to hear. Tam took one, exhaled heavily, and handed the mug over as if he had just made peace with an old enemy. When the mug reached me, I held it a moment too long.

Whisky. I smelled it. Smoky, sharp, not refined, but honest. I thought of the old days, the first times I'd stolen the stuff and my mother had recognized it from the look on her face before I could even open my mouth. "Whisky instead of prayers," I'd said to myself back then, without knowing it would become a chapter in my life. Now I was right in the middle of it, and the joke had grown old.

I took a sip. It burned all the way down, played briefly with my lungs, and then landed where it was dark. In the middle. In the hole the day had left behind. For a moment, it felt warm, a small, defiantly flickering point inside me. Freedom between two sips, I suddenly thought. Between now and the next command, the next attack, the next scream. The sip was like a thin blanket wrapped around you, even though you know winter is coming.

"Pass it on," Broc said. "This isn't a reflection of your repressed soul." I handed the jug to Aidan, who took it as if he'd been waiting for nothing else. He drank too deeply, coughed, then laughed hoarsely. "If I'm going to die," he said, "then I want to die with something in my belly that wasn't just bread."

Cailean received the pitcher, glanced uncertainly at Dougal, as if to ask if he was allowed to drink it. Dougal nodded. "Drink, boy. It might be the only thing today that will tell you you're still alive." The boy took a sip, feeling as if he had shrunk two years, coughed, but persevered. Fergus laughed from the side. "Well, at least he can do something other than tremble."

The whisky circulated through the warehouse, and you could feel your shoulders sink a little lower with each sip. Not from weakness, but rather from that brief permission you granted yourself: for ten heartbeats, not to be the strong man. For ten heartbeats, just a body that shivered and burned simultaneously. Twenty, perhaps, if you drank faster.

The sergeant sat close to the fire, his hands folded over his knees. He didn't look like the leader of a great cause, more like a man to whom fate had thrust the role and said, "You'll handle it, or I'll make it worse." He looked at me.

"William," he said, "your father. Was he there when you killed the first one?"

The question was so direct it almost hurt. "No," I said. "He's never there when someone dies. Only when he leaves."

The sergeant nodded, as if he'd expected it. "Some are like that. They leave behind belts and stories, and nothing else." He glanced briefly at the knife at my side, and I wondered how much he truly understood. Perhaps more than he let on.

"The first death stays in your mind," Seoras said quietly, without looking at me. "The first man you hit with your own steel. All the others pile up after that. But the first one is always in the front row."

I looked at my sword. Saw the spot I thought I knew, where the Englishman's blood still clung, even though the blade was clean. He hadn't been a great man, nothing special. A soldier among many. But in my mind, he now had a place on a bench I knew would soon be filled.

"How many of you are sitting in the front?" I asked Seoras.

He laughed softly. "More than I'd like. Less than I deserved. Some were pigs. Some were better than me. They'll stay longer."

The pitcher reached me again. I took a second sip. The first had brought me to the surface, the second pulled me a little deeper into myself. This time I drank more slowly, letting the liquid linger in my mouth, feeling the burn before I swallowed. Freedom between sips. A tiny space where no one wanted anything from you. No orders, no responsibilities, no faceless ghosts. Only the body saying: I am now doing something I wasn't ordered to do.

"Are you drinking because of the English?" Aidan asked. "Or because of that thing?"

"Both," I said. "And because of me."

"Because of you?" asked Dougal.

"Yes," I said. "Because at some point I realized that I don't just kill because of them. But because there's something inside me that now knows how to do it. And I don't like that."

There was a brief silence. Honest thoughts are like stones in your hand – you can throw them or keep them, but both have weight.

"Better you don't like it," said the priest from the other side of the fire. "If you like it, you're lost."

"I don't think God will find me to tell me that," I said. "He has enough other problems."

"God finds everyone," he said. "The only question is when and in what condition."

"Maybe you'll find him first," Fergus chimed in. "With that thing in your luggage." He nodded at my knife. "A girl gives you a blade, disappears, comes back as a shadow, a grotesque creature eats people, and you're right in the middle of it. If that's not a divine joke, I don't know what is."

"You believe in gods?" Tam asked.

"I believe in hunger," said Fergus. "Everything else is a matter of interpretation."

Broc took the jug back, held it in his hands, and looked into the fire. "You talk too much about things that shouldn't concern you," he growled. "A man drinks because he wants to live, not because he's going to die. Remember that."

"What's the difference?" Cailean asked quietly.

"You laugh more the first time," said Broc.

A few actually laughed briefly. It wasn't a joyful laugh, but it was enough to crack the evening. A crack through which a bit of that old, dirty humor dripped, the kind that keeps men from just screaming.

I leaned back as far as the wet ground allowed and looked up at the sky. The clouds hung low, but in one spot a small star burned through as if lost. I wondered if anyone up there cared that we down here were trying not to be eaten by some faceless thing while running towards an army that wanted to make our country their playground.

Freedom. The priests preach that it lies in God. The lords say it lies in blood. The farmers say it lies in a field of their own, one that no one sets on fire. The bandits say it lies in the sack they carry away at night. I thought it lay somewhere in between, in those small moments when you breathe without anyone telling you how.

Between two swallows. Between two blows. Between two dead bodies.

"If that thing comes back," Dougal said suddenly, "what will you do then, William?"

I didn't think about it for long. "I'm going to stop running."

"And what if you don't have a chance?" he asked.

"At least I'll die facing my own direction," I said. "Not his."

The priest shook his head slightly, but he didn't disagree. Fergus nodded. "Good sentence for a gravestone," he said. "If anyone else makes any, see you then."

The jug was almost empty. Broc drank the last of it and then placed it upside down in the grass as a sign: That was it. No one complained, no one begged for more. The body had had enough, the mind had had enough, the night had had enough of men who pretended to still be whole souls.

One of the bandits began to sing softly. One of those off-key Scottish tunes that sound as if they'd gotten drunk before anyone had ever heard them. It was about a girl waiting on the hills. It was about a man who never came back. It was about rain that makes everything even, and a fire that never goes out. The words were old, the voices rough, but something in them settled briefly on the camp like a blanket, saying: Yes, I'm thin, but I'm here.

I closed my eyes, listened to the singing, heard the wind, heard the faint clink of metal as someone restlessly grasped. And suddenly Moira was back in my mind. Her face, her kiss, the knife in my hand. I saw her standing on a hill shrouded in mist. Behind her, the thing, far away, yet close enough to discern its outline. "You're only free," she said in my head, "when you have nothing left to lose. The trick is to decide beforehand what you want to keep."

I didn't yet know what I wanted to keep. But I knew I wouldn't give everything away just because something in the shadows was hungry.

As I eventually drifted into a restless sleep, I could still taste the whisky in my mouth. Freedom between two sips. The next one would be waiting for us—in a village, in a trench, on a battlefield. Perhaps as a cup by a fire. Perhaps as blood on a blade. Perhaps as a brief, clear moment when I would say: Now. Not later. Not backward.

And the fire in my chest burned on, calmer now, but stubbornly. It would get more fuel. Soon.

The morning after the whiskey wasn't pleasant, but it was honest. Not a terrible headache, more that dull throbbing you get when you've slept too little, thought too much, and drunk just enough to avoid completely having to bear either. The fires had long since turned into cold, black circles of ash, men lying around in them like remnants left behind by the night. Nobody looked like a hero. Heroes have clean faces in songs. In reality, you've got mud in your teeth and wrinkles you haven't earned yet.

The sergeant moved among us with such ease, as if he'd slept sitting up and grown directly into that position. He didn't kick anyone, knock over any pots, or shout. He simply said, "Stand up." And that was enough. We were like dogs who hear the click of a latch: you know a door is about to open, and you have no idea whether food or a kick awaits on the other side.

We packed up. The ceiling smelled of smoke, the armor of sweat, the skin of fatigue. Fergus and his bandits broke away from their own little circle, one spitting into the embers that were no longer embers, another strapping an axe around his neck as if it were part of his back. Dougal and Cailean helped Murn mend a torn belt, and everything looked like a poor caravan that had forgotten why it had set out in the first place.

"It'll be drier today," Seoras said as we set off. "The air tastes different."

"Looking for what?", Aidan asked.

"After trouble," Seoras said. "But not after rain."

We continued south, and the landscape began to change—not faster, but noticeably. It became more bustling, without feeling alive. More footpaths, more remnants of fences, more traces of people who had passed through before us. At one point, we found a half-collapsed signpost, the wood crooked, the writing weathered, but just barely legible: a village name, a few mile markers that meant nothing to any of us. Only the sergeant nodded slightly, as if he'd heard them before, in another life when men still had time to remember the names of villages they weren't supposed to burn down.

Around midday, we saw something resembling civilization for the first time. A roadside taverna, if you were being generous. In reality, it was a squat, wooden, and stone building with a roof that was noticeably sagging and a sign bearing a half-blurred drawing of a jug. "The Crooked Fir" was written underneath, the lettering even more crooked than any tree in the area. Behind the taverna were two sheds and what must once have been a stable. Now it was empty except for a few planks that looked as if they'd lost all desire to stay together.

"We're stopping," said the sergeant. "We're going in. We'll pay if we can. If we can't, someone else will."

"I like this man," Fergus murmured.

The tavern door was open, but unwelcoming. More as if someone had forgotten to close it because there was nothing left inside to protect. Inside, it was dim, the light filtering in grimy slivers through windows that were more dust than glass. The room smelled of stale beer, poorly polished wood, and people who rarely see water. A handful of figures sat at the few tables—men who looked as if they'd hoped not to encounter a troop of gunmen today. Tough luck for them.

The landlord stood behind the bar, a tall, broad man with a face like a sack of potatoes that had been dropped on the floor one too many times. He regarded us with the calm of a man who knows that there's no point in getting hysterical when the storm bursts through the door.

"We are full," he said.

"You're empty," the sergeant countered, looking around. "Half-empty mugs, half-full men, not even a sound. There's space."

"I meant: full of problems," said the innkeeper. "And I don't have room for yours."

"We'll bring some too," Fergus chimed in, "then it feels balanced."

A few of the men at the tables laughed briefly, nervously. The innkeeper sighed and reached for a battered jug. "Water?" he asked. "Beer? We have something stronger, but it costs extra."

"We have coins," said the sergeant.

“And we have blades,” Fergus added. “Both shine.”

The innkeeper studied us for a moment, then nodded. “Good. Sit down. But no dead bodies in here. I already have enough ghosts in the house.”

We spread out as much as we could. Benches creaked, a chair gave way and broke, Murn caught himself as he fell, as if he'd practiced tumbling out of pubs without hurting himself. Broc sat close to the bar so he could keep an eye on the river. Yes, it was a tavern in the middle of nowhere, but a man like him wanted to know what went in and what went out.

The innkeeper filled jugs, one after the other. The beer was weak, but not poisonous. The water was probably more dangerous than the alcohol. A few actually received something stronger—a clear liquid in small cups. It burned in the air even before you put it in your mouth.

I took a regular jug. The first sip was flat, but it was cold, and that was enough for the moment. I leaned my elbow on the table, which was sticky, but not as bad as some of the floors in the courtyards we had marched through.

“You look like you’re wondering if you’re happy,” Aidan said beside me, drinking.

“I’m just wondering what freedom tastes like when it’s served here,” I said.

“Like stale beer,” he said.

“After a break,” Dougal said. “That’s all we get.”

It was strange, sitting within four walls. The noise sounded different, muffled, heavier. Outside, the wind, the rain, the grime that always made us who we were. Inside, an illusion of protection that every man in that room saw through, but none rejected. Freedom between sips, I thought again. Between battles, between marches, between what hunts you and what you hunt. A table, a jug, a few men pretending they didn't have death hanging from both shoulders.

The innkeeper stood opposite us, a cloth in his hand, with which he wiped a mug that would soon be unclean. “You’re not the first this year,” he said. “Scots heading south. Some come back. Most don’t.”

“And what do those who come back say?” asked the sergeant.

The innkeeper shrugged. “That Stirling is a hole that devours everything you send into it. That the English think they have a score to settle with us that will never be paid. That they put up banners where grain used to grow. And that...” — he paused briefly, his eyes narrowed — “...that at night things walk across the fields that don’t call out, don’t pray, and don’t eat.”

The topic was never far away. No matter who started talking, the shadow came along with them. “You saw something?” the priest asked.

The innkeeper shook his head. “At night, I see my wife in my dreams and the bills on my table. I don’t have eyes for anything else. But those who come through here talk. And those who drink the most say the same things as those who talk the least. That’s never a good sign.”

"Tracks?" I asked. "Round imprints in the ground where there are no hooves? Men who..." I paused. "...are missing parts that shouldn't be lost?"

The innkeeper looked at me for a long time. "You ask questions like someone who already knows the answers."

"We've seen enough," Seoras said. "More than is helpful."

"Then you're in the wrong pub," said the landlord. "There are only two options here: swallow it or leave."

"I'll take both," Fergus murmured, drank, and got up to discuss something with one of his men. Bandits couldn't sit still for long without planning something—a theft, an escape, a joke, a betrayal. It was all the same craft, just with different tools.

At the next table, two village lads were talking quietly. One was barely older than Cailean, the other already had the face of a man who had seen too much sun and too little sense. I only caught snippets. "...by the stream...", "...faceless...", "...the cows...never found again...". The innkeeper glanced at them, and they fell silent. Fear has a hierarchy. Some are allowed to voice it, others are not.

I took another sip. The beer wasn't enjoyable, but it kept me occupied. Between sips, you're just a man with a mug. Not a warrior, not a bastard, not the chosen one of some shadowy entity, not part of an army waiting to assemble. Just a throat burning because it wants to be.

"You're overthinking it again," said the sergeant, sitting down next to me for a moment.

"If I don't think, I'll just walk straight into something," I said. "If I do think, at least I'll walk into it consciously."

He nodded. "That's the difference between the young and the old. The young run blindly. The old know the wall is coming, but they run anyway."

"What are you?" I asked.

He looked at his hands. "Old enough to know I have no more choice. Young enough to move on."

We were interrupted when the door opened. Nothing dramatic, no gust of wind. Just a soft noise, but one that still made everyone turn their heads. Two men stood in the doorway, both wet, both in rags, both with eyes that scanned the room. Not Englishmen, not soldiers. More like what's left when farmhouses burn and there's not enough for bandits. One saw us, paused briefly, then nodded to the innkeeper. The innkeeper nodded back, a quiet, ancient form of communication. There was something about them I didn't like, and I couldn't tell if it was their hands or their eyes.

They sat down in a corner far back. The innkeeper brought them two jugs, no questions asked. Fergus looked at them as if sizing them up. Dougal gave them that look only men have who know how quickly someone can go from neighbor to robber.

“There are no more uninvolved parties here,” Seoras murmured. “Everyone is someone who has either already done something or still has to do something.”

The sergeant finished his drink and set the mug down. “One more sip, then we’re going,” he said. “Stirling won’t wait. And neither will that thing out there.”

I lifted the pitcher and looked inside. A sliver of wine sloshed at the bottom. Freedom between two sips. The first had brought me to this table; the second would send me back upstairs. I drank, slowly. It wasn’t much. But enough for the moment to awaken that small, defiant feeling within me: I decide. Not always, not about everything. But about this sip.

As we stood up, benches, chairs, and bones creaked. Coins changed hands, too few for the innkeeper, too many for us. Fergus paid with small change that looked as if it had already been in many pockets before landing there. The innkeeper took it without a word. He was too old to despise money.

Outside, it was that same gray light again, turning everything into a soup of form and shadow. The wind had used the lull to pick up, whipping under our coats as if testing how much flesh was left on us.

I looked back at the tavern, at the crooked sign rattling in the wind. “The Crooked Fir.” If freedom had a place, it might be a place like this: ugly, tired, honest. A few tables, a few jugs, an innkeeper equally afraid of men and monsters. That’s all it is. Perhaps it never will be.

We fell back into line: peasants, bandits, bastards, brothers in the dirt. The sergeant at the front, the priest somewhere in the middle, Fergus’s men like shadows at the sides, Dougal and Cailean close behind us, as if they’d forgotten they’d once been anything other than part of this column. And inside me, that fire still smoldered, no longer seeking glory. It only sought a point where it wouldn’t have to consume everything I was.

Freedom between two sips. Between the tavern and the battlefield. Between the Englishman I killed yesterday and the thing in the shadows that might want my skin tomorrow. There wasn’t much room to maneuver, but it was there. A few steps. A few breaths. A few decisions.

I decided not to leave them to others.

The path behind the tavern was nothing special, just another strip of wet earth in a land that felt as if it had been chewed and spat out for years. Yet there was a difference. Inside, for a moment, we had been human beings, jugs in hand, a roof over our heads. Outside, we were once again what remains after stripping all that away: bodies in motion, steel at our sides, an invisible list of debts hanging over our heads. The air was clearer than before, the rain had stopped, but the clouds still hung low, as if waiting for the right moment to finish us off.

Fergus walked beside the sergeant for a while, not quite as a friend, not quite as an enemy. More like someone debating whether to keep playing a card game or tip the table. I walked a few steps behind, enough distance to pretend I wasn’t listening, but close enough to hear every word. You learn quickly: freedom is rarely what you say aloud. It’s in the sentences you half-swallow.

“Stirling, too,” said Fergus, as if he were talking about a rotten fish. “I was there. Once. A long time ago.”

"As a fighter?" asked the sergeant.

"As someone who thought he could pretend for a few days to be something other than what he is," Fergus replied. "I fought for one night as the Banners told me to. In the morning they explained to me that I either stayed and died for their lord or left and died for myself. I chose the more honest option."

The sergeant nodded slightly. "You don't believe in clans."

"I believe in people who are able to get up in the morning without having to answer to someone who never gets down on their luck," Fergus said. "Everything else is just window dressing."

"You still have your own men," the sergeant said.

"Yes," said Fergus. "But they can leave. They stay because they haven't found anything better, not because a name ties them to a flag."

I thought of my mother, of the hole that had given birth to me. Of my father, who had handed out his name without looking back at the consequences. The clan, the blood, the sense of belonging—all of that had always been more rumor than reality for me. I hadn't grown up with a coat of arms, but with a leaky roof and the certainty that I was the one left behind when the man was gone.

"William."

The voice came from the side. Dougal. He was walking beside me, the stick—or "spear," as he called it—on his shoulder, his head slightly bowed, as if tired of the world's stares. "What?" I asked.

"What will you do when this war is over?" he asked.

I had to laugh. Not a cheerful sound, more like a hoarse belch. "You talk as if there's an 'after' afterwards."

"Doesn't exist?" he asked.

"Perhaps," I said. "For some. For others, 'afterwards' is simply a new word for 'onwards'."

"I used to think that if I brought in a good harvest and the cows didn't get sick, that was freedom," said Dougal. "Now I don't even know if I should wish to be standing in a field again."

"Fields burn easily," I said. "It's easy to become too attached to things that others can take away with a torch."

"And what are you attached to?" he asked.

I thought about it briefly, searching for something that didn't immediately sound ridiculous. "About people who aren't dead yet," I said then. "And about the idea that I don't just want to

be someone who gets eaten alive by something – whether it's an Englishman, a monster, or the rent in my head."

He nodded. "That's more than most people currently have."

We marched on. The road curved slightly, and an old stone bridge appeared, spanning a stream that made more noise than water. The parapet had collapsed in one spot, as if a car had taken the curve too fast and a driver too drunk. A tree stood at the edge of the bridge, crooked, half-dead, but still there. Its trunk was marked by knives and blades, old carved symbols, names, primitive patterns. Men like to leave traces when they know they'll leave nothing else.

I paused briefly and placed my hand on the trunk. Between the cuts and notches, I saw something that looked like a symbol—a circle with some sort of hook inside, roughly carved. It didn't look English, and it didn't look like something a bored soldier would have drawn.

"Do you know this?" I asked Seoras, who was just passing by.

He looked and shook his head. "No clan symbol. No coat of arms. Maybe just the scribbling of an idiot trying to make himself look important."

The priest, who had also stopped, frowned. "I've seen something similar," he murmured. "On the walls of old houses, near the chapel. People said it was a protective sign."

"It performed terribly for what it was," I said.

He sighed. "Most protective symbols need people who still believe they work. Maybe this is just a memory now."

I ran my thumb over it, feeling the rough groove in the wood. For a moment, I had the sensation of a vibration. Just a tiny bit, like the knife. Maybe it was my imagination. Maybe not. I pulled my hand back as if I'd been burned and continued walking.

Late in the afternoon, the sergeant let us stop. Not a large camp, just a spot where the ground wasn't completely submerged in mud and where we could build a fire without it immediately going out. We didn't set up much – no tents, just blankets to wrap around ourselves when the wind decided to turn unpleasant. The bandits helped gather firewood, not out of altruism, but because a cold-blooded bandit suffers just as much as a cold-blooded warrior.

"There's no whisky today," said Broc. "Not because I'm stingy – although I am – but because we need to be clear-headed tomorrow morning. The road will be crowded."

"What does 'full' mean?" asked Cailean.

"More people," said the sergeant. "More eyes. More knives. More opportunities to make wrong decisions."

We sat in a circle, the fire in the middle. It was strange: no matter where you were, a fire attracted men like a water bowl attracts dogs. You sit around it, look into the flames, pretend to think, when in reality you're just staring at something honest enough to show that it devours everything you throw at it.

“Freedom,” Fergus said at one point, spitting into the fire, not out of disrespect, but out of habit. “It’s a word for people who have too much time on their hands to write songs.”

“Nevertheless, they all sing about it,” the priest said softly.

“Because they don’t know how to rhyme ‘not completely enslaved’,” Broc said.

Dougal stared into the fire. There was something in his face that one might have called hope in the past. Now it looked more like defiance. “What would freedom mean to you, William?” he asked suddenly.

All eyes turned to me, as if I had volunteered. I stared into the embers, as if they could engrave an answer on me.

“Not having to run anymore,” I said after a while. “Not being rushed anymore. Not by Englishmen, not by hunger, not by that thing in the shadow, not by voices in my head. Just standing somewhere and knowing: When I wake up tomorrow, this spot will still be mine.”

“A piece of land of one’s own,” said the priest. “Like a farmer.”

I shook my head. “Not necessarily land. Maybe a cabin. Maybe just a stretch of road where I know I don’t have to give way to anyone. Maybe a fire I can put out whenever I want, and not when the order comes.”

Fergus nodded slowly. “So, what everyone wants and nobody gets.”

“And you?”, I asked in return.

He grinned crookedly. “I’ll be satisfied if I can still decide tomorrow what I put in my mouth. Bread, meat, lies, a blade. As long as I have a choice, I’m free.”

Seoras said: “Freedom is perhaps nothing more than choosing to deliver a blow yourself, instead of always just taking one.”

The priest gazed silently into the fire. “And what if freedom consists only of walking straight into something you cannot avoid?”

“Then we are all free men here,” Tam said dryly. “Whether we like it or not.”

We were silent for a while, each with their own little inner image of what they would call freedom if given a piece of paper and a pen. No one got one. Instead, there was only flames, dirt, cold, and the knowledge that we were marching south because someone else had decided that was our path. At most, we could decide how we walked it: cursing, laughing, resigned, angry. Perhaps freedom really did lie only in that—in the way you wore the chain.

Later, as the darkness deepened and the conversations grew quieter, I lay down with my back against one of the low hills and pulled my coat over me. The sky was no longer a solid blanket of clouds, but showed here and there a crack in which stars stuck like needles. I felt the ground beneath me, cold and hard, but at least it was there. Sometimes that in itself is a gift.

I groped for the knife. It lay at my side, inconspicuous in the darkness, but in my hand it was there again, that quiet, barely perceptible pulsation. I lifted it slightly, saw the blade in the flickering firelight. The dark vein in it looked like a line someone had deliberately drawn. Not accidentally, not from rust, not from blood. Something else.

"What are you?" I whispered, quietly, so that no one could hear.

Of course it didn't answer. Steel only speaks when it encounters flesh.

I thought of Moira. Her lips, which had been on mine, warm like a promise and cold like a farewell. Her voice, which had said I could soon no longer hesitate. I thought of Fiona, who would never speak again. Of the man by the river. Of the faceless farmer. Of the boy we had buried. Of the Englishman who had tasted my steel. All part of a thread that wrapped around me like a noose, invisible until someone pulls.

Freedom between two sips, I thought again. Between the last one yesterday and the next one I'd drink someday—if I ever got it. In between was everything here: dirt, blood, breath, fear, anger, friendship, mistrust. Peasants, bandits, warriors, bastards. Men trying not to go mad while the world around them had already begun.

Before I fell asleep, I made a decision. Not a grand one, no speech, no oath on an altar. Just a small, persistent thought: If this thing came back—and I knew it would—I wouldn't just run away and hope it ate someone else. I would see what it intended to make of me. And then decide if I was going along with it.

Perhaps that was all the freedom I had left.

The wind swept over us, swirling through the rows of sleepers, lifting a coat, settling into a hood, briefly making the fire flicker. Somewhere nearby a dog howled. Perhaps just a stray. Perhaps from a farm that no longer existed. Perhaps it wasn't howling at the moon, but at the thing that lurked in the darkness. You could choose. You didn't have many other choices.

I closed my eyes, listened to the others' breaths, the crackling of the last embers, the distant rustling in the undergrowth. The fire in my chest was still there, lower now, but steady. It waited. For the next day. For the next blow. For the moment when freedom no longer lay between two sips, but between two blades.

And far to the south, beyond hills, fields, villages, and all our little conversations, Stirling was waiting. And with him, the war that had a name.

The Clan, the War, and the Cold Mornings

The morning we first saw the clan's camp was so cold that our breath looked like tiny, fleeting ghosts, creeping from our mouths only to immediately change their minds. The sky was that leaden gray color where you couldn't tell if it was about to vomit up snow or just keep pretending it was done with everything. The ground beneath our boots was frozen solid, a thin crust on top, with yesterday's old mud underneath. Every step crackled softly, as if we were walking on old bones. Sometimes they were old bones, just not as clean.

We'd set off early. Too early, if you ask me, but nobody asked. The sergeant had roused us to sleep in the half-light, his voice short, without curses, without theatrics. "Today you'll see who you belong to," he'd said, and that wasn't a sentence anyone wanted to hear for breakfast. Fergus had mumbled something about "screw belonging," but even he'd packed faster than usual. Bandits know when it's better to be on time: when many swords are pointing in the same direction.

The march was short and unpleasant. The air was harsh, the blood heavy from the previous day, the muscles ached, but the body pressed on, simply because it knew no better. We crested a low hill, and beyond it lay the camp. Not a proper army, no perfect order—this wasn't France, thank God. But a lot of it. Tents, smoke, men, horses, a jumble of cloth, leather, steel, and voices. Small fires everywhere, wisps of smoke rising and catching beneath the gray sky. And above it all, the banners. Not just one. Many.

Clans.

Cloths in colors the rain hadn't completely washed out. Patterns that were supposed to mean something to you if you were born with the right name. I wasn't born with a pattern, only with the word "bastard," and before that, people always found other words that never lasted long. I saw the stripes and checks fluttering in the wind, and for a moment I felt like a stray dog passing a farm where breeding dogs lay on chains, pretending to be special just because someone had put them on a leash.

"There they are," Seoras murmured. "Our big, proud, united family."

"I've seen barns burn that looked more orderly," Fergus growled.

The sergeant paused briefly before leading us on. "Stay together," he said. "You're about to get more stares than you'd like. The less you stand out individually, the better. We come as a squad, and we'll stay as a squad."

That sounded almost like a promise. Or like a threat.

We descended the hill, and the smell of the camp hit us. Smoke, sweat, horse, old leather, cold stew, a bit too much urine near the ditches. But beneath it all lay something else. Something unseen, only felt. Anticipation. Fear. Anger. A whole landscape of nerves, still feigning calm, but already trembling. Men waiting for someone to tell them: Today is your day, you may die.

The first heads turned as we passed between the outer circles of fire. Men scrutinized our weapons, our coats, our faces. Some looked at us like relatives they half-know: not well enough to feel a sense of joy, but close enough to judge. Others stared at Fergus's men like the fleas that always follow the dogs. You can recognize bandits even when they're doing nothing. There's something in their gaze that's always searching for the next opening.

"It's nice here," Aidan murmured. "If death had a damp limbo, it would probably look like this."

"At least you're freezing with a lot of people," said Tam. "Sense of community, you romantic."

A man in a fur coat, his face battered as if it had been hit from every direction, stepped into our path. He wore a tabard with a pattern I couldn't identify, and a sword hung at his side that looked more well-maintained than his teeth. "Who is leading you?" he asked, without wasting any courtesies.

The sergeant took a half step forward. "We come from the north," he said. "Borderland, scattered farms. We've seen Englishmen lying before us, and horrors left behind. And we're here because we've heard Stirling needs more than cloth in the wind."

The man looked at him, then at us, then at Fergus and the farmers. "A motley crew," he said. "Half clan, half scum."

"Dirt sticks together when it rains," Fergus said kindly.

The man's eyes flashed briefly, but he ignored him. "Name?" he asked the sergeant.

The sergeant named one that wasn't his. I knew the real one, the old one, the one he never used. He gave me one that was harmless, too small to intrude on a lord's pride.

The man nodded; perhaps he knew he was being lied to, perhaps he didn't care. "The Highness expects reports," he said. "The lords want to know how far the English have progressed. And whether they are afraid."

"They reek of power, not fear," I said before I could stop myself.

The man glanced at me as if considering whether an answer was worthwhile. Then he twisted his mouth. "That changes when they see us closer," he said. "That's how they like to talk around here."

We moved on. The center of the camp was more orderly. There, where the larger tents stood, made of better fabric, with proper poles, and with men in front of them whose armor was less patched up. This was the part you'd show someone if they wanted to write songs. Clan chiefs, standard-bearers, men who had learned to be equally dangerous with weapons and words.

I felt my back tighten. Not out of respect, more out of defiance. These were the ones I supposedly owed, simply because the country was slipping through our fingers. I didn't know them. They didn't know me. But now they wanted to pretend I was their son, their husband, their subject. Just because I carried a blade and hadn't run away.

We were led to a clearing in front of a large tent. The tent canvas was thick, gray, not attractive, but well-stitched. Two men in neat chainmail stood before the entrance, their hands held as if they were accustomed to wielding more powerful swords. Behind them, voices could be heard: a deep tone, a higher tone, the rustling of fabric, the creaking of wood.

"Wait here," said the fur-coated man. "The High One is busy."

"The English too," said Seoras, but so quietly that only we heard it.

We stood there doing nothing, which was actually the hardest part. Once you've marched, fought, bled, waiting feels like being buried alive in clay. The cold slowly crept up your legs,

your fingers longed to grasp something that moved: a sword hilt, a jug, a neck. Instead, there was only air.

On the other side of the clearing, I saw men from another clan. Their tartans were a dark green, a kind of deep, muddy color, which they wore with more pride than it looked. A few of them eyed us with that half-arrogant, half-curious look: Are they useful or just filler? One of them, with red hair and a beard that looked like an exploded fox, grinned broadly when he spotted Fergus's men.

"Oh, look at that," he cried. "The crows from the roadside. Did they really let you in? Things must be worse than I thought."

"If you call us crows," said Fergus, "you'll have to accept that we'll shit on you when you fall."

Some laughed, some looked away, some memorized the faces. That's how alliances were formed here: like dice that were constantly being re-rolled.

Finally, the tent flap opened. Someone called the name the sergeant had just given as his own. We went inside. The interior was warmer, but not cozy. A table in the middle, with maps, stones for markers, a few jugs, and a plate with what must once have been bread. Behind it stood a man who looked as if life had dealt him many blows, but he had fought back. Not old, not young, somewhere between the years when you still fight and the years when you only give orders. His gaze was sharp, but tired—the kind of eyes that had seen too much but weren't allowed to stop.

"So," he said, without offering us a chair, "you are the ones who come from the north and caused trouble along the way."

"The English would call it that," said the sergeant. "We call it self-respect."

The man scrutinized us, one by one. His gaze lingered briefly on mine, then on Fergus, then back on the sergeant. "You've brought peasants, bandits, and bastards," he said. "Is this an army or a last-ditch effort?"

"It's the same in this country," Seoras said.

A brief flicker in the man's eyes. Perhaps humor. Perhaps simply appreciation that we hadn't just answered with a simple "yes" and "amen."

"The English?" he asked.

The sergeant reported. About the vanguard we had defeated. About the burned farms. About the village with the veil. About the chapel. He didn't mention everything, not the thing, not the tracks, not Moira. But some of the shadows still crept into the room; you could see it in the faces that narrowed at certain words.

"They are not as orderly as they like to pretend," the sergeant concluded. "They think we are a bunch of splintered tribes. And they are only half wrong."

"And this... other thing?" the man asked quietly. "You hear things. Men come up with stories that can't be put on a map."

Now he looked at me. Directly. As if he had sensed where the dirt had settled.

I swallowed. "It's here," I said. "I can't say more. It takes whomever it wants. Englishmen, Scotsmen, farmers, whatever's lying around. It hunts in the shadows and leaves tracks no hoof could make. And it knows places we call sacred. That's all I know. And even that's too much."

The man stared at the table for a moment, as if the object were lying somewhere among his stones. Then he laughed briefly, without joy. "I asked for a war with England," he said. "No one told me I'd get two."

"We're fighting those who carry banners," the sergeant said. "The other one..." He shrugged. "...will find its own enemies anyway."

The man nodded. He looked like someone who understood that there were problems for which even his position was no shield. "You'll get your place in the line," he said. "You won't be the first I put forward, but you won't be the last either. And that bastard there"—he nodded at me—"stay with his squad and don't start writing heroic songs on your own."

"I can't write," I said.

"Good," he said. "Then stay alive, and others will do it for you when they want to."

We stepped back out of the tent into the cold. Outside, camp life continued: men chopping wood, men sharpening weapons, one man packing a pipe as if there were nothing more natural than having tobacco in his mouth before battle. Somewhere, someone was hitting a younger soldier for a stupid remark; somewhere else, someone was laughing at an even stupider one. The clan wasn't a unified entity. It was a bunch of people who happened to be under the same scraps of cloth and claimed that made them brothers.

I saw the banners fluttering in the wind, saw the men standing beneath them, saw our own small, misshapen group on the sidelines. Farmers, bandits, warriors, bastards, priests, a few boys who still looked too bright for all this. The clan, the war, and the cold mornings—all words for the same soup of breath, blood, and decisions.

"Well," said Fergus when I returned to them. "So, do you like your new big family?"

I looked at him, saw the camp, saw the grey sky that didn't care whose cloth was which color.

"Family," I said. "In the end, it's just the number of people you freeze to death with instead of alone."

He grinned. "Sounds like a clan I can live with."

Or die. But nobody had to say that.

The first night in the large camp was louder than any storm and at the same time emptier than a hollow road after a raid. They say that many people together generate warmth, but that's

only true if they like each other. Here, no one really liked anyone else; they just needed each other. That's a difference you can smell. There were more fires, more voices, more cursing, more laughter, more the metallic clang of blades on grindstones. But sleep remained the same: choppy, too short, filled with images you'd never asked for.

We were camped on the edge of the camp, of course. Peasants, bandits, and bastards get thrown by the outer fire, where the wind bites hardest. The good spots belong to those with names and banners. Our "tent city" consisted of crooked tarpaulins, a few blankets, a three-legged pot, and a handful of men who pretended not to mind. Fergus's men had only half-mingled with us—close enough to notice when things went wrong, far enough away to pretend it was none of their business.

Morning didn't come, it crept. First, we noticed that the fire gave off less light than before, then that the sky was no longer completely black, but had tilted into a dull gray. The frost had eaten away at the edges of the blankets, as if we had slept on ice. Upon getting up, our joints felt as if they had turned to stone overnight. There were a few silent contortions, then we stood in that repulsive in-between state: not awake, no longer asleep, but already back in character.

The horn blast that echoed through the camp was not a heroic sound. It sounded more like someone had blown into a sick cow. Nevertheless, everyone sprang to life. Men stumbled out of their tents, faces awakened too soon, voices rough. Somewhere someone shouted a name, somewhere else no one answered. No one stayed lying down. Cold is a better rouser than any drum.

"Come on, you northern rats," Broc growled, kicking us one by one back to reality. "Today we'll show them we're not just mud with legs."

"We are fine mud with character," Tam murmured as he tightened his belt.

The morning ration was a joke. Thin porridge that looked like someone had made water sad. A lump of bread hard enough to knock a man's front teeth out. We stood there with bowls in our hands, our breath steaming over the porridge that just wouldn't get warm. Dougal spooned slowly, as if trying to delay the moment hunger returned. Cailean shoveled it in, as if he thought it would be better if he swallowed it faster.

Around us, the scene resembled an army: shifting masses of men who had to sort themselves out. One was coughing so hoarsely I swore his lung would fall out. Another vomited the remains of yesterday next to his tent and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand as if it were the most natural thing in the world. Two were arguing about who had stolen his armor during the night, until they both realized it was the same breastplate in two halves.

"Order," Aidan murmured. "Everything here looks very orderly."

"That's order," Seoras said. "Look more closely."

He was right. There was a structure to the chaos, recognizable only to someone who had spent too many hours in camps. The stronger troops were closer to the banners, the smaller ones, like us, gathered from all corners, at the edges. The horsemen were where the ground was less muddy. The messengers moved like ants, seemingly without a plan, but always with a

purpose. And above it all, the banners, fluttering in the wind, acting as if they were more important than the men beneath them.

After the meal—if you could call it that—came what they called "the roll call." A man with a voice like a saw that hadn't seen oil in years walked through the rows, shouting the names of clans, places, and old promises. Men stepped forward, formed lines, and were counted. We were assigned our section of the line like an animal its pen.

"You're in the third wedge, outer wing," said the saw-man, as if he'd just decided who would get their ass kicked first. "If they come from the right, they're yours. If they don't come from the right, don't try to play smart."

"Third wedge," Broc repeated, as if committing it to memory, as if it held meaning. Perhaps it did, for him. For me, it was just another way of saying: You're where the action is, but not in the center, where you're visible.

We stood in a line, shields tested, swords checked. Fergus and his bandits stayed with us, slightly offset. No official positions, no banners. But they were where they could move quickly. Bandits are like fire: they work best when you give them a little space.

As we waited, the cold crept under our fingernails. Our breath rose in small clouds, one after the other. I saw the faces of the men beside me. Tam, with that look half-annoyed, half-willing. Aidan, trying to keep a smile on his face, though his mouth remained closed. Ruairi, looking as if he'd spent the previous night rehearsing every possible version of our deaths. Dougal, holding his cane as if it were an heirloom about to be transformed into a spear. Cailean, his face a mixture of fear and strange excitement.

"You look like a neat row," Fergus said from behind us. "Almost a shame if one of you is missing."

"Don't worry," I said. "There are plenty who want to step up."

Across the camp, another voice could be heard, clearer, brighter, but with that harshness that only those accustomed to being listened to possess. I couldn't quite make out the words, but I understood the tone. A lord, a leader, a man who knows that success brings glory and failure offers excuses. The sergeant glanced briefly in that direction. Not with reverence, but rather with the sober assessment of a man who knows how high someone can rise without seeing the mud.

"What is your clan, bastard?"

The question came from the side. It was the redhead with the fox mustache from yesterday, now closer. His tartan flickered in a dark green, his gaze curious but not friendly. Men love to probe wounds that haven't yet scarred.

"The rain," I said. "It's hitting all the roofs."

A few in the row grinned. The redhead grimaced. "No family, no name, but a sword in his hand," he said. "You bastards are like axes lying around. Someone will pick you up when it suits them."

"And you clanmen are like old shields," I said. "Beautifully painted, but full of cracks that no one wants to see."

His hand instinctively went to his weapon before he composed himself. It was clear he knew what was at stake here: not honor, but rather not starting a fight for no reason when the English were around. Even so, he looked at me as if he were memorizing my features for later.

"Stop it," the sergeant growled without turning around. "We have enough enemies. If you absolutely must die, wait until the right ones are standing in front of you."

There's something cruel about cold mornings in a war camp: they make you wait long enough to get nervous, but not long enough to be tired enough to feel nothing. You stand there, your sword heavier than usual, your back too stiff, your fingers too alert. You wait for orders, for noise, for movement. And in the time between, your mind is filled with nonsense.

I thought of my father. Of seeing him here somewhere—under a banner, in a better coat, with a name somewhere on the tongues of men I didn't know. Perhaps he was fighting today for the same clan, the same king, the same great cause. Or perhaps he was simply standing somewhere, sharpening the sword with which he wouldn't recognize his own son if he stood face to face with him.

The priest moved between the rows like a thin shadow. He didn't speak much, only occasionally placing his hand briefly on someone's shoulder, murmuring a simple prayer that bounced off some men and lingered somewhere in the minds of others. When he passed me, he paused for a moment.

"Are you cold?" he asked.

"Everyone is cold," I said.

"How is your inner self?" he asked.

I looked at him. "It's on fire," I said.

He nodded, as if he had expected precisely that answer. "Don't let it all burn," he murmured. "Leave something behind that isn't made of embers."

"Perhaps there will be time for that later," I said.

"Later is a luxury," he said. "Don't forget that."

He walked on. Fergus stepped closer. "You talk as if you're about to enter a monastery," he said. "You're warriors. Or something like that. You're here to fight, not to philosophize."

"A blow without thought is just a twitch," Seoras said.

"As long as he scores," said Fergus, "he's fine by me."

Eventually—and eventually, in a camp like that, things always take too long—there was movement in the ranks. A signal, a shout, messengers running. You saw men being called to

their horses, others being issued spears, still others declining because they were needed for later. Stirling wasn't yet on the horizon, but it was in their minds. In their eyes. In the way hands examined blades, as if speaking to them.

We received no marching orders that morning. Instead, there was what the higher-ups called "drill," which felt to us like structured hazing. Formation running, closing shield lines, wedge forward, wedge back, "you'd die here," "maybe not there," "this is how you hold the line," "this is how you die faster." A dance for men with too much metal on their bodies. The cold air cut into our lungs, the ground was unforgiving, but the movement felt good—better than standing and waiting.

I realized how we functioned as a group. Peasants, bandits, bastards—it sounded like a bad joke on paper. But in line, shield to shield, foot to foot, it suddenly didn't matter where anyone came from. Tam pushed when someone toppled. Aidan filled gaps before anyone else saw them. Dougal planted the stick he called a spear exactly where an imaginary opponent would have charged. Cailean stumbled once, but caught himself because Fergus roared and pulled him forward again.

"If you fall, boy, fall forward," he snapped. "You can fall backward later."

The man from the tent, the High One—or one of his closest companions—stood at the edge and watched. No grand speech, no "you are my hope," no "for king and country." He simply watched. He assessed. A mental scale upon which we all lay. Weight, utility, expected lifespan. We were nothing more than numbers in his eyes, but numbers nonetheless, numbers that mattered.

When the "exercise" was over, my muscles burned, the frost had turned to sweat, and my breath came in short gasps. I felt my body again. Heavy legs, aching shoulder, stiff hands. And beneath it all, the fire that wouldn't go out. It was as if every cold morning fanned the flames instead of extinguishing it.

"Not a bad bunch," the sergeant said later, as we sat back by our perimeter fire. "They won't want to see you at the front. But they'll miss you when you're not there."

"You miss toothaches when they suddenly stop," said Tam. "That doesn't mean you want them back."

"We are the clan, the war, and the cold mornings," said Dougal, half seriously, half mockingly. "The songs will bow down before us."

"The songs will forget us," I said. "Because they prefer to sing names rather than people who have lain in the dirt so that someone else can walk over them with clean boots."

Fergus nodded. "Then we won't sing," he said. "We'll drink, we'll fight, we'll burn. Sometimes freedom lies simply in knowing who you don't owe anything to."

I looked towards the center of the camp. The banners. The better tents. The men with names. Then I looked at us. At the edge. At the cold. At the faces that felt more like truth than anything over there.

The clan was a lie, I thought. But it was a lie that at least brought us closer to the enemy, so we could see him. And in those cold morning hours, when my fingers were numb and my mind sharp, that was enough for me: to know where I stood. Among men who were just as out of place as I was. That was more of a family than anyone had ever given me credit for.

The cold mornings didn't go away. They just changed. On the first day at camp, they felt like a new, unexpected punishment. By the third, they felt like an old acquaintance you had to face every day, even though you hadn't liked them for years. Eventually, the cold didn't just seep into your bones; it lodged itself in your thoughts. Everything you thought sounded harsher, sharper, more breathless. The men talked less. The jokes became blunter, the laughter shorter. Everyone knew: We were standing on the edge of something bigger. And that bigger thing had no intention of asking us beforehand if we were ready.

The days were filled with training, marching, reconnaissance, and orders that sounded more like they were meant to appease the higher-ups than us. The nights were worse. At night, there was too much space in your mind. You lie there, half under a blanket, half in the frost, your back against the hard earth, and your heart pounds as if it wants to know how many more times it can. Next to you, someone snores, another tosses and turns, someone else murmurs in their sleep. And above it all, the faint, ever-present sound of many men pretending they aren't afraid.

One of those nights I couldn't sleep at all. Not even that choppy, dirty twilight you usually get for at least a few hours. I tossed and turned, onto my side, onto my back, onto my side again. The knife at my hip was like a small, hard stone, to which my whole body clung. Moira's blade. Moira's kiss. Moira's shadow. And the thing that was out there somewhere, walking through the hills, probably laughing, without a voice.

Eventually, I'd had enough. I pushed the blanket aside and sat up. My breath caught sharply in front of my face. The camp lay around me like a sleeping, restless giant: tents like hunched shoulders, fire pits like smoldering eyes that never quite close. A few guards patrolled the area, cloaks clinging tightly to their bodies, hands on spears or swords. In the distance, near the center, I could hear faint singing somewhere, drunken or desperate, hard to tell.

"Can't you sleep, or are you just trying to look pretty?" a voice murmured beside me. Fergus. Of course he was awake too. Bandits never truly sleep; they only rest with one eye open.

"I need to see what the world looks like when it pretends to be alive," I said.

He pulled the blanket over his shoulders, sat up, and rubbed his face. "The world always looks the same when you view it from the very bottom," he said. "Cold, far away, and nobody asks if you have a blanket."

"Go ahead and sleep," I said. "Tomorrow is training, and the day after tomorrow maybe something else."

"I'll sleep when I'm dead," he murmured. "Then at least I won't have to fool any more guards."

I got up anyway. My legs felt heavy, but they were carrying me, so they should walk. I moved a little way from the edge of our pile, not far, just enough to be out of the immediate vicinity of the fire. The air was colder, clearer, harsher. The sky was clearer than the last few nights; a few stars burned through, pretending they weren't as insignificant as we were.

I stopped by a post where a banner had hung during the day. Now it was rolled up, just a dark lump of fabric, swaying listlessly in the wind. No pattern, no color. As if it were naked. Or honest, depending on how you wanted to look at it.

It was quieter here. The camp was loud enough to drown itself out, but at the edges the sounds were fainter. I heard a dog barking, far away. Perhaps from the farmland, perhaps one of the stray animals that follow every army like flies. I heard the soft crackling of wood in the fire. The rustle of fabric when someone turned over. And in between—just for a moment—something else.

A sound that wasn't really a sound. More like a vibration in the air. Like a hum that couldn't decide whether it really wanted to be heard. I held my breath. It wasn't the wind, I knew that. The wind has a direction. This was coming from everywhere. And from nowhere.

My hand instinctively went to the knife. It lay in its sheath, but I felt it... react. Not strongly. No clanging, no glowing, no magical stuff the bards would later love. Just a slight pulsing in my palm as I gripped the handle. As if the blade were breathing.

"Not now," I murmured. Whether to myself or to her, I didn't know.

The buzzing didn't grow louder, but it persisted. It stretched like a thin wire between my shoulders, raising the hairs on the back of my neck. I gazed into the darkness beyond the camp. There, where the frost lay on open hills, the trees were like dark fingers, and not a single torch stood. Perhaps there was nothing there. Or perhaps there was everything.

"Are you going crazy, or can you see something?" a voice suddenly asked behind me. I whirled around, my hand still on the knife. It was the priest. He stood there, thin as a stolen candle, a cloak draped over his shoulders, his eyes clearer than one would expect.

"I can hear it," I said.

"What?" he asked.

"The thing," I said. "Or its shadow. Or the hole it leaves behind."

He came beside me, looking in the same direction. "I hear the wind and men who can't sleep," he said. "And I see a bastard who thinks he's in the middle of a story that's bigger than it is."

"She's big enough," I said. "She eats everything we have."

He was silent for a moment. Then: "Maybe she's just eating what was already rotten."

"Do you really believe that?" I asked.

"No," he said. "But some lies provide warmth for a moment."

The buzzing was still there, but fainter, as if it had realized it was getting attention and didn't want it. The cold crept under my shirt. I took a deep breath, the cold air burning in my lungs. The knife slowly quieted down. My fingers ached from the handle, which I hadn't wanted to loosen.

"You're not here by chance," the priest said softly. "Not just because you fight well. Not just because you're angry inside. This... knife, this woman, these places you've been. Maybe something pushed you here. Maybe you pushed yourself. In the end, it doesn't matter. What matters is what you do when it comes again."

"You talk as if you know what it wants," I said.

He sighed. "I know what drives everything, what hunts. It wants something to be missing. Flesh, blood, hope, a voice. The pattern is always the same. Only the forms change."

"And God?" I asked. "Does he want something too?"

The priest thought for a moment. "Perhaps he doesn't want us to die like animals," he said. "Not screaming, not fleeing. Perhaps he wants us to stand still, for something."

I had to laugh. It was short and dry, more of an outburst than a laugh. "If God wants me to stand up straight," I said, "he can also give me a better back."

"He gave you a better knife," the priest said, looking at my hand. "Or someone on his behalf. And that's more than most people get."

We stood there for a while longer, two silhouettes on the edge of an army that slept and pretended to be strong. The humming in the air subsided, retreating like an animal closing its mouth. Perhaps it had never been there. Perhaps it was only inside me. Perhaps there was no difference.

"Go to sleep," the priest said eventually. "The cold mornings won't become milder just because you stare at them."

I nodded, but didn't leave immediately. I looked once more into the darkness. "If it comes," I said, more to myself than to him, "it will come here. Not in the huts, not in the chapels, not just with the farmers. It will take what is huddled together here."

"Then we hope," he said, "that it will be full before it arrives here."

"I hope it chokes," I said.

As I walked back to our spot, I saw Fergus lying awake against his blanket, half-lying, half-sitting. His eyes were narrow, but not tired. "Was something wrong?" was all he asked.

"Only the night," I said.

"The night won't get any better," he said. "But eventually it will be over. And that's when the problems really begin."

I lay down, the blanket over me, the knife at my hip, the piece of wood from my cradle in my hand, as always. Two things from different times in my life. One from a mother who had wanted me to live. One from a dead woman who perhaps wanted me to survive. In between, me. And somewhere out there, the cold mornings, waiting for us as if by appointment.

Before I drifted off to sleep, I heard a sound in the distance, the realness of which I wasn't sure: a mixture of deep breathing and a dull, rolling noise. No horse, no man, no horn. I could have imagined it was the wind caught in some strange corner. Or I could have admitted to myself that the thing that had been circling us for so long was now closer than we cared to admit.

The next day, we'd be told to march on towards Stirling. Towards the walls, towards the English shields, towards banners that could be torn to shreds. And everyone would be relieved because they finally had something in front of them again to punch in the face. Only I knew—or thought I knew—that besides the English, there was something else waiting for us. Something that didn't need a banner. Something that had invented cold mornings.

I eventually fell asleep, in that mixture of frost, weariness, and the last vestiges of defiance. The clan, the war, and the cold mornings had claimed me, whether I wanted them to or not. But I wasn't here just to be part of a pattern. If the thing from the shadows truly wanted us, it wouldn't pull me out of line like another faceless body. It would see me. And I would see back.

Perhaps that is precisely the only freedom you have left: to decide how you hold your gaze when everything else begins to fall away.

Brave men, bad teeth

They say courage resides in the heart. Whoever invented that never spent much time in an army camp. Courage resides in the teeth. In the moment you bite down, even though you know perfectly well it will hurt. In the moment you bite into a day that everyone tells you will punch in the face. And if I learned one thing in that camp, it's this: We may have been good men. But our teeth were shot.

The morning we finally spoke of Stirling for the first time in days, as if it were no longer just a distant word, smelled of cold grease and metal. The camp was awake and in a bad mood. Everywhere you looked, there were men with mouths that had more holes than rows of teeth. Yellow stumps, brown edges, black spots. When someone laughed, it looked like the mouth of a rotting chest. Brave, yes. But no one would ever write a song about a Scotsman's teeth without lying.

I sat at the edge of our fire and watched Tam scrape at a molar with a small, suspiciously dirty knife. He grimaced, grunted, spat dark red phlegm into the dirt, and muttered something that was probably a prayer or an insult. Sometimes they're one and the same.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"Negotiations," he growled without looking up. "The tooth wants to come out. I want it to stay in until we're finished. I'm trying to talk it out of giving up."

"Doesn't look like you're going to win," said Aidan, who was crouching next to him and rubbing his chin as if he were afraid his beard stubble would fall out too.

Tam squeezed too hard once, flinched, and gasped. "Brave men," he said, "bad teeth." Then he looked at me. "Write that on my grave, bastard."

"If you die before your tooth falls out, I don't know if that's really a victory," I said.

Fergus sat a little further back, a bone in his hand, almost devoid of flesh. He gnawed at it nonetheless, as if refusing to let go of something that still held a glimmer of promise. His teeth were no better than ours, only sharper, like those of a man who had bitten too often into things not meant for the mouth—leather, metal, fists, lies.

"Teeth are overrated," he said with his mouth full. "You only need them until you're old. And which of us plans to get old?"

"I do," interjected the priest, who was struggling with a piece of bread that looked more like a sacrificial stone.

"You don't count," said Fergus. "You're more likely to bite into sins than into flesh."

"Sins are tougher," muttered the priest, took a bite and grimaced as if the loaf had contradicted him.

The sergeant approached us. He looked as usual: too tired to appear nervous, too alert not to notice everything. "Conference in an hour," he said. "The banners will be assembled. Today there will be more than just cold porridge and empty promises."

"A plan?" Seoras asked.

"Or what they consider to be," the sergeant replied. "Stirling is getting closer. And the English have apparently realized that we are more than just a few disparate clans with bad tempers."

Aidan nudged me with his elbow. "Do you hear that?" he whispered. "Finally. A real war. No farm, no bandits, no faceless thing. Just real enemies with real teeth."

"Have you ever looked at the English?" I asked. "They're no better endowed than we are. They just have more gold to lie to themselves about."

Tam spat again. "Gold on your teeth is useless if someone smashes your skull in. Then they'll just shine in the dirt."

We laughed briefly. The laughter sounded rough, fragile. But it was there. And sometimes that's all that stands between you and nothingness: an ugly, honest laugh.

I stood up, stretched, and felt my spine creak like old wood. The camp was in motion. Men were tightening armor, pulling on chainmail, checking helmets, sharpening blades as if trying to rub the fatigue out of the steel. Everywhere you could hear that metallic scraping, the dull thud of iron on stone, the quiet curse when someone cut themselves. Brave men, bad teeth, sharp swords—a fitting title for the scene unfolding before me.

I walked a short distance, just to clear my head. Between two rows of tents, I saw a man sitting, poking at another man's gums with a red-hot piece of metal. The patient was gripping

a post, his knuckles white, sweat beading on his forehead. No scream. Just a long, drawn-out, muted groan, suspended somewhere between masculinity and collapse. Beside him lay a cloth with three dark, blood-smeared tooth roots.

"Nice morning for a root canal," I muttered.

The "dentist"—a man with hard hands and a face that boded ill—glanced up briefly. "Better to let them bite you than have your jaw shattered in battle because you can't hold your shield from the pain," he said. "Afraid of fire?"

"I'm afraid of things that are bigger than me," I said. "That's too small."

He grinned, his mouth a jumble of gaps and crooked remnants. "Good man," he said. "Bad teeth." He shoved the red-hot iron back into the other man's mouth, who this time only let out a muffled sound and tried not to breathe.

I continued walking, towards the center. The banners fluttered, the wind playing with the colors. Green, blue, red, patterns that told stories I'd never heard. I wondered if my father's name was hanging somewhere there. Maybe not. Maybe the man was one of those who were a little bit everywhere and completely nowhere. Like me—only I'd never had a choice.

A group of men had gathered in front of a large tent; they looked considerably better than we did. Not clean, no. But more well-groomed by comparison. Armor that hadn't come from five different corpses. Coats with more thread than holes. You could tell by looking at them: these are the ones who want to hear the stories about brave men, but are rarely there when one of them really screams for the first time.

I stayed outside the circle. I knew where I stood. On the sidelines. That's the place for people like me. Good view, little say.

Inside the tent, voices could be heard. The High One, other clanmen, strategic minds, naming hills, rivers, and narrow passages. Stirling was no longer a story, but a series of lines on a map. Bridges, castles, waterways. They were planning how to send men in, to later count them as numbers. Brave men, bad teeth, good position. That's how the reports would sound.

Suddenly, the redhead with the fox whiskers, whom I already knew, stood beside me. He was chewing on something—a piece of bone, a chewy loaf of bread, perhaps his own lip. His teeth were in terrible condition, but he wore them with a proud defiance, as if they were part of his clan.

"You," he said. "Bastard without tartan."

"You," I said. "Man with too much hair on his face."

He grinned broadly. A brownish, patchy wall. "They say inside that they put the best ones at the front."

"Then we'll definitely be at the back," I said.

"Oh no," he said. "They also say: Those who have nothing to lose are the ones you should send to test the bottleneck."

I knew what he meant. Stirling. The bridge. The hole through which everything had to go.

"Sounds like a job for good men," I said.

"With bad teeth," he added. "If you bite and they break, at least you tried everything."

He moved a little closer to me, looking, like me, towards the tent exit. For a moment, we weren't a clan issue, not a bastard, not a named one. Just two men waiting for someone to tell them when they would be sent to the slaughter.

"My name is Eòin," he said suddenly, without looking at me.

I glanced at him sideways. "William," I said. "The last name is irrelevant. Ask the man who should have given it to me."

"I'll ask him on the other side of the bridge," said Eòin. "Maybe he'll be standing next to an English banner, pretending he has everything under control."

For a moment I wondered if he knew more than he was letting on. Then the tent door was swung open. Men came out: the High One, two others in fine coats, and a messenger who looked as if he would rather disappear. The crowd parted, without anyone giving an order.

"Listen," cried the High Man. No grand theatrics. Just a voice that knew it would be heard. "The English are at Stirling. They're holding the bridge because they think we're foolish enough to give it to them. They have more horses. More heavy armor. More space. We have..." – he paused briefly – "...less to lose."

A few people laughed. Not because it was funny, but because you had to laugh when someone was so honest.

"We're going to Stirling," he continued. "Not today, not with this frost in our bones. But soon. And we'll show them that brave men can bite even with bad teeth."

A few shouts, short, harsh. No jubilant cries, as the bards would later invent. Just this "Aye," which sounded more like an old man agreeing that he had no choice anyway.

I felt something rising inside me. Not a heroic surge. More like a hard, jagged knot of anger, exhaustion, hunger, a knife at my hip, a father somewhere else, a thing in the shadows drawing ever closer. Stirling would at least give me some direction. A place with names, walls, enemies I could see. Maybe that was exactly what I needed to avoid completely disappearing into the invisible war that raged around the camp at night.

Back at our fire, the mood was mixed. Dougal seemed paler, Cailean more animated, as if the word "Stirling" had ignited a fire within him that hadn't yet learned that fire also burns. Murn, the silent blockhead, merely nodded and continued sharpening his blade. Fergus sat down, slumped forward, and rubbed his knees.

"Well then," he said. "Stirling. At least we'll die in a place that can be drawn on a map."

"And what if we don't die?" asked Cailean.

Fergus looked at him and grinned crookedly. "Then we have one more story to annoy others with who don't believe it."

"What about... that thing?" Ruairi asked quietly. "Do you think it will get there too?"

It was a valid question. We all thought it, but saying it out loud was still difficult.

"If there are many men there," I said, "then it will be there. Sooner or later. Where there is blood, there are flies. Where there are flies, there is decay. And where there is decay, there comes that which likes to wallow in it."

"Maybe it will eat English people before it eats us," Aidan said. "That would be a form of justice."

The priest looked into the fire. "Justice is a word men invent when they want to feel superior to those they kill," he said. "But if the thing is hunting us and them, at least it's honest."

Brave men. Bad teeth. Honest monsters. Honest blades. Dishonest banners. That was the reckoning we would take south.

I felt for the knife. Moira's blade was cold, but not dead. In my hand, I felt that faint vibration again, as if she had heard where we were going. Stirling. Bridge. Water. Blood. Perhaps that was precisely why she had been placed in my hand. Perhaps not. It didn't matter anymore.

In the coming days, the camp would shift. We would break ranks. Form lines. Read river lines as if they were sentences. The English would raise their shields, make their horses trot, their commanders would point at maps with clean teeth. And we—good men with rotten mouths—would try to prove to them that in this land there is no one who alone has the right to decide where blood belongs.

I glanced over at Tam, who was still struggling with his tooth. "Well?" I asked.

He raised his head, grinned at me, and a new gap had opened up in his grin. Bloody, raw, honest.

"He's out," he said. "See? One less thing to worry about."

"Or one more hole," I said.

He laughed, that raspy Scottish laugh that always sounds a bit like a cough. "In the end, we're all just holes, William. In flesh, in mind, in history. The main thing is that we take a good bite every now and then."

Brave men. Bad teeth. Stirling in front of us. The Thing behind us. And me in the middle, a bastard with a dead woman's knife and a fire in my chest that never quite went out.

That was enough. For today.

The day the order to leave came began with a taste in my mouth as if I'd spent the night sucking on a rusty bucket. I woke up with a furry tongue, dry lips, a whiff of stale beer and cold smoke in my throat, and I knew: if there was any proof that humans weren't made for

armies, it was what you breathed out in the morning. Around me, men straightened up like old, creaking doors. Some rubbed their faces, others reached for their weapons first, still others for the spot in their back they knew would protest today. No one reached for their teeth. They'd already given up.

The horn call that went through the camp was thin and crooked, as if wrested from a dying animal. Nevertheless, everyone understood it: Pack up. Move. No more excuses. The talk about Stirling was over. The time when it was just a word, too. From now on, it was a place that met us like an open mouth.

Broc stomped through our part of the camp, stepping on feet that weren't moved out of the way quickly enough, and didn't say a word. When he was silent, it was worse than any cursing. He stopped just in front of me, looked down at me like a butcher at a piece of meat he already half knows. "You look like shit, William," he said.

"You smell like shit," I replied. "We're even."

He grinned crookedly. He was missing a tooth on the right side, one I hadn't seen pulled. Perhaps it had been gone before. Perhaps he'd lost it somewhere in a battle, along with a piece of illusion. "Teeth are overrated," he muttered, as if answering me in my head. "If you keep your mouth shut long enough, nobody will ask questions."

We packed. Armor was pulled back over cold shirts, belts tightened, swords hooked, spears picked up. Blankets, still reeking of smoke and fear, were rolled up and strapped down somewhere in the back. Dougal tied his staff—his spear—with a piece of strap, as if afraid the thing would run away if he just carried it. Cailean tried to zip up his cloak so the rip in the side wasn't right over his heart. Murn said nothing, as always. He was like a rock with legs: there, heavy, useful in an emergency, not much of a conversationalist.

Fergus came over to us with a piece of dried meat stuck between his teeth. He chewed as if it were an act of personal resistance. "We're running today," he said. "They say it's not far. And when people in good coats say it's not far, it means we're going to curse."

"What do they say about Stirling?" asked Aidan, as he tried to untangle a strap that had turned into a knot of bad temper overnight.

"That it will take us in," said Fergus. "As if we were guests." He spat out a small piece of meat, too tough even for his teeth, and kicked it into the mud. "I've been a guest in places that were less hungry than Stirling."

The march began to move like an animal that had been tethered for too long. Hesitantly at first, then with that languid determination that comes with a mass of people moving. Rows of people pushed their way between the slowly burning fires, banners bobbing overhead as if testing whether the wind still recognized them. Above us, a sky that pretended not to see any of it. The sun was invisible, only a glimmer of light lurking somewhere behind the gray.

We took our place in the third wedge, outer wing. Peasants, bandits, bastards, like a dirty seam on a coat someone called patchwork and "army." Other ranks in front of us, more behind. I felt the weight of the men against my back, their footsteps in the same rhythm, the faint clang of metal, which here was not a refined sound, but a reminder that everything we carried was made to cut into something.

“When we walk like this, we look like real warriors,” said Cailean, half proud, half frightened.

"If you fall like that, you'll look like a real dead man," Tam said. "Don't worry so much about gender roles."

The path leading out of the camp was well-trodden. Dirt, tracks, broken branches, a lost piece of armor here, an old bandage there. Armies leave trash behind like giants. We were no exception. As we left the camp behind, I turned my head slightly one last time and saw the many fire pits, now just smoldering holes in the ground. After us, the wind would sweep over them, then the rain. In a few weeks, no one would be able to tell that hundreds of men had stood here, laughing, drinking, praying, and shivering.

That's how everything worked in this country. Today fire, tomorrow grass, the day after tomorrow a story no one believes.

The road to Stirling wound its way through the hills like an old scar. It wasn't difficult, just long. The cold seeped into our bones, the frost crunched under our boots, and the longer we walked, the more I noticed the men growing quieter. At first, there were still some lighthearted jokes—about English teeth, about Scottish flags, about who would stumble first. After a while, all that could be heard was the steady thumping of footsteps, breathing, the crackle of leather.

There were moments when I felt almost... safe. Amidst all the bodies, all the weapons, all the banners. As if nothing in the shadows could be foolish enough to run into that raging mob. And then the other thought came: What if that's exactly what it wants? What if that's exactly what it loves—the density, the fear, the blood running across the hills in one great rush?

The memory of the buzzing in the night was still fresh. The knife at my side felt still, but not dead. Like someone awake who pretends to be asleep because they don't want to be spoken to.

Around noon, we were briefly halted on a rise. The order was passed along the line: “Halt. Maintain order. Don’t fall apart. Don’t eat until the order comes.” The sergeant didn’t shout, but his voice was clear. We stopped, the ranks automatically closed again, gaps were filled, shields were minimally adjusted, swords were briefly drawn to check they were still there. Men used the break to urinate, to swear, to wiggle their toes in their boots to remind themselves they were still there.

From above, we could see a glimpse of what lay ahead. Not a city, not yet. Instead, more plumes of smoke in the distance, a darker line on the horizon where something was moving that wasn't a forest. Armies always look the same from afar: a speck on the earth, little form, much consistency.

“There they are,” Seoras said. “Or some of them.”

“English or us?” Aidan asked.

“Both,” he said. “We are never alone when things get bad.”

The men stared. Some with narrowed eyes, others with open mouths, as if they could measure the distance with their teeth. I saw the shoulders around me straighten. Not because anyone

was preaching courage. Simply because it was now clear: what lay ahead was no longer just a word.

The order to move forward came, and the march became more arduous. Conversations almost completely ceased. There were only these small islands of words: "Tighten your belt," "Raise your shield," "Don't look down." The bandits walked close by, nimbly despite their burdens. Fergus had that half-bored, half-tense face of a man who had waited too often for something that might kill him.

"Are you scared?" I asked him as we walked side by side for a while.

He looked at me, briefly, as if the question wasn't stupid, just unusually honest. "Yes," he said. "Of course. Anyone who claims they don't have any is either lying or already dead. But I know what fear tastes like. I've got good teeth for it."

"If we survive today," I said, "you won't need any more by evening."

"I need them to give life another taste," he muttered. "Today, tomorrow, who cares? As long as there's something to eat."

In the afternoon, the path led us through a narrow passage, a kind of small dip between two low hills, from which everything was visible. A perfect spot for an ambush. Perfect enough that any man with a shred of sense would have noticed. The ranks automatically tightened, shields were held higher, and the view was no longer so freely unobstructed. We could hear fingers grinding on handles.

Nothing happened.

No arrows, no shouts, no Englishmen, no shadows. Just our train, running through this hollow as if it simply had to get through it, without anything waiting for it.

"Sometimes nothing is worse than something," Ruairi muttered behind me.

"Yes," I said. "Nothing means that something will come later."

Just beyond the narrow passage, I saw something in the ground again that made me stop. Tracks. Not deep, not large, but different. Not hooves, not boots. Those round, cursed impressions that I could now recognize even in my sleep. Not many. Just a few. Like a whisper in the mud.

I didn't stop; that would have caused trouble. But my gaze lingered on it. The knife vibrated almost imperceptibly.

"Do you see that?" I hissed at Seoras.

He glanced down briefly as he walked. "Yes," was all he said.

"New?" I asked.

He thought for a moment. "Not old enough to be reassuring," he replied.

That was all. I didn't need anything more.

We marched on, and that knot tightened inside me again. Brave men, bad teeth, sharp blades—and somewhere out there, something saw all that as a reserve. Us, the English, everything in between. It was as if we were fighting two wars, and no one had asked if we had enough teeth for both.

As the sun—or what should have been—descended, the order came to set up camp. No longer the large assembly camp as before, but a forward one. Closer to the enemy, closer to Stirling, closer to the water, which you could smell before you saw it. The river had laid that heavy dampness in the air, which hung over everything as if saying: You come to me, whether alive or dead.

We pitched our tents—if you could call those crooked tarpaulins that—closer together than before. Shields were leaned against the outside, spears placed within reach. The fire we lit was smaller. Less light, less warmth, less inviting. Perhaps we hoped that the thing in the shade would prefer to go where the fires were bigger.

At mealtimes – this time something that called itself soup, but was more like hot water with a few peas scattered in it – we sat in a circle. Men shoveled the stuff down, not because it tasted good, but because their bodies needed something to believe they were still receiving external support.

“Tomorrow?” Cailean asked with her mouth full.

“Tomorrow it will be closer,” said the sergeant. “Perhaps not the battle. But Stirling is coming into view.”

“Will I finally get to face an Englishman?” asked Aidan.

"First, your sword," I said. "If you start biting her, something has gone wrong."

Tam sat there, repeatedly running his tongue into the new gap where the tooth had been. "Feels strange," he murmured.

"Get used to it," Broc said. "This won't be the last gap you get."

I thought of all the gaps we already had: in the ranks, in the stories, in the faces that were gone at some point. Brave men, bad teeth. And in between, this country, looking at us like a toothless mouth that could still swallow everything.

Later, after the soup was eaten, the weapons checked, and the men wrapped themselves in their blankets, I stayed awake. The river wasn't far; I could hear its soft murmur. It sounded calm, almost friendly. Water is a liar. It pretends to flow only until you're lying in it and realize how heavy it is.

The sky was dark again, the stars fewer than before, but they were there. I felt the knife, the piece of wood, my own heart. Everything was beating. Everything was still there. Tomorrow we would be closer to Stirling. Even closer to English steel. Even closer to the thing.

I ran my tongue along my teeth. One was loose. Right at the back. It wobbled as if it had decided it didn't want to see this chapter through to the end.

"Not yet," I murmured. "You stay until I'm finished."

Good man, bad tooth. Maybe it was the other way around. Maybe we were all just bad men with a bit of bite left. But I knew: as long as something in my mouth still hurt, I knew I was alive.

Tomorrow we would find out how much bite we really had.

The night before Stirling no longer smelled of camp, but of anticipation. Not the good kind of anticipation, like when a child hopes someone will bring them something sweet from the market, but the kind where you know something big is coming and none of it will be pleasant. The river rushed somewhere in the darkness, as if it wanted to remain detached the whole time, as if the mess on the bank didn't concern it. The camp was smaller than the previous gathering place, denser, more compact, like an animal crouching down before it either charges or gets beaten.

I lay on the blanket, my back on the hard floor, staring upwards. The sky was clearer this time, as if it actually wanted to see us. Stars, scattered irregularly, cold and dull. No comfort, just a reminder of how small we were. To my right, Broc snored, deep and steady, as if he'd decided he'd rather march into hell with a full tank of sleep. To my left, Aidan tossed and turned, as if trying to shake the nightmare from his chest through sheer movement. A few rows away, I heard someone gag, either from fear or because their stomach had decided the stew wasn't fit for combat.

I couldn't sleep. Not properly. I drifted off, slipping briefly into images where Stirling was a gigantic grotesque and the bridge like a stone toothpick we'd all be hanging from, and came back up as soon as I felt the humming. That soft vibration that wasn't the river, wasn't the wind, wasn't the men's voices. It was too deep and too close. It had no direction, only a presence. As if someone had stuck a finger in the air and set it vibrating ever so slightly.

The knife lay still at my side, as still as anything can be that you know isn't just forged steel. I placed my hand on it, and there it was again—that faint but perceptible echo in my palm. Not the trembling of a frightened dog, more the tension of an animal ready to spring at any second. I sighed softly, pulled the blanket away, and sat up. The floor was cold; my feet felt as if someone had dragged them through ice.

"Out looking for a bride again, bastard?" Fergus's voice came softly from the darkness, somewhere near the dying embers of the fire, which now only glowed like a bad memory. He sat there, his cloak draped over his shoulders, his back against a shield, a shadow with eyes.

"I just want to know if the night has anything more in store for us than freezing," I said, standing up.

"The night always has more to do than you," he grumbled. "But go ahead. If something eats you, we'll have fewer mouths to feed tomorrow."

I moved a little way from the fire, not far, just enough so that the voices grew quieter and the river louder. The ground was uneven, full of roots and holes, as if the earth were devouring

itself. I stopped between two low bushes. From here, I could see a faint, unfamiliar glow in the distance. Not a campfire. Not a star. More like a bright scar on the horizon. Stirling. Or what had settled around Stirling.

I stood there, letting my gaze wander. Over dark hills, sparse trees, a world that pretended to be silent. But silence is a liar. If you listen long enough, you realize how much lies beneath the surface.

The buzzing intensified. Not loud, but more present, like pressure in my ear. I held my breath and turned my head. No shadow, no sound of footsteps, nothing a normal person would have indicated "over there." Just this feeling that something was nearby, something that didn't want to be seen. I stood like that for a while, half in a stance that could be called a fighting stance, half in one that signaled flight. My heart beat faster, not because I was running, but because it had apparently decided to sound the alarm in front of me.

"William."

The voice was soft and close. Not from the darkness, but behind me. I flinched, whirled around, my hand on the knife handle. The priest stood there as if he had sprung from the ground. Thin, his cloak pulled tight around his shoulders, his breath steaming.

"You have to stop sneaking off on your own," he said. "Otherwise, people will think you're important."

"I wanted to see if it was eyeing us up," I said.

"Does it?" he asked.

I thought about it. "Yes," I said. "But I think it's eyeing everyone."

He stepped beside me, looking in the same direction. For a while we said nothing. Only the river spoke, and it had no interest in us as long as we were still on the bank.

"The men are talking," the priest said at one point. "Not just about Stirling. About... the other thing."

"Let them talk," I said. "As long as they're not shouting, everything's fine."

"They wonder why you always notice it first," he murmured.

"Because I'm unlucky," I said. "And because I'm carrying a knife that isn't just any knife."

He looked at my hand, which was still gripping the handle. "Do you want them to think you're something special?" he asked.

"I want them to live," I said. "If it helps them think I have some connection to this thing, and makes them more alert—so be it. But I don't want songs. I don't want stares. I don't want them whispering my name when something crackles in the dark."

"So you want responsibility without glory," he said. "That's an unusual kind of greed."

I chuckled softly. "I just don't want the thing to be surprised when it arrives," I said. "Neither are we. It should know that at least someone is watching."

We stood there in silence for a few more heartbeats. Then the buzzing subsided, as if something had changed its mind. The pressure in my head eased, my breathing became calmer. I didn't know if that meant it was gone—or just that it had crouched down and tilted its head.

"Go back," said the priest. "Tomorrow you'll need legs that still know how to stand."

I nodded and went back to the fire. Fergus was there as before, except now he had a piece of wood in his mouth, which he was chewing on. Like a dog refusing to let the day pass him by.

"And?" he simply asked.

"Just shadows pretending to be more," I said.

"They usually are," he said, and lay down again.

I lay down too, pulled the blanket up, knife at my side, piece of wood in my hand. My teeth ached a little, especially the loose one. I rubbed my tongue against it until the pain became familiar. Eventually, I drifted off.

The dream was sharp, as if cut from cold iron. I stood on the bridge at Stirling, alone. No clan, no banner, no brother in the mud. Just me and the water rushing beneath me like a hasty confession. On the other side of the bridge, the English, in orderly ranks, with gleaming helmets and shields, as if they hadn't grasped that the mud makes us all equal. Behind me, somewhere on the bank, the Thing. Not to be seen, but to be heard. That deep hum, always just behind my shoulder.

The English raised their shields, I raised my sword. I shouted something, I don't know what. A word, a name, a curse. Maybe all of them together. And then I saw her. Between the ranks. Moira. Without her veil, without her smile. Her face wasn't distorted, not dead, not quite alive. She walked toward the English, not toward me. She looked at me—for just a breath—and I knew she was on the wrong side. I wanted to go to her, but my feet were stuck to the stones of the bridge. As if the river had sucked them in.

The thing behind me was getting closer. I didn't feel its breath on my skin, but in my chest. As if someone were pressing against my ribs from the inside. Moira raised her hand, as if to warn me—or say goodbye. Behind her, above the English helmets, something large was moving. Wider than three men, taller than two, without sharp edges, just an outline shimmering like heat above the ground. The buzzing grew louder. My teeth began to vibrate, as if they were about to pop out of my jaw.

I ripped the knife from its sheath. The blade was black in this dream, not metallic, but like a piece of night that someone had shaped. I wanted to scream, wanted to run, wanted to do something. Then one of my teeth shattered in my mouth. Just like that. It crumbled to dust, and when I tried to spit it out, only blood came out. It ran from my mouth, dripped onto the bridge stone, and then flowed backward, toward the river, not forward.

I woke up, mouth open, gasping for breath. My tongue frantically searched for the loose tooth way in the back. It was still there. Wobbly. But it was still there. I breathed out, slowly, tasting nothing but the old taste of sleep and metal. No blood. No dust. Just my own bad breath.

Around me it was still dark, but no longer pitch black. A first pale gray crept across the sky, groping its way over the edges of the tents. The camp was restless. Men who had been on watch began nudging others with their feet. A few quietly uttered the first curses of the day. I sat up, throwing off my blanket, my back cold. The river still rushed, as indifferent as before.

Tam was already sitting down, rubbing his eyes, yawning, then holding his hand to his mouth as if he couldn't bear to breathe his own breath. "If the English ever get close enough to smell this," he muttered, "they might just run home of their own accord."

"That's our secret," I said. "We stink them out."

Aidan sat up and looked at me. "You mumbled something in your sleep," he said. "Sounded like 'bridge' or 'break'. And something with a name."

"At least I still have my tongue," I said. "The rest will take care of itself."

The horn blast came. This time it didn't sound sick, just relentless. Rising. The beginning of the day. The beginning of battle. The beginning of everything that would cease to exist afterward. We packed again: shields, weapons, blankets, all the pitiful baggage of a man who pretends he can oppose death with just a few things.

The sergeant came closer, stopped in front of me, and looked briefly into my eyes. "Did you sleep well?" he asked.

"I dreamt about Stirling," I said.

"Then you are further along than those who still believe it is just a name," he said.

"I dreamt about that thing too," I added.

"That's the difference between you and most people," he said. "They only dream of one war. You dream of both."

He briefly placed his hand on my shoulder. No comfort, no blessing, just a touch that said: You are here. I see you. That was all I needed.

As we set off, the light was sharper than the day before. The sky was no longer gray, but had that pale brightness that promises nothing, yet reveals everything. Ahead of us, behind a low hill, lay Stirling. Not yet in sight, but close enough that the air felt different. Thicker. Heavier. Full of something I couldn't name.

I ran my tongue over my teeth again. They weren't good. Too many cracks, too many loose teeth, too much pain that had settled in certain spots. I'd never be a hero with a beaming smile, the kind you paint on banners. But they were still there. I could still bite.

Brave men, bad teeth. Maybe that was all we were. Men who wouldn't fit neatly into history, but who wanted to bite into it long enough until it bled. I was a bastard in the dirt, with a knife made from a dead woman and a tooth that wouldn't let go, and I decided that had to be enough to meet Stirling.

If war doesn't make us all equal, I thought, then this thing will. And maybe, just maybe, one of them would choke on me.

We set off. Southwards. To Stirling. Towards the bridge that would show whether good men with bad teeth always just bite – or sometimes get through.

Learning to Die in Stirling

Stirling smelled even before we saw it. Not of roast meat, not of freshly baked bread, or any of those fairytale smells the bards would later use to pretend cities had such things. Stirling smelled of wet stone, cold smoke, and too many men in too little space. And underneath it all, ever so faintly, that metallic whiff you get just before blood starts to warm up. It's like the promise of a brawl in a crowded tavern: no one starts it, but everyone knows it's going to happen.

We crested one last hill, and there it was. First the castle, like a black nail in the gray flesh of the sky, high above, where people made decisions for which they didn't have to die. Below it, the town, a cluster of houses, pressed together like teeth in the mouth of a man who had waited long for life's fist. And in front of it, the river. Broad, dark, calm, as if it had already resigned itself to carrying more than just branches and debris today. Above it, the bridge. Not large, not grand. Just a piece of stone, pretending to be innocent.

The English stood on the other side. Not too close, not too far. Just far enough away to see them as a mass, not as individuals. Ranks, shields, flags. A colorful, upright heap of arrogance. Armor that fit better than ours, helmets that gleamed as if they possessed a pride of their own. Behind them, banners that fluttered in the wind as if they were worth more than any man standing beneath them.

"There they are," said Seoras.

"Or we," I muttered. "Depends on who the problem actually is here."

The army—our army, if one was feeling generous—spread out before the river. Not perfectly, but determined enough that it was clear: this was no longer a raid. This was the moment that all who survived would later speak of as if they had planned it. From right and left, more troops streamed in: clans with their checks and patterns, riders checking their horses, messengers running like hounds. The ground transformed into something that looked like a decisive moment: crushed frost, torn-up earth, deep tracks in the grass.

The sergeant led us to the spot the High Commander had granted us. Not in the front row, that was reserved for the "good" clans. But not way in the back either. Third wedge, right wing. The spot for those you hope will stand there long enough so as not to make the rest look completely ridiculous.

“Here,” said the sergeant, stopping with his hand on his belt. “This is your piece of Stirling.”

I looked at the bridge. From here, it looked narrower than I had imagined. It didn't look like the place where stories are born. It looked like something you quickly repair when a wheel breaks. A functional piece of everyday city life. Except today, we were the wheel, and no one had brought a spare.

“They are holding the bridge,” said Aidan, as if it were a surprise.

“Of course they’re holding the bridge,” Broc growled. “If you have water and stone across it, you don’t let the lunatics run across it, shouting that they want freedom.”

The English had built a wall of shields on the other side. Nothing fancy, but effective. Shield upon shield, spears behind them, bows even further back. A line of men waiting for us to be foolish enough to die in their favorite way: one after the other. I saw helmets tip here and there, glances cast upon us. We were no longer an abstract enemy. We were the Scottish faces they could remember if they wanted to boast later about whom they had killed.

“Learning to die in Stirling,” Tam muttered beside me. “Sounds like the title of a bad prayer book.”

"Those who are lucky learn nothing at all," Fergus said calmly. He stood slightly behind us, his bandits scattered like thorns along our flank. "He'll fall before any teacher can open his mouth."

The dignitaries rode back and forth. Men with better coats, better horses, better teeth. They gave speeches that reached us at the back only as clipped murmurs. I caught snatches of words: "Honor," "Homeland," "Freedom," "Pride." Not a word about fear. Not a word about the fact that most of us down here were simply trying not to die like dogs.

The priest stood not far from us, his cloak fluttering as if it were as thin as he was. He didn't look like a man who could ignite courage. More like one who would gather up the remains when the fire had gone out.

“What do you think – will they come to us or we to them?” Ruairi asked softly, gripping the spear more tightly as if he were about to drop it.

“Both,” I said. “We go there, they come towards us, and in the middle we meet and pretend we’ve understood something.”

The sergeant turned to us. His eyes were clear, his voice not loud, but it cut through the murmuring around us. "Listen," he said. "Today, no one will ask you if you're ready. That doesn't matter. No one is ready. The only thing that matters is this: you hold your line. Shield to shield. If someone falls, you move up. If you're afraid, tell your feet, not your hands. Your feet may tremble, but your hands must not."

He glanced at each of us briefly. Tam, Aidan, Seoras, Ruairi, Dougal, Cailean, me. Fergus, who grinned as if he were about to steal something. Murn, who just stood there like a rock that had decided to stand somewhere else today.

"You're not heroes," said the sergeant. "Good. Heroes are the first to fall because they can't keep their mouths shut. You're men. That's enough."

A horn sounded. This time from our side, louder, clearer. A command. A start. The front ranks began to move, slowly, with the weight of what they knew. Shields were raised, spears pointed forward. Shouts, short, pent-up, came from the throats of those who could not bear to move silently. Others remained silent. Their footsteps spoke loud enough.

We were still standing. Third wedge, right wing. Waiting. Waiting is the prelude to death. During that time, your mind paints pictures that are worse than anything that could actually happen—except for what actually does happen.

I saw the first of our men reach the bridge. Like arrows ripping into it from the other side. Like men staggering back, like one plunging into the water, his armor heavy, a couple more desperate movements, then nothing. The river took him, as it took everything, without hesitation. The English shield wall remained standing. Their spears stood still like a barbed wall. Behind them, faces that grew clearer as ours drew nearer. They didn't look like demons. They looked like us, only better groomed. And sated. And banners proclaiming that God himself had given them the right to stand there.

Ours clashed against their shields. Screaming metal against hard edge, wood, leather, bone. A dull thud that pierced the chest. Spears thrust forward, found gaps, found flesh. Men crashed against each other like barrels overflowing with rage. The bridge became a narrow abyss through which an entire battle had to carve its way.

"This will be a throughput problem," Seoras said dryly.

"What do you mean?" asked Cailean, who was trying not to stare at the bridge, but was doing it anyway.

"More men than the bridge can hold," Seoras said. "More death than the river can bear. The rest are scattered along the banks."

Orders were shouted on our side. Troops back, others forward. Arrows forward. I saw archers take up positions, draw their bows, and send arrows flying. A black swarm flew toward the English lines. Some found gaps, some ricocheted off shields, some fell into the water on their way. Shouts could be heard from the other side, high-pitched, short ones. That was the moment when the Scottish side briefly raised its voice.

"Our turn will come too," said the sergeant. "Warm up your hands. Rub them if you need to. Soon they'll be able to hold more than your own weight."

I rubbed my fingers together. Not out of cold. Out of respect. The sword at my side suddenly felt heavier. The knife at my other side felt lighter, dangerously light, as if saying: Now, William. Now things get serious.

Dougal leaned towards me. "Are you scared?" he asked.

I didn't hesitate. "Yes," I said. "I have."

"Good," he said. "Then you're not dead yet."

Behind us, Fergus croaked a laugh. "Fear is the only thing that's always on time," he said. "Those who don't have it are either asleep or lying."

Ruairi nodded vigorously, gripping the spear tightly, his knuckles white. "I'm so scared, I could vomit," he said.

"If you vomit on my shoes, you'll learn to die before we reach the bridge," Tam said.

A second horn sounded. Closer. An order that rippled through the ranks like an electric shock. The sergeant took the blade in his hand, twisted it briefly to see if the light stayed on it.

"Third wedge, right wing – advance!" someone shouted.

That was our cue.

The line began to move. Step by step, shield after shield. The ground beneath us was already torn up by the feet of those who had gone before us. I felt the vibration coming from the bridge, rising through the earth, into my legs, into my chest. Stirling was breathing through us, whether we wanted it to or not.

The closer we got, the clearer everything became. The English faces, contorted with shouting, glistening with sweat. The blades, glittering in patches of sunlight as if to show how cleanly they worked. The blood on the stones, seeking the river. The bodies already floating in the water, armor heavy, arms outstretched aimlessly.

Learning to die in Stirling, I thought. No priest, no teacher, no king shows you that. You learn it in the two seconds when you realize you're not going to get a third breath. Or in the minutes before, when you see someone else do it – and try to remember how not to do it.

We drew closer. The noise grew thicker, clinging to our ears. Metal on metal, flesh on stone, men's voices turning people into animal sounds. In contrast, the river roared on, as if to say: I am greater than your noise.

The sergeant glanced over his shoulder. A quick look, a brief moment. "Remember," he said. "You're not here to die beautifully. You're here to teach each other how to die."

I felt for the knife again. Moira's blade felt as if it had been waiting for that exact sentence. That tough, dirty fire burned in my chest again, no longer asking if it was all fair. It only wanted to know if I would stand my ground.

"Learning how to die can wait," something inside me said. "Today I'll learn how to show others how it's done. If there's time left after that, death can come to me."

We marched on, towards the bridge, towards the English, towards what awaited them behind. Brave men, bad teeth, trembling hands, heavy steel. Stirling in front of us, the thing somewhere beside him. And me in the middle, a bastard who was just realizing that he was less afraid of dying than of the fact that everything he had been up to that point might ultimately be meaningless.

So I decided it wouldn't be okay. Not for me. Not today. Not on this bridge.

The bridge smelled of fear and iron. Not that you could clearly separate the two. The air was a muddy mixture: sweat, old leather, hot breath, cold river, the first open wounds. The sound was no longer noise, more like a thick blanket covering everything. You heard screams, but they no longer belonged to anyone. They were simply there, like the rushing water. The bridge was too narrow for what we were putting it through. Every step was a compromise between moving forward and not crashing into the person in front.

"Shields up!" someone yelled at the front, and the order crept back through the third wedge until it reached us like a tired dog. We raised our shields, not in unison, but enough of them. Wood, leather, metal, all scarred from other days that had started just as shitty.

Something whistled from the other side. An arrow, two, many. The first ones struck the front ranks, dull thuds on shields that at first only twitched, then solidified. One flew overhead, so close I could feel the hiss right next to my ear. A man somewhere behind me cried out briefly, then there was only a dull thud, as if a sack had fallen. No one turned around. If you turn around, you're already halfway to the river.

We approached, slowly, like a plank being pushed against a doorframe. From here, the English were more clearly visible. Their shields were cleaner, their spearheads smoother, their faces clean-shaven or neatly trimmed, as far as one could see under helmets. They looked like men accustomed to being told they were superior. I felt a strong urge to knock that very thought out of their heads.

The initial impact hit us like a wave, coming from the front and still shuddering at the rear. Our front ranks slammed against their shield wall. Wood cracked, metal screeched, men gasped. The bridge vibrated beneath us, not gently, but as if briefly considering whether to refuse it all.

"Advance, don't push!" the sergeant roared. His voice cut through the mixture of fear and adrenaline like a knife through tough meat. "Shield to shield!"

Tam, to my left, pulled his shield closer to his body, his jaw grinding. I saw him briefly press his tongue against the new gap, but forced himself to stop. Aidan, to my right, had that crooked grin on his face, which didn't quite convince because his eyes were too wide open. Behind them were Ruairi, Dougal, Murn, Fergus, and his bandits, all in varying degrees of disarray, but all with the same look: We're already here, so we're going to see this through.

The pressure from the front intensified. Men ahead of us were pushed back, just a little, then they regained their footing. The sergeant gave the signal, we advanced, two steps, then one more, stopped again. My feet felt the stone beneath the mud, the slight unevenness, the crack you had to remember if you wanted to still be standing tomorrow. If there was a tomorrow.

An English arrow found the gap above a shield, somewhere ahead of us. A man snapped out of line, more to the side than backward, as if someone had ripped his hook out. Blood spurted, a warm, brief rain that spread across the shields. The space he vacated was immediately filled. That was the terrible thing about an army like that: it made you replaceable in real time.

"Spears!" The order came from the front and ran towards us. We thrust our spears forward, diagonally, over the shields. Those without spears held their swords ready, low down where legs began and often wanted to stay upright for too long. On the other side, they were doing the same. It was like two prickly hedgehogs trying to embrace each other.

An Englishman opposite me, just a few ranks away, thrust his spear forward; the point slid down over the edge of a Scotsman's shield, grazing his forearm. The man cursed, but kept his shield up. No room for pain, only for assessment: can I still go on, or can't I?

Then it happened. The front ranks were so tightly packed that the pressure turned into close combat. Spears were too long, swords became essential. The blow ripped through the ranks, we pushed forward, and suddenly there was no space. Only close quarters.

I saw an English face directly in front of me. Not heroic, just angry. Young eyes in an old steel helmet. He yelled something, probably in English, maybe "Death," maybe "Scottish swine." I didn't understand, but I grasped the spear thrust coming over the shield, straight at me. I raised my shield, the point scraping across, catching somewhere in the top edge. The blow went through my arm as if someone had thrown a stone at my shoulder.

I thrust my shield forward, not gracefully, just hard. I struck him in the chest; he staggered back a finger's width, enough to feel the gap. My sword came from below, flat, swift. It found the soft spot above his thigh, where the iron skirt ended. I felt the resistance of fabric, then skin, then something warm yielding. He roared, this time much more intelligibly. Pain has no language.

Blood spurted against my boots. He didn't collapse immediately, clinging to his spear like a drowning man to a branch. Someone beside him pulled him back a bit, offering him his place. In the time it took to breathe, I had wounded a man and filled his wound. Stirling brought his own order.

The ranks around us grew denser. A shout to the left, a dull thud to the right. A spear pierced Tam's shield just beside me, slipped off, and left a deep gouge. Tam laughed briefly, more out of reflex. "You need to aim better, you English buffoon!" he roared, even though Tam couldn't even hear who was insulting him anymore.

Someone behind us fell. I heard the impact, felt the line give slightly before it closed again. Fergus yelled something to his men that sounded like, "Show them how thieves stab!" His bandits weren't proper soldiers, but they knew that close, dirty fighting where you couldn't make a nice sweeping motion with your blade. They stabbed where the gaps were: the backs of knees, sides under the arms, necks sticking out too far from the shield.

I took a blow to the helmet, from above, perhaps from an Englishman, perhaps from a Scotsman who swung too wildly. Stars exploded just before my eyes, I tasted metal. The blow made me crouch, only half an inch, but in this crush, half an inch is practically a grave. My shield tilted just enough for the air to briefly touch my ribs, and air is more dangerous than steel in a moment like this. I forced myself to raise my arm again, even though the muscle protested like an old man being made to walk. The blood roared in my ears as if I were underwater, but my hand still knew what to do.

I yanked my shield back to my chest, just as something hard slammed against it—a spear stump, a blade, perhaps just the desperate head of some poor dog trying not to fall. The blow forced me back into line, and the men behind me caught me, not out of friendship, but because they didn't want to trip over me.

"Stand still, bastard!" I heard Broc growl behind me, close to my ear. His breath reeked of stale beer and metal. "If you fall, fall forward, understand?"

Understood. Always fall forward. Stirling's rule number one.

I gritted my teeth—the ones that were still there—and braced myself against the pressure. The line was no longer a group of men, but a single body, a compressed worm of steel and flesh, desperate to move forward and forgetting everything inside in the process. All around me, someone was panting, someone was cursing, someone was perhaps praying. I had no room for prayer. I barely had room to breathe.

An English spear snatched over the edge of Aidan's shield, grazed his cheek, and tore a red mark into his skin. Not a deep cut, but enough to make him stumble briefly. His grin, which was never entirely genuine anyway, twisted into a grimace of pain and surprise. He roared something unintelligible, just a loud noise, and rammed his sword forward, blindly but not senselessly. A dull resistance, a half-broken scream from the other side. Hit. It wasn't difficult to hit someone here. The skill was not to die in the process.

"Go on!" the sergeant yelled, and I didn't know if he was at the front or somewhere in between. His voice was everywhere and nowhere. "Push! Push them down, push them back! Don't think, just push!"

Don't think. Good advice. My mind was more of a hindrance than a help anyway. Every image it produced was a mistake. When I started thinking about the fact that there was rock beneath us, water beneath the rock, and that this water would consume so much more today, I almost stopped breathing. So I concentrated on small things: the rough inside of the shield strap against my hand. The one loose spot on my left boot. The sweet, warm scent of fresh blood somewhere to my right, distinct from the cold, iron breath.

To my left, I heard Tam laughing. It was a hurried, raspy laugh, but it was laughter nonetheless. "Come on, you English pile of crap!" he yelled forward. "I've taken better blows with that wooden wedge!"

An answer came like a blow. A sword swung over the top of his shield, ricocheted off the edge, passed over his helmet, and left a gleaming dent. Tam flinched, staggered briefly, but remained standing. "Good," I murmured. "Helmet: one. Brain: zero."

A small gap opened up a little ahead of us as one of our men collapsed. I didn't see who it was, only the suddenly formed hole where Scottish blood steamed, seeking an English blade. No room for mourning. The line did what lines do: it closed. Like a mouth that won't let out a bite. I felt myself being pulled half a step into that hole. The man hadn't even properly fallen before his position was history.

Learning to die in Stirling, I thought. Lesson one: You are a stone in a wall. If you break out, your mother won't be put in your place, but the next stone.

The English fought back. They weren't here because they were bad. They were well-positioned, shields close together, spears precise, their curses more orderly than ours. One directly in front of me—a slightly older fellow with a gray beard sprouting from the edge of his helmet—looked at me briefly. No hatred, just that cold assessment. He thrust at my shield, not to kill me, but to throw me off balance. I blocked, he pulled back, I took a step forward, he did too, and in the middle there was nothing but noise.

An arrow—from where, from which direction, no idea—struck diagonally into the neck of a man two rows in front of me. At first, it looked like a strangely grown thorn protruding from his collar. Then came the blood. He clutched his throat as if he could close the hole, stumbled into the man in front of him, and fell half onto the parapet, half forward. Two men tried to catch him. The pressure from behind pushed them down with him. The river decided. It took all three of them. A dull chorus of screams, water, metal. Then only water.

The gap they'd created was a vortex. It's like a whirlpool: a hole, and everything wants to go in. I heard the sergeant further ahead shouting something, probably "Hold your line!", "Close it down!", "Don't give way!". It didn't matter what words he used. Our bodies understood what was at stake. We pushed forward, plugging the gap, only to be squeezed even tighter together in the process.

My shield edge crunched against Aidan's shield on the right. Our arms were so tightly locked that it was impossible to tell who controlled which muscle. Behind me, Broc pushed as if I were a piece of furniture he had to shove through a doorway that was too narrow. In front of me, I felt the resistance of the English, the hard, stubborn pressure of an army that was no less afraid, but more afraid of retreating.

A sword slid up through a gap below, grazing my shin. Pain shot through me, but the cut wasn't deep. Instinctively, I stepped forward, probably hitting nothing but a shield, maybe an Englishman's foot. Then I got an opportunity with my own sword. I brought it in low from the side, at hip height. It struck something hard, slid off, then hit something softer. An Englishman's cry, short, clipped.

I noticed my back right tooth was loose again. Of all times, now. The thing in my jaw seemed to have decided it no longer had a contract with me for this battle. I bit down harder, out of a mixture of defiance and stupidity. A sharp pain shot through my head, all the way to behind my eyes. Everything blurred for a moment. I wanted to spit the tooth out, right in an Englishman's face. But I kept it in. If I had to die, it might as well come with me.

"You're bleeding from the mouth, William!" shouted Aidan, who glanced briefly at me.

"Better out of the mouth than the throat!" I shouted back, spitting red into the gap between our shields. A few drops hit the wood, a few the boot of the Englishman in front of me. Let him have some.

The battle didn't become more heroic. It became smaller. The world shrank to the few centimeters in front of my face. Shield edge, helmet rim, eyes beneath an iron bar, a hand flying too close to my face, a spear ramming somewhere, blades constantly too near. I could see nothing of the castle anymore, of the city only a wisp of smoke. Of the banners, only occasionally a sliver of color at the edge of my vision.

It was no longer a war between two armies. It was a pub brawl on Stein that just happened to have too many participants. We were no longer Scots, they were no longer English. We were men trying not to be the ones kissing the water next.

At some point—I honestly have no idea how long we'd been standing in that crush—I noticed that the pressure had changed. It was no longer just frontal, but seemed to be tilting sideways. A scream further forward, different from the others. Not pain, more surprise. A few heads turned, only to be immediately forced forward again.

“They are... falling!” someone shouted.

At first I didn't understand whom he meant. Us? Them? Both? Then I felt the Englishmen in front of us slide half a step to the right, as if someone had turned the ground beneath their feet. Part of their shield wall wavered. One of them slipped, fell halfway sideways, dropped his shield, and stumbled into his own man.

"Push!" shrieked the sergeant, and this time his voice was not just a command, but pure instinct. "Now! Push!"

We pushed. Shield against shield, flesh against flesh, teeth against pain. I felt my loose tooth finally pop out of my jaw. It came loose in a single, small, crunching moment, as if someone had pulled a rivet out of my mouth. I had a choice: swallow it or spit it out. I chose to spit it out.

I spat forward, over the edge of the shield. Blood, saliva, a small, dark tooth. It flew in a pathetic arc, probably hitting no one in any meaningful way, but in my mind it was a symbolic declaration of war: Here, take it. That's all you're getting.

They broke before us. Not all of them, not at once. But enough of them. Part of the English front buckled, as if they suddenly understood that the bridge wasn't just making things difficult for us. The rear ranks pressed forward, the front ranks tried to retreat, and in between arose precisely what you never want on a bridge: disunity in movement.

One stumbled onto the parapet, pulling a second down with him. They toppled over. I briefly saw their arms flailing, their eyes wide, their mouths open. Then they were gone, swallowed by the river like breadcrumbs.

"Onward!" roared the sergeant. "Get right into them! Give them no solid ground!"

We walked. Step by step, then faster. Not running—you couldn't run here—but with a different kind of will in our legs. We used the swaying like a wave, allowed to surf it for a moment before it crashed back down. My sword worked, not beautifully, but diligently. Blows, thrusts, short, ugly movements. I struck more cloth than flesh, more steel than bone, but occasionally something that yielded and screamed.

The noise grew louder, shriller. English voices sounded different when they were afraid. I still didn't understand the words, but the message was clear: Shit, this isn't going as planned. Welcome to the club, I thought.

An Englishman directly in front of me, his face far too clean for the day, raised his shield too late. My blade struck him under the chin, not deep enough to instantly kill him, but enough to make his head jerk back and his mouth open like a man who still has something to say, but whose words are bleeding from his throat. I drew my sword back; he staggered, was pulled aside by one of his own men. The space he made was filled again. Always this filling up. Stirling was a hole into which we poured men until either our courage or our bodies ran out.

I realized I was laughing. It was that absurd, dry laugh you get when you've already crossed the line where reason still has any influence.

“What is it?” gasped Aidan beside me, without looking from the front.

"I lost my tooth," I said.

"Congratulations," he gasped. "At least death can't punch you in the mouth."

Learning to die in Stirling, I thought. Lesson two: You give away parts of yourself before you're completely gone. Teeth, skin, blood, voices. Piece by piece. And if you're lucky, you'll still be around long enough to remember everything you've left behind.

The bridge beneath us vibrated, the river foamed, men shouted, steel sang its squalid song. We hadn't yet achieved victory, not even a real advantage. But we had something they had just lost: the belief that only one side was learning to die here today.

And there I was, the bastard in the dirt, standing right in the middle of it all, one tooth missing, a few more cuts, the knife at my side like a cold promise. I didn't know when my own lesson would start. But I did know one thing: I was going to watch damn closely how the others took their exams.

There was a point when time on the bridge softened. Not slower, not faster, just soft. It had lost its edges. You didn't know if you'd been standing there for an hour or just ten breaths. Everything was a single, extended moment of noise, blood, pressure, and this absurd attempt to keep both feet on the same piece of stone while the world tugged at you. If someone had asked me later exactly when we started winning or losing, I would have just shrugged. In Stirling, you learn: there is no "exactly then." There is only "still" and "no longer."

"They're toppling!" someone shouted at some point, either far forward or in the middle, it was hard to tell. The line in front of me wasn't just swaying anymore, it seemed to be actually devouring the ground. An English shield broke free from the line, flew sideways, and struck a colleague on the helmet. Someone dropped to their knees. Another tried to pull him up and got a blade between the ribs for it. When order dies, it dies in a fraction of a second. Before that, it lasts longer than any human being.

"Onward!" the sergeant roared, and I felt his voice pierce the men's spines. "Into it! Hold on to the noise, not the ground!"

I didn't know what he meant, but my legs understood. They moved. One, two, three steps. Not a march, not a storm, more like the impatient pushing of a crowd in front of a bar window. Except that the bar here was made of steel.

Ahead of us there was no longer a clear line, but a frayed edge of shields and bodies, unsure whether to move forward or backward. An Englishman stumbled right in front of my shield's edge, half-turned, without cover. His helmet was crooked, the strap torn, one eye open, the other swollen shut. He glanced at me, briefly, and in that look was a hint of "this wasn't part of the plan." I hit him, not even particularly cleanly. A slanted blow that struck him above the mouth. Something white spurted out, not a pure tooth fragment, more like a mixture of bone and blood. Brave men, bad teeth—on both sides.

"Get him out of the way!" Broc yelled, and two bodies behind me rammed their shoulders against the half-dead man, pushing him away toward the river. I didn't hear him fall into the water. Maybe he got caught on something. Maybe he was simply lying in that niche of stone and flesh where you momentarily forget you've brought a body with you.

To my right, I heard Aidan gasping, a different gasp than before. Not a normal "I'm exhausted," but that thin, surprised sound when the air realizes it has a new outlet. I risked a quick sideways glance. A spear had caught him in the side, just below the ribs, angled in, not quite through. He was still standing. His eyes wide, his teeth clenched, his lips bloody.

"Everything's fine," he lied.

"Of course," I lied back. "Looks like a love bite."

He laughed briefly, a dry, hacking cough. "If I survive, I'll tell everyone that was a bear."

"If you survive, say it was an Englishman with bad manners," I said, turning back to face forward before the next spear showed me what he thought of conversation.

We were almost in the middle of the bridge, as far as one could tell in all the crush. Behind us, ranks were still pushing forward, men who were perhaps seeing blood for the first time and pretended it was just mud of a different color. In front of us, the English were retreating slowly but noticeably. Not a panicked run, more like the sluggish yielding of a tree slowly falling. Those at the rear were trying to hold the front, but you could see the line beginning to fray. One took a step too far back, another dropped his shield, another looked too long to the left, where a comrade was falling. Every small mistake here was an invitation.

Fergus and his bandits greedily exploited this. They positioned themselves slightly staggered, not in the tightest line, but where gaps appeared. If an Englishman stumbled, they were there. No honorable blow, no clean cut – a knife to the side, short thrusts to the kidneys, a blade up the groin, a hand grasping the throat and slashing open something that made a noise. They fought like what they were: highwaymen, only the road was made of stone and their pay was measured in seconds.

"You fight like pigs!" shouted a Scotsman from another row to the back, half contemptuously, half impressed.

"Pigs survive!" Fergus roared back, ramming his blade into an Englishman's armpit, where there was no iron. "And pigs eat well!"

Amidst all this, I suddenly noticed that the air sounded different. Not quieter, but deeper. Somewhere behind us—or beneath us?—something was vibrating. Not as distinctly as at night, not that pure hum of something else. More like an echo of it. The river? The thumping of many feet? Or perhaps a laughing shadow? No time to think. The knife at my side pulsed briefly nonetheless, like a heartbeat beneath someone else's skin.

"Not now," I growled to myself. "I already have an enemy today."

As if it had heard, the thing calmed down. Or maybe I just convinced myself of it. In Stirling you also learn: Imaginations are sometimes more helpful than truth. Truth shouts at you. Imaginations help you take the next step.

An English officer—or at least he looked like one, with better armor, a crest on his chest, and that slightly disgusted look—fought his way forward through his own ranks. He bellowed orders, brandished his sword, and pulled one of his men aside to take his place. There was that

face again: someone who had heard his whole life that he got to decide who died. I hate faces like that.

He saw us, us piles of dirt, our torn tartan, our dented helmets, the missing teeth in our mouths. Something inside him changed. Perhaps he realized that we didn't look like we'd retreat just because he was roaring loudly. He was coming straight toward our section. The shield wall in front of him surged forward once more, a concentrated push, an attempt to at least visually regain the upper hand on this narrow strip of stone.

"Up ahead!" the sergeant roared. I saw his helmet, which I could now recognize from any distance. "Watch out! The one with the chicken on his chest isn't yours—he's mine!"

Of course. Even here, in the hell of the bridge, there was still that raw, old reflex in man: the superior wants the superior. The small kill each other so that the great can settle their personal scores.

The Englishman pushed aside one of his own men's shields, making room for himself. The gap was dangerous – but he filled it quickly, standing firmly, shield high, sword low. I caught a glimpse of his eyes. Clear, gray eyes, not stupid. More like annoyed that he had to get his hands dirty here.

Our sergeant pushed forward, his shoulder grazing my shield. "Move aside, William," he growled. "That guy owes me one."

I took a half step sideways, as far as I could. Space was a precious commodity, but it was enough that the two of them were standing directly opposite each other. It wasn't a scene straight out of a movie. No sudden silence, no circling crowd. Just two men, amidst the carnage, locking eyes and pretending to be alone for a moment.

The Englishman said something in his language. It didn't sound friendly. Our sergeant spat blood onto the stone. "I don't have an ear for your crap," he said. "Only a hand."

They clashed like two old dogs who had known each other for years. Shield against shield, steel against steel. The officer struck precisely, with practiced skill, a good wrist. The sergeant struck dirty, crookedly, from experience. The Englishman took a step forward, the sergeant half-stepped sideways, let the blow slide off his shield, and instead delivered the edge of the blow right against the rim of his helmet. A dull thud reverberated through my arm.

For a moment, the Englishman seemed to topple backward, but he recovered. His sword jerked upward, hooked over the sergeant's shield, and pulled him down slightly. That was the gap any bard would later embellish. In reality, it was an awkward moment in which both were briefly unsteady.

"Now!" roared my own voice before I even knew I wanted to say anything.

Not to the sergeant. To me.

I thrust forward, not with my sword, but with my shield. I didn't hit the Englishman, but his shield, sideways. That was enough. His balance, already precarious, broke. He stumbled half a step to the right, into a gap no one had left for him. His shield was momentarily too far from his body.

The sergeant dropped his shield as if it had suddenly become superfluous. His sword, already bearing the marks of other lives, came from below. No heroic sweep, no upright, gleaming thrust. Just an ugly, short thrust into the area between the breastplate and the groin, precisely where a man is most vulnerable, no matter how much iron he wears.

The sword found its way. The officer made a sound that wasn't a word. Air and blood at once. His hand released the hilt, the shield tilted. He looked first down, where the blade entered him, then up, into the sergeant's face. There was no "why" in those eyes. Only that "ah, I see."

The sergeant drew back his sword like a man pulling a stake from wet earth. The Englishman crumpled. Not dramatically, not slowly. He collapsed like a wet sack. Two of his men tried to grab him, perhaps reflexively, perhaps afraid of what it means when someone like him falls. The pressure behind them prevented it. Someone stepped on his hand as it lay in the way. The blade slipped from his fingers. It came to rest somewhere between his feet, disappearing into his step.

"One less person who thinks he's above us," the sergeant muttered, breathing heavily, and picked up his shield again. "Onward! No one stops just because a chicken loses its head!"

That was the moment when something truly broke on the other side. You could feel it. The Englishmen ahead of us became lighter, not because they weighed less, but because something inside them gave way, something invisible. If you tear the thread that holds a fabric together, it will eventually unravel. We had just pulled on a crucial thread.

"They're pulling away!" Someone shouted, and this time it wasn't an exaggeration. The resistance weakened. Some of the English began to retreat. Those in the rear were still pushing, while those in front realized that the choice between "stand still and die slowly" and "run and maybe live" was suddenly real. A few threw down their shields. Not a good idea, but panic is a bad advisor.

"Don't chase after them!" the sergeant growled. "Keep pushing. Secure the bridge. No collapse now!"

He was right. In Stirling, you also learn that the moment the enemy falters is dangerous—for both sides. If you start running then, you'll stumble over corpses faster than over victory. We kept our pace. Hard, forward, but not erratically. That was the only thing that was currently separating us from a surging mass grave.

A few Englishmen actually jumped from the bridge. Some out of fear, some because they were pressured. Their cries were shorter than their courage. The river took them, as it took everything. I watched one of them briefly, his face strangely youthful. He didn't look like an enemy as he fell. He looked like a boy who had realized he was in the wrong place at the wrong time, too soon.

"Don't think about it," I muttered to myself. "You didn't choose this. Neither did he. Let the survivors tell the rest."

We finally managed to maintain a closed space on the central part of the bridge, while the English ahead of us continued to retreat, step by step, towards the shore, towards the somewhat wider ground. There they would regroup, adjust their banners, and organize their

ranks. Perhaps they would meet us there again, with less chaos, more calculation. But we had achieved one thing: they had stopped treating Stirling as their private chessboard.

A horn sounded, this time from our side, a different tone. Not an attack signal, more of a metallic wheeze: Stop. Halt. Regroup. No further. The front rows slowed down, the rear rows pushed on briefly, then the pressure subsided like a wave that was about to unleash its full fury and then realized the beach was still a little further on.

"Stop!" the sergeant yelled. "Keep your line! Don't spread out! No one runs forward alone!"

I stood there, in the middle of the bridge at Stirling, my boots in the blood-water mud, my shield heavy in my arm, my sword sticky in my hand. My head was pounding, my tooth was gone, my shoulder throbbed, my shin burned. And I was alive. For now.

Beside me, Aidan was breathing in gasps, holding one hand to his side as if he could plug the hole in it. Tam had blood on his face, from whomever. Fergus grinned like a madman, knife in hand as if he'd just emptied a particularly successful wallet. Dougal stood behind us, his spear askew, his eyes wide, but he was standing. Cailean was trembling so violently that his shield vibrated—but he didn't drop it.

The river below us continued to rush, as if we were only making a fleeting noise on its surface. Perhaps we were. Stirling wouldn't remember our names. The castle wouldn't grow quieter because we had shouted today.

Learning to die in Stirling, I thought. It wasn't my turn yet, but I'd taken lessons. Learned how close the abyss can be to the edge of a shoe. How little use a hero's helmet is when the ground gives way. How quickly a man who thinks he's above others ends up on the same level as the lowest bastard with bad teeth.

The sergeant glanced briefly at me. His gaze lingered on the blood at my mouth. "Tooth?" he asked tersely.

"Away," I said.

He nodded. "Good. Less weight. Maybe you'll run faster when you need to."

I laughed hoarsely. It hurt. But it felt alive.

Behind us in the army, the first voices were already rising. "We've pushed them back." – "Stirling is ours." – "The English are fallen." Words that came too soon. Words from men who hadn't yet understood that a battle doesn't end when you've smeared a section of stone with your blood.

I looked ahead. At the bank where the English were regrouping. At the coming line, the next wave. At the land beyond, still contested, no matter how many men had already swum in the river that day.

If the dying started here, I thought, then this was just the introduction. The first blow to a body that still had plenty of empty spaces. We hadn't won Stirling. We had only learned how soft bones are when they hit rock.

And as I stood there, shield in my arm, sword in my hand, knife at my belt, one less tooth in my mouth, I knew: I wasn't just going to learn how to die here. I was going to have learned how to force others to sit in the same class as me. That was all I could ask for. This country had never given out more.

Mud, steel, and Scottish curses

The day after the bridge wasn't one of those days where you wake up and think, "I'm glad I'm still here." It was more like that plodding resurfacing when you realize you missed your chance to die properly, and your body has to keep on working, sulking. Everything was heavy. My legs—lead. My arms—wood. My head—a barrel someone had thrown stones into. My tongue instinctively went to where the tooth used to be. Now there was just an empty space, a soft, sensitive edge. A small, private crater in my mouth that said: There was a war here yesterday.

Stirling was not silent. Not a single day was silent here. Those who could still walk were herded into rows to be counted, moved around, and re-sorted. Those who could no longer walk were dragged to the edge, to where the ground was softer and one could dig a hole without immediately hitting rock. Englishmen, Scotsmen—after the day on the bridge, the ground wasn't so picky anymore. It took everything. Only the banners still pretended to know whom they meant.

We were now among the "tried and tested." That was a term favored by higher-ranking men with better armor and longer pedigrees. Tried and tested men, tried and tested squads—as if we were tools that could now be reused with a clear conscience because, at least, they hadn't broken. Nobody asked the axe if it wanted to see more wood.

The mud had gotten worse. Yesterday it had been frozen ground with blood on top. Today it was a thick, brownish-red sludge that clung to boots, edges, and thoughts. Every step made that squelching sound, as if the earth were tasting whether there might be something edible here after all. In some places, the river had washed away a little of what we had offered it in terms of corpses, but not everything. An arm, a helmet, and a shield with an English coat of arms that looked as if someone had painted a chicken's backside on it remained caught on one section of the bank.

"It's like a soup kitchen," Tam murmured as we moved through the mixture of water, mud, and leftovers.

"Only the soup will eat you," Aidan said, still occasionally clutching the side where the spear had struck him. The wound was bandaged, haphazardly, but he was walking. Like a man afraid to stop, because then death would have time to find him.

The sergeant had positioned us a little way off the main hustle and bustle. Not right at the front, not right at the back. Third wedge, right wing – still the same. Only today the wings were more made of bandages than feathers. We squatted down, as far as one could squat in that muck, and just let our arms hang loose.

Fergus arrived with a mug that smelled suspiciously of what was called "whiskey" around here, even though any goat in the Highlands would have said it was more like liquid discipline. He took a sip, grimaced, and passed it on. "For those who still have teeth," he muttered.

I took the cup, held it briefly to my lips, and felt the smoke in my nose. I thought of the tooth that had flown toward the Englishman yesterday, somewhere in all the chaos. A small, useless part of me, probably lying in the mud with other remains now. I drank anyway. It burned in the gap, as if someone had poured fire into the small hole. Good. Pain was honest.

"We are still alive," Seoras said after a while, more like taking stock than expressing joy.

"Some are not," said the priest, looking over at the tarpaulins under which one could see legs, shoes, and occasionally a hand.

"They had worse luck than us yesterday," said Tam. "Or less luck. It depends on how you look at it."

"That's the point," I muttered. "Nobody knows if the one who continues running today is really the luckier one."

The sergeant sat down next to us, not comfortably, but at least with a slight groan that said: Even commands have their limits. He looked tired. Almost translucent, if you looked closely. The skin too close to his cheekbones, the circles under his eyes dark.

"We are held back for now," he said. "No immediate attack, no second bridge, no assault. The higher-ups first need to decide whom they will sacrifice and how."

"How noble of them," Fergus said dryly.

"As long as they're fighting, we'll have a cold ass instead of a punctured lung," the sergeant said. "Take what you can get."

We were silent for a while. Around us, men cursed, others laughed, a few wept, secretly, face down, as if to prevent anyone from overhearing. Somewhere, someone was swearing so loudly and at length that I almost felt envious. Scottish cursing is an art form, if you have enough opportunity to practice.

"Did you notice that thing?" Ruairi asked suddenly, quietly, so quietly that only those in our small group heard. "Yesterday. On the bridge. Or was that just..."

He broke off, searching for a word that wasn't "fear".

I thought for a moment. It was difficult to distinguish between the usual horrors—arrows, spears, roaring men, the river that devours all equanimity—and this other thing. "Something vibrated," I said slowly. "In the air. In the ground. In the knife." I involuntarily tapped the side of my body where Moira's blade was embedded. "Whether it was that thing or just the river laughing as it swallows us—I have no idea. But I felt it."

The priest nodded, entirely without irony. "One of the wounded told us something last night," he said. "He was lying closer to the shore. Said he'd seen something in the water that wasn't a body. Not a fish, not driftwood. Something dark that passed beneath them, as if choosing."

"Great," Tam growled. "So now we've got this, the English, and some other crap in the river."

"Maybe it was just a tree trunk," Aidan said. It was clear he didn't believe it himself.

"They've been telling the same story in Loch Ness for decades," Fergus interjected, rubbing his hands together as if warming a tale before serving it up. "A long thing in the water that always seems to appear just when someone's had too much to drink or stared too long into the mists. They call it Nessie. A monster, they say. Some swear they've seen it. Others swear the first ones were lying, but they're lying themselves."

Cailean, who was still more boy than man, looked up. "You believe the Loch Ness Monster really exists?" he asked.

Fergus grinned crookedly. "I think men need stories so they're not so afraid of the water," he said. "If you invent a monster lurking in some hole, you can pretend the rest of the water is harmless. It isn't. Water will drown you even without a head and neck or old legends. But people would rather talk about Nessie than about the three cousins who swept away while fishing last year."

"Perhaps Nessie is just what you see when you look into the depths for too long," Seoras murmured. "A shadow that eventually takes shape because your mind wants to see it."

I thought about the thing that had been haunting us for days. No shape, no clear edges, just this humming, this hole in everything that was there before anyone could name it. "Our thing doesn't need a hole name," I said. "It doesn't need a lake to eat us. It comes anywhere there are shadows."

"Maybe they're brothers," Tam said. "Nessie in the water, your thing in the air. One big, happy family of shitty creatures."

"If Nessie at least prefers Englishmen, I have nothing against her," grumbled Broc. "But I've never heard of an Englishman claiming to have been eaten by a sea monster. They always just shout 'Scots!' right before we meet her."

Cailean persisted. "Have you seen Nessie, Fergus? Really seen it?"

Fergus looked at him for a while, not mockingly, more appraisingly. "I've seen Loch Ness," he said. "I've seen fog lying over the water like an old blanket. I've seen waves that looked like something was breathing underneath. And I've seen men who've wet themselves and then swore it was because of a monster, not the cold. Take your pick. But I'll tell you something: whatever's been haunting us... feels more like something that's decided Nessie is being too friendly."

A few of us laughed, but the laughter caught in our throats. The priest stroked his face as if smoothing wrinkles that weren't from the cold. "The old stories aren't harmless," he said. "They remind us that we're not the first to think there's more out there than what you can hit with a sword."

"Yes," I said. "But our problem doesn't have a name you tell children to keep them away from the water. Our problem will still occur even if you do everything right."

A gust of wind swept across the field, carrying the scent of blood and wet wool, and bringing something else in its place. Perhaps just the cold clarity that follows a battle, when the noise subsides and the ravens begin to venture out. Or perhaps just a reminder that the world is big enough to care about more than just our little war.

"Do you think children in a hundred years will be telling each other Nessie stories," Aidan asked the group, "or stories about some bastard who ran around with a knife taken from a dead woman?"

I looked at him. "Children in a hundred years will tell each other stories to help them sleep," I said. "Whether about Loch Ness or Stirling. And half of them won't be true. Neither will the other half."

"But somewhere in between," the priest added, "there will be a truth sufficient to make them more cautious."

"Or dumber," said Fergus. "Most people still run to where it's dangerous, whether they know about Nessie or not."

The sergeant stood up again, groaning softly. "We've had our peace and quiet," he said. "As much as you can get around here. Now things will get moving again."

"Where to?" asked Dougal.

"Back and forth," said the sergeant. "Consolidating positions, trampling through mud, pretending the Banners have a plan. Mud, steel, and Scottish curses—the usual. The English are regrouping, and so are we. Nobody wants to be the first to admit the river has had its fill today."

We got up again. The mud clung to our boots as if to say, "Stay." I freed my foot and took another step. That's how it went. Step, mud, curse, step. Behind us, the bridge; ahead, new positions, new orders, more waiting.

I thought of Nessie. Of a monster that supposedly lurks in a hole and only comes out if someone stares at it long enough. Part of me would almost have been glad to have just such a monster. One that's tied to a place. A lake, a hole, a fairy tale. Not something that roams fields, tears apart farmhouses, devours Englishmen and Scotsmen alike, and doesn't even bother to look majestic.

"If we survive this," I said quietly, more to myself than to the others, "I'll go to Loch Ness someday. Stand on the shore, stare into the water and tell Nessie: You're not so bad after all."

Tam heard it and grinned. "Then let's hope Nessie isn't jealous," he said. "Otherwise, she'll drag you in right away, just to prove she can compete."

I laughed briefly. It felt good, even if it was only a weak laugh. Mud splashed, steel scraped against steel, and our curses settled over the field like an old cloak. We were moving again, in a land that could afford more monsters than it had stories to explain them. A war to the south,

a shadow at our backs, a river that remained greedy. And somewhere in between, a hole where a monster supposedly slept, more harmless than anything nipping at our heels today.

I was William, a bastard in the dirt, one tooth missing, a few more cuts, a knife at my side that vibrated softly when the air grew too still. And I knew: the next few days would bring more mud, more steel, and more Scottish curses. Perhaps new stories, too. Perhaps one of us would become one. Whether in the hole, the river, or in the mind of a child listening later in the dark.

They didn't let us dwell on sea monster memories for long. No sooner had we made the first halfway decent joke about Nessie than messengers arrived again. Messengers are like flies: where there's blood and disorder, they're already there. One, wearing a far too clean tabard, stopped in front of the sergeant as if he'd swallowed a stick.

"The right wing is being relocated," he said, without even glancing at us. "You will be taken to the dip in front of the grove. For safety reasons."

"Securing what?" asked Fergus.

The messenger didn't flinch. "Securing the room."

"The room is very grateful," Tam murmured.

The sergeant simply nodded. "You heard the man," he said. "We're moving our mud. Onward to the depression."

So we went. No big deal. You pack your stuff like you're just moving to another corner of the same tavern because it's less drafty there. Except this train consisted of arrows and spearheads. The ground got deeper the closer we got to the dip I'd described. The field outside Stirling wasn't made for so many feet; it took them, but it complained. Every furrow that had been just a track yesterday was now a trench. Blood, water, dirt—all a single brown mess.

The depression wasn't a proper ditch, more of a shallow hollow where everything unwanted had accumulated: rainwater, eroded soil, a few lost shields, a single, abandoned boot sole. Beyond it lay a grove of stunted trees, too close together, too few leaves to be considered a "forest." The kind of place where ravens first perch when assessing the situation.

"We're supposed to secure this place?" Aidan asked as we stood at the edge of the depression.

"They're afraid the English will try to break through here," the sergeant said. "Along the side, out of the shadows. Or that they'll slip through here at night. And since they've already sent us to the bridge, they're sending us here too. We're officially the ones they put where it might hurt now."

"Always hitting the sore spots," said Fergus. "I'm honored."

We formed a loose line at the edge of the depression. Not as close as on the bridge, but close enough to feel each other's footsteps vibrate the ground. The mud here was deeper, heavier, a sticky bastard that hated every foot. I could feel it pulling at my boots, as if trying to remember who had stood there before. The river was farther away, its sound muffled. The noise from the main front was muted, but still like a city trying to laugh and vomit at the same time.

"I like it here even less than on the bridge," said Ruairi. "At least there you knew where death came from."

"He comes from everywhere," Seoras murmured. "Or not at all. And then we just get cold."

The priest stood a few steps behind us, near the grove. The wind blew leaves to his feet, dry ones that had already served their purpose. He looked like someone who would rather be somewhere else, but didn't know exactly where. His gaze kept drifting back to the trees behind us.

"What about the grove?" I asked.

"Trees," he said.

"And?", I asked.

"Trees are like people," he said. "Some just stand there. Others know too much. I don't like them when they're silent."

Fergus snorted. "Trees, hole monsters, shadow creatures," he counted on his fingers. "We'd have to charge admission for this fair, damn it."

We just stood there for a while, holding our position. No attack, no movement from the English. A patrol on their side, nothing more. The front was occupied elsewhere; we were what you might call "reserve troops in the dirt." Time crawled by. Men started to move because standing still is harder than moving forward.

Tam cursed a stone he kept tripping over. "If I slip on that damned thing one more time, I'll dig it out of the ground and kill someone with it."

"Maybe the stone itself," Aidan suggested. "He deserves it."

The mud bubbled in one spot as if someone had lit a fire underneath it. I looked and saw nothing unusual. Just pooling water. Nevertheless, I felt that slight pulling in my stomach again, that inner twitching. As if someone had stretched a thin string across my ribcage and was now very gently plucking it.

The knife at my side responded. Not loudly. Not like a signal. Just that faint throbbing in my palm as I touched the handle. It was there, as always, when something in the air was wrong.

"William?" Dougal asked quietly. "Do you feel...?"

"Yes," I said. "Something is playing tricks on us."

"The English?" asked Cailean.

"If only it were just them," I murmured.

The wind shifted. Suddenly the smell was different. The scent of blood remained, as did the packed mud. But beneath it all was a different note. Like old water. Not like the river—at least that smelled of movement. This smelled of stagnation. Of something that had lain in

shadow for a long time. The smell of a hole, I thought. The smell of places where light is a stranger.

"I don't like that," said Tam. "That's what the well behind our yard smells like when it goes bad in the summer. Just before the animals die if you let them drink from it."

The sergeant felt it too. He tensed his shoulders slightly. "Keep your eyes open," he said. "Not just ahead. Behind you too. And in the hollow. If anyone sees something that shouldn't be there, they'll shout. And if anyone shouts because they've drunk too much, I'll rip their throat out."

We did as he said. Eyes forward, to the front. Eyes to the left, where our men were regrouping in the mud. Eyes to the right, towards the river. And every now and then a quick, uninhibited glance into the hollow. There was only water, mud, a few sticks that looked like fingers if you looked too long.

"Nessie in miniature," Aidan murmured. "This is her small, ugly cousin."

"Too far away from Loch Ness," said Fergus. "But shadows have long legs."

Minutes stretched into a long, gray thread. My hands went numb on the shield grip, my feet heavy. My tongue wandered back to the gap between my teeth. You get used to an astonishing amount. Even to the absence of parts in your own mouth. Sometimes what's there is worse than what's missing.

Then it happened.

No scream, no horn blast, no dramatic crash. It was more of a change in the weight of the air. Like someone opening a door in a room where you've been breathing with too many people for too long. You notice it before you see them.

The humming was back. Deeper. Broader. Not like a sound, more like a color spreading over everything. The ground vibrated, but not like under many feet – different. Narrower, more direct, as if something larger were crawling through a too-narrow passage beneath the top layer of mud.

"Do you see that?" whispered Ruairi.

I followed his gaze. In the center of the depression, where the water was thickest, the surface rippled. Not a gust of wind, not a falling drop, not a stone. It was a calm day for what was happening here. Nevertheless, ripples were forming. First small ones, then larger ones. Not outward, as if something were falling in. Inward. As if the water were being drawn into itself.

"Back from the edge," the sergeant said calmly. Too calmly. "Everyone. Step back, keep your shield in front. The first one to stumble stays down."

We took a step back. Some of us took two. The water in the depression noticeably contracted, like when you wring out a rag and the center becomes darker. Mud, clumps of grass, half a shield's edge—everything seemed to slide easily toward the center. A halting sound rippled through the ranks, something between a curse and a prayer.

"That's not Nessie," Fergus muttered. "Nessie would have style."

"What is it then?" asked Cailean, and I heard his voice break.

I could now clearly feel the knife pulsing. As if I were holding a live fish trying to slip from my hand. The handle was both cold and warm at the same time. Moira's blade vibrated beneath my skin, not loudly, but unmistakably.

"It is..." I searched for a word. "...that which doesn't appear in stories because no one survives long enough to tell it properly."

In the middle of the depression, the water's surface broke. Not like a head surfacing. It was more as if the water was suddenly pulled downwards, dragging everything above it with it. A hole. A real, dark hole. No rim, no bubble. Simply a black point, where the world was missing.

"Back!" shouted the priest, his voice far too alert for a man who was usually quiet. "Back from the edge!"

The hole didn't grow very large. It didn't need to. It was perhaps as wide as two men were tall. But the depth... That's the problem with holes. No one knows when they'll end. Mud, water, an old wooden pole – everything disappeared into it, silently. No splash. No resistance. Just being gone.

I had seen holes in men's chests, holes in walls, holes in chapel roofs. This hole was different. It wasn't "inside something." It was in place of something. Like a piece of an obliterated world.

"What in all the fucking saints is this?" Tam gasped.

"A mistake," the priest said quietly. "Something that doesn't want to be here, and yet is."

"It can't be the English," said Aidan.

"The English can do a lot," said Fergus, "but I don't think they have that much style."

We stood at the edge, shields half-drawn, half-forgotten, none of us foolish enough to raise our weapon unless we knew where to put it. A few men further to the right moved even closer, because people never learn when to keep their distance. One slipped in the mud, his foot sliding forward, his center of gravity following behind.

"No!" I shouted, but he was already over the edge.

He didn't fall like one falls. It wasn't a normal fall. He was pulled. A jerk on his leg, as if someone had yanked at it from below. His cry was short, sharp, full of pure astonishment. He didn't even manage to grab for anything. For a moment he stood askew, his body in the air, his heel already above the darkness. Then he was gone. No splash, no spray. Just gone.

"Back!" the sergeant yelled, no longer calmly. "Everyone back, hold your position, away from the dip!"

We jumped back. The mud made it difficult, but fear is a good motivator. My boots gripped me for a moment, as if they wanted to keep me there, then I ripped them free. The hole in the middle remained. It didn't get any bigger. It was content just to be there.

"Is this... the same as in the village?" asked Ruairi, pale, her hands trembling.

"It feels like it," I said. "Only this time it's not under the roof, but in the middle of a field."

"At least Nessie eats in the water," Tam said tonelessly. "This one eats everything."

For a while—perhaps seconds, perhaps longer—nothing happened. We stared at it, and the hole stared back, if a hole can stare. Then, slowly, the rim began to fill again. Mud crept back, water trickled its way back up. In a few heartbeats, the depression looked as it had before. A little deeper, perhaps, but nothing a farmer wouldn't have dismissed as "poor soil."

"Did that really just happen...?" Cailean stammered.

"Yes," I said. "It has."

"Was that a sign?" the priest whispered, more to himself.

I spat in the mud. "It was a mouth," I said. "Nothing more. Signs are for men with too much time on their hands."

The sergeant looked at each of us in turn. There was something in his eyes I'd rarely seen in him: bewilderment. "We'll report it," he said finally. "But none of you are going to spout any heroic nonsense about it. No monster eyes, no big mouth, no arms reaching out. Got it? We'll say the floor gave way and swallowed a man. End of story."

"And if they ask why?" Aidan said.

"Then we say the country is hungry," said the sergeant. "They can live with that."

"And what about us?" asked Dougal. "Can we live with that?"

I looked down into the hollow again. It looked the same as before. Mud, water, a few small ripples where a drop had fallen somewhere. Nothing a bard would sing about. But I knew what I had seen. A hole that wasn't simply "deep ground." An empty space in the world.

"We have no choice," I said. "We either live with it or we don't live at all."

Fergus grinned crookedly, without humor. "Nessie in the lake, holes in the field, Englishmen outside the town, a shadow at your back," he recited. "Scotland makes it hard to have normal nightmares anymore."

We kept watch. Mud beneath us, steel in our hands, curses on our tongues. The depression acted as if it had always been this way. The front lines roared on, the banners fluttered as if they were the most important thing here. And somewhere deep inside, I knew: This war was just the noisy surface of something far older and far hungrier than any king.

I was William, a bastard in the rain, now a bastard in the mud, one tooth less, one more hole in my head. And I realized: learning to die in Stirling was one thing. Living with the knowledge that holes in the world could open up whenever they wanted – that was another.

It was strange: after that hole in the hollow, after that swift, silent disappearance of a man, ordinary warfare almost felt... harmless again. Englishmen, arrows, swords, curses—all loud, all visible, all at least honest enough that you could give it form. That thing down there, on the other hand, that silent maw in the mud, had done something to us that I couldn't immediately grasp. It was as if someone had pushed open a door in your mind, a door you'd always known something was behind, but had hoped you were wrong.

We stayed put at the edge of the dip because "security" apparently also meant: Stick close to what wants to eat you; maybe it'll get bored. According to orders, we were now the "barrier on the right edge." In reality, we were the backup plan in case things got even worse. Better a few peasants, bandits, and bastards disappear than a clan leader get knocked off his horse.

Time dragged on, more sluggish than the mud beneath our boots. The front line raged, the constant ebb and flow of shouts and metal echoing through the air, but back here it was like the lull in a barnyard fight: everyone knew it was about to start again, so they briefly pretended they could breathe.

Tam started swearing quietly. No one was really addressing him, just swearing into the air. He had a peculiar way of fitting God, the English, the soil composition, and the entire ancestry of the first man to ever hold a spear into a single sentence. Aidan listened, grinned crookedly, and occasionally added an "Amen," which I found amusing, for the priest's sake.

"If anyone survives here today," said Tam, "it's only because Death doesn't want to bother with the mud."

"Death is Scottish," said Aidan. "He knows mud."

"Death is English," Broc grumbled. "He stands in the back, neatly, and lets others go."

The priest said nothing. He stood a few steps behind us and looked back into the grove, as if he had something planned because of the trees. I thought to myself: Who knows, maybe the next holes are already there in the roots, just waiting for someone to go and pee.

"I need to pee," Ruairi said quietly, as if he had heard the exact thought.

"Then do it back there," said the sergeant. "And if you hit the wrong hole, let me know beforehand so I'm not standing in the beam."

Ruairi disappeared briefly behind some bushes, then returned looking as if the ground itself had hissed at him. "Everything's normal," he muttered. "Just dirt. Thankfully."

"You and your happiness," said Fergus. "If you only knew what it looks like..."

We laughed, but it was that dry laugh where no one really has time to breathe. We were all too awake, too tired, too full of images that hadn't yet found their place.

Eventually, another messenger appeared. This one looked less polished than the one before. His armor was battered, his helmet dented, as if he'd met Stirling not from maps, but with his forehead. He stopped in front of the sergeant and huffed.

"Left flank movement," he said. "The English are trying to test the flank. Perhaps just a diversion. The high man wants the right line to hold in case they try to turn around or break through here."

"So... nothing new," said the sergeant.

"Just more of that," the messenger confirmed. "And..." He glanced into the hollow, saw only water. A relief for his nerves. "...keep your men calm. There's a rumor going around that there are holes in the field that are eating people."

"Rumors," the sergeant said tonelessly. "I never liked them."

The messenger nodded, as if he had expected it, and disappeared again, back towards banners, orders, tents where men with cleaner hands decided about mud.

"So you already know," Aidan murmured.

"Of course they know," said Fergus. "Rumors travel faster than arrows."

"And at least as accurate," Tam added.

The sergeant looked at us, one after the other. "You heard what just became official," he said. "You also heard what I said. We lost a man because the ground decided to open its mouth. Period. Anyone who makes more of this will get what's coming to them before it gets them."

"Yes," I said. "But it's still there."

He looked at me, and there was no anger in his gaze, more a weary admission: I know. "I can't fight against something that has no face," he said quietly. "So I fight against what does. You do what you want if you want to keep yours."

Fergus nudged me with his elbow. "Did you hear? You're allowed to be special again."

"Screw you," I said. "I'd rather be stupid and blind."

The wind carried a sound of shouting from the left. High-pitched neighing, men's voices, the dull rumble of many hooves. The English were testing their horses. I saw wisps of dust, half in the distance, half obscured by hills.

"Do you really think they're going to try it here?" asked Dougal.

"If they're smart, no," Seoras said. "If they're desperate, yes."

"And?" asked Cailean.

"They are English," said Fergus. "So both."

We positioned ourselves a little closer together, shields slightly tilted, spears at the ready. Broc gave short, clear instructions: "If riders come, shields down, spikes up, legs wide. If you run, only run inwards, never to the side. Whoever runs to the side runs straight into their mouth."

"Which one?" Tam asked.

"Pick one," said Broc.

The minutes faded into softness again. Sometimes I thought I saw something between the trees. Shadows that didn't quite match the branches. Eyes that weren't really eyes. I knew I was exhausted. I knew that when reality is too overwhelming, the mind searches for images. Nevertheless, my fingers kept resting on the knife handle. Every time the blade twitched, I knew: Not everything is my imagination.

"When we get out of here," Aidan said suddenly, "I'm going home and telling my nephews I saw the Loch Ness Monster."

"You've never been to Loch Ness," said Ruairi.

"Who cares?" said Aidan. "Do you think they'll check? I'll just tell them they don't want to go to the lake at night anymore."

"And what do you tell us about Stirling?" I asked.

He thought for a moment. "That the English are bad horsemen and the river is a better scapegoat than we could ever be," he said then. "I'll swallow the rest."

"I'll tell my grandchildren someday," Tam murmured, "that I spat in the face of a hole in the ground. Even if it's not true. Someone has to exaggerate their own achievements."

"You'd throw up just looking into a dry well," said Fergus. "But sure, go ahead and tell me."

The priest listened to everything. "Perhaps this is the only thing left for us," he said quietly. "That we decide which parts we tell."

"And which ones we'll get drunk on," said Fergus.

It took us quite a while to realize that the cavalry movement had only been a test. No breakthrough, no assault on our depression, just an advance, a few arrows, a few dead over there, a few here. The main line shifted a bit, but in Stirling, every bit is a matter of days, not hours.

A messenger arrived later with the garbled message that the right wing had "held." In their language, that meant: We weren't completely destroyed, so we'll pretend it was intentional. For us, it meant: We stayed put. Securing. Waiting. Mud and steel and the same old curses.

Sometime in the afternoon—if you could call it that in this grayness—it started to drizzle. Not really rain, more like a damp drizzle from above. The ground rejoiced. It became softer, deeper, more eager. The depression visibly filled with water again. Nothing special. No hole. Just ordinary, dirty wetness.

"If this continues," said Ruairi, "we'll all soon be just a pile of boots in a lake."

"Maybe Nessie will come to us then," Aidan said.

"If I actually see the beast," said Tam, "I'll ask it if it eats Englishmen. If so, I'll build it a shrine."

We laughed. It was strange that this silly legend about the sea monster came more easily to us than the nameless thing that had just swallowed one of us. Maybe that was it: Nessie had a shape, a lake, stories. The other was just a hole. An absence. You can talk more easily about something you can imagine, like a big fish, than about something that simply... isn't there.

The day dragged on. The battle at the front flickered up and down, like a fire fueled by too much wet wood. Sometimes I think that the war, just like us, didn't know whether to really get going today or save itself for tomorrow.

Towards evening, we were relieved. Another group – fresher, cleaner, more clueless – marched to our depression. Men with faces that hadn't yet etched themselves with so much. We handed them our mud like an unwanted heirloom.

"Any special features?" their leader asked the sergeant.

He looked into the hollow and saw only water. "The ground is soft," he said. "Sometimes softer than it looks. Don't put the stupid ones on the sidelines."

The other one nodded. "Understood."

I saw one of the new ones – a skinny boy with overly large eyes – staring into the hollow for a moment too long. I walked past him and bumped him with the sign.

"Don't stare too long in puddles," I said. "Otherwise they'll look back at you."

He swallowed. "I heard, here..."

"There's mud here," I interrupted him. "If you're lucky, you'll stay on top. End of story."

We left. Away from the hollow, away from the grove, away from the hole that had once again turned to earth. Back towards the camp, back into a different kind of mud. Men, tents, fire, smoke, the familiar chaos. Stirling had grown larger since we'd arrived. More dead, more stories, more things you didn't want to think about at night.

When we sat by one of the smaller fires, finally able to crack our bones, I let myself fall onto my backside as if someone had thrown me.

"I've seen enough mud for three lifetimes," I said.

"Not me," said Fergus. "If you stay in it long enough, you become part of the country. Isn't that what everyone always wants? To become one with their homeland?"

"At most, I want to become one with a dry bed," said Aidan.

"I want to become one with a cup," Tam murmured.

The priest sat down, his hands clasped together as if he were cold. Which he probably was. "Mud, steel, and Scottish curses," he said. "If someone asks later what this war was, you can boil it down to that."

"You heard the chapter," I said.

"Which chapter?" he asked.

I waved it off. "Nothing. Just a thought."

I tilted my head back and looked up. The sky was still gray, but a different shade. The light was more oblique, the air heavier. Soon night. Soon shadows again, sounds, that humming that might come, might not.

"Do you think," asked Dougal, "there will come a time when we only talk about things like that? Nessie, mud, the bridge... and don't actually stand in it anymore?"

I thought for a moment. "Maybe," I said. "For others. Not for us."

"At least we can choose how we swear," said Tam. "That's a kind of freedom, too."

"Freedom between two sips," I said, thinking of the chapter that lay behind us. "And between two holes."

The knife at my side was still now. The hand that touched it trembled only from the day, not from what lurked beneath. For a moment I felt something like... not peace, that would be too much. More like a brief understanding with the world. It hadn't made the worst of us today. Just the expected.

I felt my eyes grow heavy. The body, which had acted all day as if it were still made of steel, suddenly remembered that it was made of flesh. I half-lay down against a pile of knotted blankets, feeling the hard ground beneath me, the smell of smoke on my clothes, the taste of old whiskey and fresh blood in my mouth.

My last thought before I slipped wasn't a prayer, not a curse. It was just one sentence: If another hole opens up tomorrow, at least I want to stare at it with my eyes open.

Then came sleep. Not good sleep. But sleep. And that was enough for that night.

The brief triumph of a dead man

The morning they told us we'd won smelled exactly like the evening we were sure we were all going to die. Of stale smoke, stagnant blood, wet fur, and bad breath. If that was the smell of glory, glory had a serious hygiene problem. It wasn't as if someone out of nowhere shouted, "We've won!" and everyone started dancing. It was more like a slow seepage of phrases that burrowed through the ranks like rats: The English are back. They're across the river. They're falling back. Stirling is holding.

"We pushed them back," the sergeant said, as if he wasn't sure if that was really a good thing. He stood before us, sword still in hand, his armor covered in stains that were no longer quite clear – dirt, flesh, a few memories he didn't want to sort. "They've abandoned the bridge. They're retreating. Our high-ranking officials will sell this as a victory."

"Sell to whom?" Tam asked. "To us? Or to themselves?"

The sergeant shrugged. "To the gods, the bards, the farmers who will have to feed them again next time. It doesn't matter. For us, it means: no second bridge today. No second hole in the river today."

The camp moved differently that morning. Not more easily, but louder. Men who had only gasped yesterday began to talk. Voices grew shorter, harsher, surging. One said he'd thrown three Englishmen off the parapet at once. Another swore he'd killed an officer who looked as if he'd personally stepped out of a pile of gold. Fergus grinned and said he'd stabbed an Englishman in the balls, who had screamed "Mother!" like a child.

Everyone carved out their own triumph from the chaos, even if it was just a single moment when they hadn't fallen despite the blade being damned close. In a war like this, survival is the cheapest form of victory, and yet the one that tastes the best.

The higher-ranking officers rode around as if they had bitten through the bridge with their horse teeth. Cloaks flapped, banners were held so that they caught the few rays of sunlight that struggled through the gray. One of the tall men, a high-ranking man with a face that looked like a carved mask, had us inspected. His eyes scanned our ranks, our dented helmets, our dirty tartans, our missing teeth, our poor posture.

"Good work," he said finally, more to the sergeant than to us. "Your men have proven themselves."

Tried and tested. I thought of the man who disappeared into the hollow yesterday. Tried and tested in falling. A different kind of seal of approval.

The sergeant nodded curtly. "They're still standing," he said. "Those who are no longer standing are the reason why."

The High One nodded, as if it were a saying he wanted to remember in case no bard was around. "We will not forget this sacrifice," he said. It was one of those phrases that only come from men who are guaranteed to survive.

"Of course not," Fergus muttered behind me. "You have lads who will write it down for you."

They began calling out names. Not ours. Others. Names of men who had led banners, raised shields, shouted orders. Names that hovered above the noise like ravens over a battlefield. I heard "Murray" and "Wallace," names that had already been circulating through the ranks before Stirling had even been more than a shadow on the horizon. Men who had fought the war not just with their arms, but with their minds.

"There," said Seoras, pointing ahead with a barely perceptible nod. He was riding among a group of riders, on a not particularly beautiful but strong horse. William Wallace.

I had seen him before, from afar, among tents, at a meeting, by a fire where he didn't laugh. But today he was impossible to miss. Tall, broad-shouldered, his face not handsome, but sharp. Not a hero's face like one in a stained-glass window, not a smooth mask like the lords'. More like a country road, worn by heavy wagons too often. His eyes dark, tired, but wide awake. He was listening to another rider beside him, and yet you could see his gaze constantly scanning everything – men, banners, the ground, the river. Someone who knew where he stood.

"See?" Aidan said beside me. "That one. That's the reason everyone's saying 'victory' today instead of whispering where they can best run away."

"He is the reason," I said. "And we are the prize."

Wallace rode past us. No great spectacle. He didn't stop, didn't make a speech, didn't throw up his arms. But his gaze swept over our line, lingered briefly. Not long, but long enough for me to know: he saw us. Not as a mass, but as a group of individuals. His gaze lingered on my blood-crusted mouth, then on the knife handle at my side. Something in his face twitched. Perhaps my imagination. Perhaps not.

He nodded. Just a small nod. Not a "thank you." More like: I saw you were there. Then he rode on, towards the tents, towards the meetings, towards decisions we hadn't been invited to.

"He was watching you," Tam said. "Maybe he likes bastards."

"Maybe he likes knives," Fergus said. "Or men who still have enough teeth to growl at him."

"Maybe he's like us," Ruairi said, surprisingly serious. "Only with a horse."

I watched him go. A man around whom stories were already gathering like flies. Some said he was just a braggart who'd gotten lucky. Others swore they'd seen him take out three men with one blow on the bridge. Still others claimed the thing that was chasing us was retreating from him. I didn't believe it. Things that tear holes in the world don't tip their hats to anyone.

The logic of the day was simple: they had beaten the English back, so they needed symbols. Wallace was one. Murray was one. So were the banners. The peasants, bandits, and bastards on the sidelines? We were the wood from which they made the fire for those symbols. Once you understand that, it's hard to be genuinely happy anymore.

Nevertheless, there were moments that felt like triumph. Brief, raw, but real. When a wounded man realized he would see the next day after all. When someone learned that his brother, whom he thought had disappeared in the river, was actually lying in a field hospital

tent. When Tam discovered that the loose tooth he'd been using was still holding, and he grinned like a child who'd found a lost stone.

We received something called an "extra ration." A little more porridge, a bit more of the thin soup, for some a finger's width more whiskey. "For the fighters from the bridge," they said. Broc distributed it as fairly as a man can who knows perfectly well that nothing is fair.

"To the dead," said Fergus, raising his cup.

"To those who don't yet know they're already half dead," Tam added.

We drank. It burned warmly through the cold emptiness in my stomach. For a moment, there was this stupid, hard-to-kill feeling: Maybe... we really had accomplished something. Maybe we hadn't just bought time for men hunched over maps. Maybe things would have been different without us.

The priest later sat down with us. His hands were red, not only from the blood he had wiped from the faces of the wounded, but also from the cold water with which he had washed them. "They say we've made a big impact," he murmured. "That the country is a step freer today."

"Free from what?" I asked.

He shrugged. "From those over there," he said, gesturing vaguely towards the English. "Not free from everything. Just a little less bound."

"I didn't feel free on the bridge," I said. "I felt like a stone someone was holding and hitting against other stones."

"Stones can fall," said the priest. "Today, a few have fallen on the right side."

"And tomorrow?" asked Ruairi.

The priest looked at him, and in his gaze there was sometimes more honesty than in all the speeches of the high lords combined. "Tomorrow they will find new stones," he said. "Or the same ones will have to try again."

In the afternoon, the great counting began. Not just of the living, but also of the dead. Lists were kept, names collected wherever they existed. For some, there were only descriptions: "The one with the scar above his eye," "The boy with the oversized sword," "The old man with the crooked nose." For those like me, it was: "Bastard with a knife," "The tall, silent one," "The one who's always swearing." If someone disappeared without their name being known, it was like a tooth falling out at night and lying in the straw in the morning: You know there's a hole, but you can't remember exactly where.

I helped carry the wounded. It was a pointless exercise, but better than sitting around and listening to my own thoughts. We hauled men into makeshift tents that smelled of pus, herbs, and the stale sweat of fear. Some groaned, some were silent, which was worse. One held my hand as we laid him down and whispered, "Did I... did I at least get one of them...?"

"Yes," I said. "Several."

I didn't know. I didn't care. He needed an answer, not a statistic.

The sun tried once to break through the clouds, but quickly gave up. Stirling remained gray. So did the castle, the town, and the river. Only the stories grew more colorful as the day wore on. By evening, wounded Englishmen had become slain monsters, and every man who didn't return a hero. No one spoke of those who had jumped into the water in panic or slid on their knees, crying "Mother!" They don't fit into songs.

We were sitting around our fire again when another group passed by. One of them stopped and looked over at us. "You're the ones from the third wedge, right wing," he said.

"It depends on who's asking," said Fergus.

"They say," the other continued, unimpressed, "that you shook the English to their core. That your ranks held when they tried to break through."

"People say a lot of crap," said Tam.

The man looked at me. "They say that one of you fights with a knife that feeds on English fears," he said. "That it... vibrates just before something bad happens."

All eyes in our group slowly turned to me. I swallowed a curse word.

"They say," I replied, "that men like to put meaning into things so that their own trembling feels like part of a plan."

The other one grinned. "It's enough for me that you didn't run," he said. "We had a wedge that did. Now the gentlemen are talking about betrayal and cowardice. But the men... they remember who stayed put."

"Then remember the ones who are lying in holes tonight," I said. "They've been standing the longest."

He nodded, his voice briefly turning serious. "We'll drink to you," he said. "Even if you're not sitting with us today." Then he continued walking.

"You see," said Fergus, as the noise of the others faded away. "You're history now, William. A bastard with a nervous knife."

"Let them say what they want," I muttered. "I know what I am: someone who narrowly avoided falling because others were standing closer to the edge."

In the distance, across the river, the English campfires were visible. Small, orange dots hanging like eyes against the darkness. They weren't gone. They were just further away. Stirling had been struck down. Not beheaded.

"The brief triumph of a dead man," the priest said suddenly, quietly, more to himself.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

He looked at me, and there was something in his eyes that I didn't like. Something knowing. "Today they're celebrating Wallace," he said. "And they're right. Without him, we might all have ended up over there, with our heads under English boots. But..."

"But?" Tam pressed.

"Men like him rarely live long lives," the priest murmured. "They carry too much weight. Too many stares, too many hopes. Eventually, even their shoulders can no longer bear it, and then..."

"Then there will be new stories again," Fergus thought. "New banners, new names. And the old heroes will be slipped into the songs so that no one notices how badly those who are still alive are being treated."

I looked back to the spot where I had last seen Wallace. A man on a horse, hundreds of eyes on him, the country behind him, the enemy before him, something in the shadows that wasn't on any map. Did he know that his triumph was already like a knife with an expiration date?

"We are all dead men," I finally said. "Most people only realize it later. He did it sooner."

Night came, as it had every night since we'd stood before Stirling: heavy, wet, too full of sounds we couldn't identify. Somewhere someone played a soft tune on a whistle. Someone laughed too loudly. Someone wept, thinking no one could hear. The river roared, the English fires flickered, the holes in the land held their breath.

And I, William, a bastard in the dirt, sat there, one tooth missing, a knife at my side that sometimes vibrated, and knew: The victory everyone was talking about today was just a brief, weary reprieve. A triumph for men who would be turned into stories in the years to come. Some of them were still alive. Some were already dead and just didn't know it yet.

It didn't take two hours for the victory to begin to stink. At first, there was that raw, incredulous sigh of relief you get when you realize you can still move in the morning. Men who yesterday had expected to end up in the river were now standing around fires, holding tin pots over the embers and telling each other how close they'd come to facing death. But the longer the day wore on, the clearer it became: Death hadn't gone away. He had simply taken a stool and listened.

It started with the looting. It always starts with the looting. When the high and mighty say, "We've won the battle," the rats say, "Then what's left behind is ours." English corpses were prized merchandise. Better boots, better buckles, sometimes a halfway intact suit of armor, coins that someone had carried in a leather pouch under their tunic, hoping that God would be on the side of those who could pay.

I saw a boy—barely bearded, hands too small for the sword he carried—bent over a dead Englishman. The Englishman's mouth was open, as if someone had forced his head sideways mid-sentence. The boy pulled the ring from his finger. It took a while because the hand was already stiffening. When he finally got it off, he held it up in the air as if it were a victory in itself.

"See?" he said to a comrade. "Gold. This guy was getting a big head."

The comrade nodded, greedily, pale. "Keep him," he said. "Before someone else sees that the bastard had something."

I moved on. I had no interest in English gold. Once you realize how quickly bodies soften, metal seems like a bad joke. And yet, everywhere the same scene: one kneels, one stands, one keeps watch, one looks away so as not to notice how close their own hands are to doing the same thing.

Among them all lay one who looked different from the others. Not an Englishman, not a simple Scotsman. His armor was somewhat better, but not as rich as that of those on horseback. A coat of arms, half-torn, something with lions, as always. He lay on his back, his eyes half-open, as if he were about to say something. His mouth was twisted, not in a scream, but rather in what might once have been a smile before the sword had struck him.

"Who is he?" I asked someone who was standing nearby, pretending to be just watching over the body.

The man shrugged. "An English captain, they say. Or something like that. He's had enough of talking, now it's time for some peace and quiet."

"Did he do anything special?" I asked.

"Yes," the man said. "He died in the right place so that our high-ranking gentlemen can later say they killed someone important."

I looked at the dead man. For a moment, I imagined the guy barking orders yesterday, certain that all these dirty Scotsmen would just become a number in a report. Now he was just a body with a halfway decent breastplate, someone already watching.

"They will sing songs about him," I murmured. "Just not ours."

"Perhaps about us too," the other said. "But we won't hear how wrong they are."

I continued walking, back to our area. The men looked different than before the bridge. Not because they had suddenly become more handsome. But there was that slight twitching in their faces now, the kind you get when you've stood up too quickly and your circulation can't keep up. Between the jokes, between the laughter, between the curses, there were small, silent gaps. Eyes that briefly wandered elsewhere, mouths that closed more quickly than before.

"Do you see that?" I asked the priest, who was kneeling beside our fire, trying to conjure something that felt like food from a cauldron.

"What?" he asked, without looking up.

"The way they talk," I said. "The way they look. The way they act as if this is now... I don't know. A beginning."

He stirred the cauldron, the wooden spoon scraping against metal. "You have to pretend," he said. "Otherwise, their heads will break off. If you tell them that this was just a small tooth that Scotland pulled from the giant English Crown today, they'll hate you. So you tell them the giant swallowed blood today. And that he's keeping his mouth shut now."

"The brief triumph of a dead man," I repeated his sentence from yesterday. "Wallace?"

The priest glanced up briefly. "Among other things," he said. "Today is his day. He will be celebrated, he will be quoted, they will call him everywhere they need courage. They will put him high on a pedestal where he would be better off not standing if he wants to live."

"You're talking as if he's already dead," I said.

"He is a man who stands on the front lines," said the priest. "In a war like this, if you are at the front and everyone behind you is shouting what to do, you are always a step ahead of the others."

"And what about us?" I asked. "What are we? Those who push him forward? Or those who lie beneath him when he falls?"

"We are the ones," said the priest, "who will later sit by the fire and say, 'I was there.' If we make it to the fire."

The sergeant sat down and helped himself to a bowlful of what was in the kettle. It tasted of nothing and smelled of even less. But it was warm, and warmth was practically a luxury these days.

"Have you seen him?" he asked me.

"Who?" I said, even though I knew.

"Wallace," he said. "You were in line when he rode by."

"Yes," I said. "He nodded."

"To you?", Tam asked immediately, grinning.

"To us," I said. "To those who were still standing."

The sergeant nodded slowly. "Good," he said. "At least he's got eyes in his head. I've seen too many who could only see banners."

"Do you think he knows what's chasing him?" I asked quietly. "That thing. The holes. The... I don't know what."

The sergeant looked at me. His gaze wasn't mocking, not annoyed. Just tired. "If he doesn't know it, he'll soon find out," he said. "Men like him attract that sort of thing. Like blood attracts flies."

"Maybe that's why it's after us," Fergus said. "We're close enough to pass for a side dish."

Broc joined them, sat down heavily as if the ground were momentarily complaining. "There's another new word circulating," he said.

"What kind?" asked Ruairi.

“‘Freedom,’ said Broc. He made a face as if he had bitten into it and found the core to be hard. ‘They say Stirling was the first big step toward freedom.’

"Freedom from what?" Tam asked again.

“From those over there,” said Broc, nodding towards the English camp. “From their taxes, their chains, their laws. From their gods, perhaps, if some have their way.”

"And what about this one?" I asked, gesturing in the general direction of the hole in the depression without saying a word. "Will someone free us from this one too?"

"That's not in any plan," said the sergeant. "There are no speeches for that sort of thing. There are only men who happen to be nearby when things get greedy again."

“So we,” said Fergus.

“Well, you,” said Tam. “Your knife already trembles if a shadow is in the wrong place.”

I reached for the handle. It wasn't vibrating. Not now, not here. It had been quieter in the camp. Maybe it didn't like too many voices. Maybe it was just tired. Maybe it was just the fear inside me that needed to rest.

Later, they brought an English prisoner through our camp. Most of the prisoners had the same look: blank, exhausted, somewhere between "I don't care about anything" and "please, not anything else." But this one was different. He walked upright, as far as his shackles allowed, and his eyes were alert. Not proud—he wasn't that proud anymore—but clear. Someone said he was an officer who had been captured alive before the final line was broken.

A few men growled, spat in his direction, and hurled words that had been used so often they were dull: "whore," "dog," "king's ass." He didn't look at them. Only when he was level with us did he pause briefly, because the man leading him was taking a break.

Our eyes met. His eyes were gray, with those little cracks that appear when too much has happened in them. He looked at me, then at the others, then at the knife at my side. A brief shadow of something—recognition, fear, mockery, hard to say—flew across his face.

"Then?" Fergus asked in Scottish. "Well, how does it feel to be captured by the 'barbarians'?"

The Englishman said something in his language, quietly, in a discordant tone.

"What is he saying?" asked Ruairi.

The priest listened, frowning. "He's saying," he translated, "'Today you rejoice. Tomorrow you'll know that you're all dead anyway. The only difference is how long it takes you to realize it.'"

Tam laughed harshly. "Tell him I knew that before he could walk."

The priest nodded to the Englishman and said something in return. The Englishman answered briefly, then the strap around his neck was tightened again, and he continued walking towards some tent, some hole, some interrogation that might end in a noose.

"What did you say to him?" I asked.

"That he's not entirely wrong," said the priest. "And that I still hope he'll be in the ground before we are."

"Comforting is not your greatest strength," Fergus said.

"I am not a comforter," said the priest. "I am just a man who observes."

In the afternoon, when we thought the rest of the day was just for sitting around doing nothing, we were called back together. No alarm, no attack. Just that dry "fall in" you get when someone wants to talk to you.

We lined up in rows, as best we could, with aching legs and tired faces. In front of us were a few standard-bearers, behind them a platform made of hastily constructed planks. Not high, but high enough to place a man on it for everyone to see. And of course, who climbed onto it? Wallace.

He looked like he'd had as little sleep as we had. His armor was polished, but you could still see the scratches. His face was hard, his eyes tired. And yet there was something there that none of us had: that burning feeling behind his eyes that said, "I'm not finished yet."

He spoke. Not long, not like a priest, not like a lord. No grand words that could be neatly squeezed into verse. He spoke of Stirling, of the bridge, of the river that had claimed more Englishmen than Scots, of men who are missed today because they stayed yesterday. He spoke of freedom, yes, but not as a dream that could be painted on a banner. More like a stubborn beast that must be recaptured a hundred times before it finally stays with you.

I didn't understand everything because at some point my mind was only registering the rhythm. Word, breath, word, breath. The men around me nodded, murmured, occasionally raised their weapons. Tam whispered an "Aye" that wasn't feigned. Ruairi had tears in his eyes and wasn't even particularly ashamed of it. Aidan looked as if he would cross any bridge in the world for this man.

I stood there, listening, and inside me was this strange, conflicting feeling: Part of me wanted to join in, wanted to believe, wanted to shout that we were going to show those bastards over there. The other part stood apart, looking at the pedestal, at the man standing there, and thought: You're a dead man, Wallace. You don't know it yet, but you are. You've entered the place where heroes stand. And heroes, I knew by then, are just men whose names get written down when they finally shut up.

After the speech, the encampment grew louder. Men sang, badly, off-key, but with heart. Somewhere, barrels that had been saved for later were opened. Someone took out a pipe, someone a drum, someone a girl from the city who, for a few coins, let herself be led through the camp and probably wondered why the men's eyes were looking less at her body and more into the void.

"They are celebrating tonight," the priest said as we sat by the fire again. "Because they might not be able to tomorrow."

"Is this your blessing?" I asked.

"That's my advice," he said. "If you find something to laugh at, laugh. If you find something to drink, drink. If you find someone to fuck, ask him. That's all I can give out."

"You sound like the most honest priest I know," said Fergus.

"I am the worst priest the Church knows," he replied. "Perhaps that's how I balance myself out."

Later that night, as the fires grew smaller and the songs slowed, I sat alone a little way off. I looked at my hands. They were barely trembling anymore. The cut on my shin burned, my shoulder throbbed, the gap in my teeth felt like it would never completely stop bothering me.

The brief triumph of a dead man, I thought. Perhaps there were several. The Englishman in the better armor, now lying somewhere in the mud. Wallace, who had stood up there, with all eyes on him, unaware that he was stepping onto his own monument. And we, who today imagined we had won something, even though we knew perfectly well: the war was only just beginning to take a liking to us.

I placed my hand on the knife. It didn't vibrate. Perhaps, for once, it was satisfied. Perhaps that was the only mercy this day had left.

That evening, victory hung over the camp like a dirty coat, proudly thrown over the shoulders despite its holes. The fires burned higher than usual, as if to prove to the heavens that they were still there. Men who yesterday had been half-submerged in the river sang today as if they had never swallowed water. One could almost forget how many of them lay in the mud, unless one stepped directly on it.

It wasn't long before someone did the inevitable: he began calling out the name of a dead man so loudly that it soon sounded like a song. "To Eòin!" roared someone a few fires away. "For Eòin, the madman from the bridge!" Others joined in, hesitantly at first, then louder. "To Eòin! To Eòin!" Someone had a jug, someone else had found enough of the thin broth to pour into the cup and hold it aloft.

I knew Eòin. The fox-bearded man with the yellow spikes in his mouth, who had called me "bastard without tartan" before we'd left for Stirling. He was one of those guys who had more hair on his face than teeth in his mouth, and yet laughed as if he had both in abundance. I hadn't seen him fall on the bridge. Nor had I had a clear view to see who disappeared where and when. But now I knew: he was one of those who were supposed to make this victory glorious.

"What did he do?" Ruairi asked. "The Eòin?"

Fergus grinned narrowly. "If you're listening to this – everything," he said. "Knocked down three Englishmen at once, bit one in the neck with his teeth, pushed another over the parapet with his shield, danced in the middle of a hail of arrows, and swore properly all the while."

"And what did he really do?" I asked.

Fergus shrugged. "He stayed on the bridge," he said. "That's enough to get a song these days."

We took a few steps closer to the fire where his troop was gathered. They had cleared a space, half dry, half tamped down, and in the middle stood a rough wooden post. Hanging from it was his shield, battered, dented, the colors half-covered in blood. They had tied his belt to the edge of the shield, and on top of it was a helmet that wasn't his, but was meant to look like it was. A kind of improvised statue made from whatever was left over.

A man with a red face and glassy eyes stood nearby, waving a cup as he slurred a story that had probably once borne some grain of truth before alcohol had corrupted it. "And then," he bellowed, "then there he is, the dog, right in the middle of the bridge, the English in front of him, the water beneath him, the Scots behind him, and do you know what he says? Do you know what Eòin says?" He paused, as if it were all part of a grand theatrical performance. "He says, 'If anyone goes into the water first today, let it be you handsome fellows with the clean teeth. Mine stay on the stone.'"

Laughter. Shouts. Someone threw a bone into the fire. Sparks flew.

"That's not how he talked," murmured another man, who was standing closer to the sign and holding his cup more tightly than necessary.

"He's not talking at all anymore," said the red one. "So shut up while we still can."

I looked at the shield. The wood was split, as if someone had tried to break it lengthwise. Dried remnants, which must once have been Eòin's blood, clung to the bottom edge. I waited to see if something like awe would rise within me. It didn't. Instead, I felt that dull, weary sense that we were trying to dress a dead man in a costume that had never fit him.

Tam nudged me lightly with his elbow. "At least he's getting an evening," he said. "Better than those whose shields have long since been lost elsewhere."

"He won't get a night," I said. "He'll get five cups, two songs, and by tomorrow morning half of them won't even remember his name."

"Do you want it better?" Fergus asked. "Do you want no one to say his name? For him to just become 'one of many'?"

"He was one of many," I said. "That's the problem."

We stood there for a while, listening to the drunken man exaggerate Eòin's importance. In the story, he leaped alone onto a pile of Englishmen, laughed in the face of death, sang a mocking song, and smashed helmets with his shield until his arm fell off. In reality, he was probably just like the rest of us: in the dirt, in the crush, in the blood, in the noise, too busy breathing to crack many more jokes.

"A dead man," murmured the priest, who had stopped beside us without me noticing. "And his brief triumph."

"At least he has one," Ruairi said. "I don't even know if I'll get that far."

"Triumph is what others make of your death," the priest said. "Not what you feel."

We went back to our fire. I'd had enough of the false glamour.

The wind swept across the field again, carrying away snatches of laughter, of song, of the first scuffles that are inevitable when men, after a bloodbath, have to try to become friends. Somewhere, a man was arguing with a bard because his name had been sung incorrectly. Somewhere else, a man vomited on his own boots and then swore he'd never drink again, which was, of course, a lie.

I sat down, my legs tired, my back stiff, my hands around a bowl that was barely warm anymore. My thoughts returned to Wallace. He was nowhere to be seen. He'd probably been dragged into a tent, presented with reports, bombarded with plans, with maps on which lines shifted back and forth, as if men were merely lines to be rearranged when they were in the way.

"I wonder," said Aidan, "if he's thinking of us right now."

"Definitely," said Tam. "Between two sips."

"I'm serious," Aidan said. "Up there, with the gentlemen. Does he remember how we stood on the bridge? Or are we just steel in the mud to him?"

The sergeant, sitting a few steps away, listened. "Wallace isn't one of the smooth operators," he said. "He saw the mud before he even held a sword. He knows what it means when someone falls. I trust him more than those who only know war when someone else tells them about it."

"And yet," I said, "he's standing up there. And we're sitting here."

"That's the way things are," said the sergeant. "Some make plans, others carry them out. And then there are those who simply try not to be crushed by both."

"Which ones are we?" asked Dougal.

"We're the lucky ones today," said the sergeant. "Don't make a big deal out of it."

The night dragged on. The songs grew hoarse, the jokes worse, the movements heavier. The camp breathed slowly, full of alcohol, sweat, and the dull awareness that one should be happy, but couldn't quite manage it.

Eventually, I got up again; I couldn't sit any longer. My body had had enough of being still. I walked a little way from the fire, past other groups, past one man lying on his shield with his eyes closed, as if it were a bed. Past a bard tuning his lute, even though he was clearly missing three strings. Past someone staring alone at the river without even sitting down.

I stopped at the edge of the camp. From here, I could see the dark line of water, faintly reflecting what remained of our fires. On the other side, the English lights flickered. Fewer than the day before, but still enough to know: the enemy hadn't disappeared, he'd merely changed sides.

I felt the knife at my side. No vibration, no buzzing. Just the steady weight, like an animal asleep, yet capable of opening its eyes at any moment. I imagined the hole in the hollow reflected in the river. I imagined Eòin reflected in the river. I imagined the Englishman with

the grey eyes, the one who had said we were all dead, reflected in the river. Not Wallace. He was still up above, in the midst of the light.

"Freedom," I said softly, testing the word in my mouth like a piece of bread that was too hard. It got stuck in the gap between my teeth.

"When you start using words like that, you scare me," said a voice behind me.

I turned around. Fergus. Of course. He was like a dog, aware of every movement of its pack, no matter how quiet.

"I'm not starting with that," I said. "I'm just listening to everyone throwing it around like it's a coin."

"Freedom is the biggest lie with the best taste," he said. "Everyone wants it, no one defines it, and in the end you're just glad if you can pee somewhere without someone telling you which way to go."

I leaned slightly against a post from which hung a rope supporting a row of shields. "You know what the shitty part is?" I said.

"Everything?" he asked.

"That I believe him," I said. "Wallace. When he's standing up there talking. I know perfectly well that we're all going to die. Maybe sooner, maybe later. I know that this victory today is just a breath between two blows. I know that the thing in the shadows isn't finished yet. And yet—I listen to him and think to myself: Maybe it's worth running onto a bridge a few more times."

Fergus looked at me. The wind tugged at his beard, as if he didn't already have enough tufts. "Then you're not quite dead yet," he said. "Real corpses don't believe anyone anymore."

"Maybe," I said. "Or maybe I'm just dumber than I thought."

"Will you still think the same way tomorrow?" he asked.

I thought. The river rushed. In the distance, someone laughed hysterically. Someone else vomited. The camp was alive because it didn't know what else to call it.

"If I'm still here tomorrow," I said, "I'll probably think the same way. And be just as annoyed about it."

"That's your problem," said Fergus. "You want to believe and be right at the same time. That's impossible. You have to choose one."

"And you?" I asked. "What do you believe in?"

He grinned narrowly. "I believe I can run faster than the person they catch first," he said. "And that whiskey gets worse the more blood you have in it. So I drink it beforehand."

We stood there for a while longer. Two shadows at the edge of a camp where men imagined they had beaten the devil with a stone, when he had only briefly changed sides.

Eventually, when the wind grew colder and my bones had had enough of the "pensive bastard gazing at the river" pose, I went back to the fire. The others were already half-lying down. Tam on his back, his mouth slightly open, as if he'd start cursing again at the slightest touch. Aidan curled up, one hand at his side where the spear thrust had been. Ruairi on his side, as if afraid of rolling onto the ear he needed to hear orders with in his sleep. The priest awake, still, his eyes in the fire, as if he saw something in them we weren't supposed to see.

I lay down beside it, blanket over my shoulders, shield half under my head. The ground was hard, but by now I was so tired I could have slept even on the bridge at Stirling. The humming stopped. The holes kept silent. The river murmured. The camp breathed.

The brief triumph of a dead man, I thought once more, just before sleep came. Maybe I was one of them. Maybe not today. Maybe later, when someone smears my name onto some song that isn't true. But in this moment, I didn't care. I wasn't dead. Not yet. And if the only triumph was that I was allowed to close my eyes without waking up in the water, then that was enough for today.

At the edge of my consciousness, I saw Wallace standing on the pedestal once more. Not like a king, not like a saint. Like a man who had happened to be in the right place at the wrong time and had made the mistake of standing up when everyone else had knelt. He was alive, yes. But in my mind, he already had that thin shadow around him, the kind only given to those whose stories are made of them before they are buried.

Then there was only darkness. No hole, no humming. Only sleep. And that held me tighter than any shield wall.

Fame smells of decay.

A few days after Stirling, the field no longer smelled of battle, but of what comes after when no one is quick enough to deal with the rest. Glory, they said, was ours. They stood on crates, on rocks, on anything that made them higher than the rest, and gave speeches. But if you walked among the dead, you knew: glory smells of a false sweetness. Of flesh that's been smiled at by the sun for too long. Of the point where you can no longer tell if the stench comes from the English, the Scots, or the words of the bards.

We were assigned the way you assign people who are too good to stand around and too lively to be pitied: "Cleanup crew." It sounded cleaner than it was. The sergeant came over to us, as always with the face of a man who doesn't want to do it, but certainly doesn't have an excuse. "You want," he said, "us to get this floor back in such a state that you don't step on someone with every step who was standing screaming in line yesterday."

"So, are we going to do gardening now?" asked Tam.

"Yes," said the sergeant. "Except that we don't plant flowers in this meadow, but what's left of them."

We set off. Not a march, more of a shuffle. Our legs were tired, our heads were full, the rest of us somewhere in between. The river had calmed, not because it was carrying less water, but because most of what it had taken had already settled further downstream. The battlefield was a carpet of stuff no one wanted anymore: tattered banners, torn belts, half-crushed helmets, arrow shafts without points, arrowheads without shafts, shoe soles without shoes. And in between, the bodies.

Englishmen lay in armor that none of us liked, yet everyone eyed with envy. Some Scotsmen were still in their tartan, the patterns unrecognizable beneath the reddish-brown crust. Some were already bloated, as if they had decided that after death at least they would gain some bulk. Flies were busier than the bards.

"Glory," Fergus murmured as we were supposed to turn over the first one. "There he is."

We had instructions on how to sort the bodies. It was a kind of macabre bookkeeping. Englishmen on one side, Scotsmen on the other. Our own were to be identified, named, and bagged if possible. The foreigners deserved a hole and a curse. No one said it outright, but we all knew: history would later remember the names of those who had carried banners far better than those we were pulling from the mud today.

The first one I grabbed by the arm was as hard as cold cheese. The skin beneath the tunic was taut, as if it had decided it would never give. When we turned him, a sound escaped, a faint, nauseating puff, as if the air itself had swallowed him. The smell was so thick it made my eyes water for a moment.

"Goddamn shit," coughed Aidan, who was helping me. "He stinks like he started rotting while he was still alive."

"Englishmen," said Tam. "They arrive already rotten."

I looked at the man's face. His eyes were half-open, his pupils milky, his mouth twisted as if he were still trying to force out one last word. I didn't know if he'd been on our side or the other. His armor was so battered from blows that no crest was visible. So I looked at his teeth. Bad condition, a few black, a few missing. "Scot," I said. "Englishmen have money for teeth."

"Or better doctors," murmured the priest, who stood behind us and still looked as if he were settling an old score with every death.

We dragged him to a shallow depression that was already half full. Three others lay there, stacked on top of each other, like logs no one wanted to use for firewood anymore. Someone had made the sign of the cross over them, someone else a dry remark about the wasted effort. I laid the man down next to them. His arm caught briefly on my sleeve, as if he didn't want to let go.

"Move on," said the sergeant. No time for lingering glances. No time for anything. There were too many.

We worked our way forward. An Englishman, young, barely bearded, still wore a look of surprise on his face, as if he'd realized, as he fell, that his king wouldn't jump between him and the spear. Another, a Scotsman, was so mangled that you had to guess rather than know what he'd once looked like. At one point, Fergus didn't even swear anymore when he

accidentally tore off someone's hand, which had been clinging to the ground. He was only briefly quieter.

"Fame smells of decay," I said aloud at one point, without realizing that I had thought the sentence before it came out of my mouth.

"What?" asked Ruairi, who was limping behind on one leg, but still managed to pull other bodies along as if his guilt depended on it.

"Nothing," I said. "Just a thought."

"You can keep him," he said. "I have enough of them that smell bad."

Higher-ranking gentlemen passed by occasionally. Always in a formation that kept them clean. Two or three riders, a few runners around them so they wouldn't trip over anything. They looked, not directly at the dead, but rather over them, as one looks at a field that has been rained on but still yielded a harvest. One of them, a thin, pale man with an overly groomed beard, held a handkerchief to his nose.

"The men should work faster," he said to some officer beside him. "It's important that we make this field usable again soon. For deployment. For signals. For considerations."

"They're doing what they can," the officer growled.

"They smell," said the thin man, and rode on.

"That one too," Fergus murmured. "Only from the inside."

We continued. One body after another. Eventually, you get used to everything. Even the moment a belly opens when you twist it too roughly and half-fermented life spills onto the floor. The smell becomes background noise. Only sometimes, when you think you're getting a breath of fresh air for a second, do you realize how deeply it's already ingrained inside you.

The priest rarely spoke loudly. Occasionally he would murmur something about someone we recognized as ours. A name, if he had one, a "Go home" if he didn't. I once asked him if he also prayed for English people.

"If I have time," he said. "But honestly – I think their gods should take care of themselves. We have enough of our own garbage."

In one spot, the ground was darker. Not just from blood. It was as if the land itself had had a rough day. The mud was deeper, thicker, as if something more than humans lay beneath it. I stopped, without knowing why.

The knife at my side vibrated slightly. Not strongly like in the hollow, but clearly enough that I couldn't blame it on my nerves.

"What is it?" asked Seoras, who was pulling a leg out of the dirt beside me, a leg that had already lost the rest of its body.

"There's something here," I said.

“Yes,” he said. “Corpses. Welcome to the battlefield.”

“No,” I said. “Differently.”

The priest approached us. “Do you feel it?” he asked.

I nodded. “Something here is... full.”

The priest looked at the ground. “Perhaps one of them was here,” he said quietly. “Perhaps the thing itself got its meal here.”

“Can’t we just have a war for once without the whole world falling apart?” growled Tam, who had joined them.

“No,” I said. “We can’t.”

The sergeant came, saw us standing there, the wheelbarrow half full of meat that barely resembled human remains. “Move,” he said first, reflexively. Then he looked around, frowning. “Can you feel that?”

“Yes,” I said. “But we don’t know how to beat it.”

He took a slow breath in and out. “Then do what you can,” he said. “Throw the dirt into the holes before the dirt makes new ones.”

We dragged ourselves on, even over this spot. The ground gave way a little, more than it should. Not enough to swallow anyone whole, but enough to say: Someone’s bitten here before you. I imagined the thing that was chasing us crawling among all the dead, content because no one noticed that the biggest beast in this field wasn’t roaring in English or Scottish.

During a break – if you can call sitting down when you’re only briefly not carrying anything a break – I sat on a fallen sign and stared at my hands. Something dark was stuck under my nails. I couldn’t remember what it was.

“Do you know what the worst part is?” said Aidan, who flopped down next to me.

“Tell me,” I murmured.

“That in a few weeks they’ll be lining up men here again,” he said. “Clean ranks. Beautiful banners. And nobody will remember that the ground they’re standing on still stinks of us.”

“That’s what fame is all about,” I said. “He stands on top of it and acts as if he has nothing to do with the smell.”

A whistle could be heard in the distance. Someone was playing a tune that might have sounded cheerful, if it hadn’t been heard between two mass graves. A few men sang along in sync, others shouted over it.

“Do you think Wallace is at work right now?” Ruairi asked. “Or is he sitting with the gentlemen, listening as they put their victory into words?”

“Both,” I said. “He’s the one who has to sit on two chairs. The bloody one and the one with soft cushions. And if either of them slips, he’s finished.”

"Then he'll be dead faster than we are," said Fergus.

“Perhaps,” I said. “But they will know his name. We will only be ‘the men under him.’”

The priest looked over at me. "Sometimes it is better to be part of a sentence that is never written," he said.

“You say so,” I said. “But you don’t write.”

He smiled thinly. "I'll remember that," he said. "It's worse."

We got up again. More bodies. More work. The day dragged on, the sun nothing but a pale speck behind clouds. The stench didn't lessen, only our ability to distinguish it worsened. English, Scots, hole-eaters – to the nose, it was all the same.

It was already dusk when we walked back to camp. My shoes squelched with every step, as if the mud had decided it wasn't going to let me go so easily. I looked at my hands, at the stains on my kilt, at the dried edges on my sleeve. If this is what fame looked like, he could kiss my ass.

"Today they say we are heroes," I murmured as we saw the fires. "Tomorrow they'll hang songs about us. And the day after tomorrow, not even the flies will know who lay here first."

"You're in a particularly good mood today," said Tam.

“I’ve been dealing with the truth all day,” I said. “That’s just how it smells.”

That evening, after cleaning up, I felt as if someone had stuffed me from the inside with the same dirt we'd spent shoveling into holes all day. You can wash as much as you want, but some things stick to your soul, not your skin. After three men, the water in the tub they'd given us was more brown than clear. I dipped my hands in, watched the water around them darken, and felt like I was just scraping off the top layer of the real grime.

Tam stood next to me, ran his fingers through his hair, and snorted. "If I ever get rich," he said, "I'm going to buy myself a bathroom big enough that I can submerge myself without having to stand ass-to-ass with three other men."

“If you ever become rich,” said Fergus, “the first thing you’ll do is make sure you don’t have to stand near me anymore. And then maybe take a bath.”

Aidan came over and re-bandaged his side wound because the bandage was now more red than cloth. "If I ever get rich," he said, "I'll buy myself some teeth."

I rinsed my face, wiping over the gap in my teeth, which by now was as familiar as an old scar. "If I ever get rich," I murmured, more to myself than to anyone else, "I'll buy a piece of land that doesn't eat away at holes."

The priest dried his hands on an old cloth that had been washed so many times it had long since given up the ghost. "If I ever become rich," he said, "I'll buy myself time. But nobody sells time."

The camp was different than in the days before Stirling. It was full of voices, but they had a different tone. Less cutting, less harsh. It was as if everyone had decided that victory had to be hard-won, even if it left a bitter taste. The bards were already practicing new lines, trying out rhymes, as if adjusting new wounds. "Stirling" rhymed with surprisingly few things, but that didn't stop them from mentioning it several times in the same verse.

We sat down by the fire, which this time was a bit bigger than usual. Battlefield work was rewarded with a few extra logs, as if the men had realized that warmth sometimes accomplishes more than words. Broc handed out bowls of a stew consisting mainly of "an unidentifiable piece of meat." I didn't ask if any of it had previously worn a uniform. Some questions are better left unasked.

"They announced someone today," Ruairi said between spoonfuls. "In the big tent. Someone who's going to get a title for Stirling. Something like 'Guardian' or 'Protector' or 'Champion'. I didn't catch the exact name."

"Let me guess," said Fergus. "Not us."

"Of course not us," Tam growled. "If someone is called a 'champion,' he's seen more horses than mud."

"Wallace?" I asked.

Ruairi nodded. "Who else?" he said. "They carried his name through the ranks as if he were a relic. Men raised their weapons as if that would change the fact that they had spent all day mistaking knuckles for hands."

The sergeant sat down heavily beside him, supporting himself on his knees. "They need a face," he said. "One that hasn't fallen apart yet. So they take his. It's not wrong. But it's not the whole truth either."

"Which one is it?" asked Dougal.

The sergeant looked into the embers. "The truth is: without men like him, we wouldn't have had the courage to even run onto the bridge. And without men like us, he would have been standing over there alone with his sword, finding out how quickly one can disappear into the river."

"So we'll share the glory?" Aidan asked.

"No," said the sergeant. "He gets the glory. We get the smell."

I gave a short, dry laugh. "A fair division," I said.

Later, two bards came to our fire. You could recognize them by their instruments and the way they walked—as if they weren't quite landing on the ground. People who aren't constantly

carrying corpses always walk a little more lightly. One had a lute that had seen better days, the other a kind of flute that looked as if someone had carved it from a bone. Perhaps he had.

"We collect stories," said the man with the lute. "From the bridge. From the field. From the men who are no longer here."

"You're collecting fabric," said Fergus. "So that you can sell it later."

The bard smiled thinly. "Everyone makes what they can out of what they find," he said. "You close holes, we open words."

"And what do you want from us?" I asked.

"Names," he said. "Pictures. Sentences. Something you can sing without half the camp falling asleep before we get to the third line."

Tam didn't hesitate for a second. "Write it down," he said. "Eòin with the fox whiskers shouted so loudly on the bridge that the English thought the river had gone mad."

"He only screamed because an arrow went into his leg," one of them muttered.

"Shut your mouth," Tam snarled. "The truth is what someone believes later when they're drunk."

The bard wrote with a piece of charcoal on a piece of leather. Not elegantly, but quickly. "Eòin, fox-beard, scream," he murmured. "Good. And you?" He looked at me. "They say you had a knife that twitched when the horror drew near."

The others grinned, waiting. I saw the flute, saw the lute, saw the hungry look of the man who knew that such a story would make a good refrain.

"People say a lot of things," I said. "Write this down: A bastard with a knife from a dead woman stood in line like everyone else. Didn't run. That's enough."

"What's your name?" he asked.

I thought for a moment. My name suddenly felt like something I wasn't sure I wanted to give away. "William," I said finally. "That's all your people need to know."

The bard waited as if something else were coming. Clan name, origin, anything to tell a listener where the horse came from. Nothing came. He wrote anyway. "William. Bastard with a knife," he muttered. "That'll stick in your mind."

"Write that he lost a tooth, but not his sense of humor," said Fergus.

"Humor," repeated the bard, skeptically. "We're considering whether that's appropriate."

As they moved on, I heard them already beginning to piece together the first lines. Stirling, bridge, blood, river, Wallace, freedom – it was all there. We walked along, just background noise.

"I don't want some stupid song making my life into something it wasn't," I said when they were out of earshot.

"Then die quietly," Tam said. "Ideally somewhere in the forest, while gathering firewood. Then nobody will sing."

"Or live so long that they no longer want to remember you," said the priest.

The night passed us like a drunken dog: staggering, noisy, with sudden periods of silence where you weren't sure if it was sleeping or just gathering itself to bark again. At one of the other fires, two clans were arguing over who deserved more of the glory. One claimed his men had been the first to reach the middle of the bridge. The other swore that without their storm, the English would never have wavered. After a while, it sounded like two children fighting over the biggest bone, while the dog had long since been licked clean.

"Is that always the case when a battle is 'won'?" Ruairi asked.

The sergeant nodded. "Always," he said. "Once the blood has dried, the comparisons begin. Who was braver, who was faster, who got more. Nobody says, 'I was scared and still didn't run.' Even though that's the only achievement that counts."

"And where do we fit in?" asked Dougal.

"We'll stay where we are," said the sergeant. "In the middle. In the holes. In the hands of bards too lazy to write it all down."

A gust of wind swept through the camp, carrying the smell of the battlefield. Even here, among the fires, the stench of decay was palpable. Not as strong, but enough to make you know: Glory is not far from the grave.

The priest stood up, stretched his legs as if his bones were creaking. "I'm going for a few laps," he said. "Some people need someone to sit with them when they realize they've survived."

"And the others?" asked Fergus.

"They need schnapps," he said. "So they don't realize they've survived."

I remained seated, the fire on my face, the cold on my back. My hands played with a piece of wood that had once been part of a shield. My fingernails weren't quite clean yet. The day still clung to them, probably even more than that.

"Are you thinking about that thing?" Aidan asked quietly.

I knew immediately what he meant. Not the battlefield, not Wallace, not Eòin. The hole. The humming. The place where the ground no longer wanted to be ground.

"Yes," I said.

"Do you think it will come again?" he asked.

"I think it was never gone," I said. "It just chooses when it lets us watch."

Aidan nodded, slowly. "Sometimes," he said, "when I close my eyes, I imagine that hole opening up right in the middle of London. Right in front of their king. Just like that. No battle, no banners. Just open, closed, out, the end."

"That would be the first time I would voluntarily step into an English dream," said Tam.

Fergus gave a dry laugh. "Fame smells of decay," he said. "But the idea has room to breathe."

Eventually, I lay down with my back to the embers, my face to the cold rest of the world. The sounds mingled: laughter, sobs, coughs, a snatch of song, a curse, a fervent prayer. The smell of smoke settled over the scent of decaying glory like a thin blanket. Not enough to dispel it, but enough to make it bearable.

Her hand was back on the knife, as it had become accustomed to doing. It was quiet. Perhaps because it wasn't responsible for anything in the camp. Perhaps because it knew I'd seen enough for the day. Perhaps it was simply tired of our small human victories.

Just before I drifted off to sleep, I imagined some bard standing in a warm tavern in two, three, ten years, playing his instrument with a clean shirt and even cleaner fingers. He would sing of Stirling, of Wallace and the bridge, of Englishmen in the river, of heroes who knew no fear. Perhaps somewhere in the fourth verse, a "bastard with a knife" would appear. Perhaps not.

People will clap, laugh, drink, maybe even shed a tear, because it's nice to be sad when you're sitting in the warmth. None of them will know the smell that lingers in my nostrils today. None of them will know what it's like to pull a hand out of the dirt, a hand that's still holding your sleeve as you die.

Fame smells of decay, I thought. But later, when they serve it up, they sprinkle enough words over it so that no one notices what's rotting underneath.

Then I fell asleep. Not deeply, not well. But long enough to forget the battlefield for a few hours.

The next morning the songs were worse, but the stench had improved. Not really improved—more familiar. Like in a tavern where, after a few nights, you no longer notice the stale beer fumes, but only the single stale glass sitting right in front of you. The fame had settled over the rows like a cloth. Holey, stained, but large enough for everyone to stand under for a moment.

They began to officially "consecrate" the battlefield. A nice word for what it was: an attempt to persuade the country to forget everything we had shoveled into it yesterday. A troop of clergymen set off, led by a fat fellow with a ruff so white you knew he hadn't been near blood since he could walk. The priest from our row joined them, not out of duty, more out of curiosity. He said he wanted to see how others sold out God.

We stood a little apart and watched. The clergymen sprinkled holy water over places where we knew very well that there was more than just "memory" beneath. They muttered Latin, some old babble that supposedly opens doors to heaven, while flies danced over the open

seams of the earth. One of the fat men swung a censer, from which came white smoke that smelled unpleasantly sweet. The smoke settled over the stench of decay, fought briefly, and lost.

"Now it smells like dead fame mixed with herbs," said Tam.

"They're putting perfume on an open grave," Fergus muttered. "Maybe God will come down here thinking there are funeral snacks."

The priest eventually returned to us. His hands were trembling slightly, not from cold. "Well?" I asked. "Did heaven applaud?"

"The sky did nothing at all," he said. "Neither did the earth. Only the men's lips moved. And the smoke stank."

"Did you pray along?" Ruairi asked.

"I listened," he said. "That's enough. If God has an ear, he will know what is imagination and what is not."

Later that day, the scribes arrived. No battlefield is complete until the men with clean fingers appear. They had tablets, parchment, inkwells, quills. One even wore gloves—leather, smooth, as if his greatest fear was that a word would stick to him. They were accompanied by guards, as if they needed protection from us, not the other way around.

"We're collecting reports," one of them said. He spoke as if every word were a coin he didn't want to spend. "Processes, impressions, heroic deeds. For the record."

"For whose chronicle?" asked the sergeant.

"For the Lords and the Church," the writer said. "For posterity. The truth must be recorded."

"The truth," Fergus repeated, as if he had something bitter in his mouth.

They sat down in a tent that had been set up especially for them, so that no rain would dilute their ink. One by one, men were waved in. Officers first, then those with names that were known, then those whom someone claimed had "played a decisive role." We weren't called. Bastard with a knife was apparently too messy for a neat chronicle.

Tam still walked too close to the tent, just on principle. He heard an officer talking. "...and then, when the enemy began to waver, I gave the order to pursue," the officer said in an important voice. "The men looked at me, my order was clear, and we pushed them back. If even one of them had hesitated, the day would have been lost."

Tam came back, his eyes narrowed. "Strange," he said. "I didn't see anyone looking after him. I just saw everyone trying to stay on their feet."

"Perhaps in his version he's also standing on the bridge," Fergus suggested. "With a drawn sword, wind in his hair, sun on his face, and we're just a beautiful gray mass behind him."

"For the record," I said. "Fame smells better when you cover it in ink."

The scribes would later record that it was a great day. That Wallace and Murray had led the men like shepherds their flock. That the English had panicked, unable to withstand the courage of the Scottish ranks. That God himself had directed the river. Perhaps somewhere a sentence would appear like: "Much blood was shed." Not a word about how, for some, blood flowed from their bellies like old soup as they were turned. Not a word about how one had been swallowed by the gully, without a cry, without a trace. Not a word about the buzzing in the air. That doesn't belong in chronicles. Only what can be painted next to coats of arms fits in there.

In the afternoon, a body was brought in that they hadn't yet disposed of: Murray. It sent a ripple through the camp. No great, dramatic outcry, more a crack in the atmosphere. One of the men with the red face, who had been singing that morning, suddenly just stood there, his mouth open.

"They say," came the message, "that he is dying from his wounds."

"Which ones?" asked Tam. "Everyone here had wounds."

"Those from the battle," said the messenger. "Or from before. Some say he was already ill when he rode. Others say God didn't want him to suffer any longer. Still others say it's Stirling's price."

"Of course it's the price," Fergus growled. "God doesn't do things by halves. Give him a victory, and he'll take the man who made it possible."

We didn't see him directly. He was lying somewhere, in a tent guarded as if it contained the crown itself. But the news spread like laughter in a tavern, like curses after a bad throw. And suddenly, Wallace's victory took on a different flavor. The brief triumph of a dead man—only this time the man wasn't just some peasant's son, but one of the, as they said, masterminds behind the whole thing.

"That is glory," the priest said later. "You go first, you carry more than the others, you become the name. And then you lay everything you are on the field—and the field takes it. What remains is a word. Murray. With paint. Maybe a stone. Maybe a song. And a bunch of men who are now saying, 'He would have wanted us to carry on.'"

"Would he have?" I asked.

"He had no choice," the priest said. "No one who has gone that far forward has a choice anymore."

Ravens and crows gathered at the edge of the camp. They were having the time of their lives. For them, fame was simple: a pile of meat that no longer ran. They fought over eyes, pecked at open bellies, and tugged at fingers. Sometimes they would briefly take flight if a human came too close, then settle down a few steps away and carry on.

"The only ones who really get full from that sort of thing," said Fergus, "are those people."

"And the writers," Tam added. "They stuff their books full until no one can see what's underneath."

I thought about the future. Not mine—that was as blurry as a river shrouded in mist. The other one. The one where people would say, "Remember Stirling? What a great victory." Perhaps they'd be sitting around a table, eating bread, drinking reasonably clean beer, and someone would begin, "They say Wallace stood on the bridge..." Then images would emerge where everyone is cleaner than they've ever been. Where no one slips on corpses. Where the water is merely a dramatic backdrop, not a mass grave.

No one would say, "Glory smells of decay." That's not a sentence you tell children before they go to sleep. You tell them that heroes are strong, that God is on the right side, that the dead lie in better fields. You don't tell them that their fathers had to bury the remains of other fathers while cleaning up after them, the smoke from the incense burners scratching their noses.

That evening, they invited a select group of men into a larger tent. "For a ceremony," they said. Not us, of course. We stood outside, watching the shadows of those entering: officers, standard-bearers, bards, high-ranking priests, a few of the clan chiefs, pretending they had personally moved the river with their bare hands. Wallace would be there too, they said. He would speak words that would later be made into words again.

"Don't you want to try to get in?" Aidan asked.

I snorted. "What am I supposed to do there? Watch them tell each other they've saved the world?"

"You were there," he said.

"That's exactly why," I said. "I can't stand fame that smells of incense."

Instead, we went to the edge, to where the battlefield began and the camp ended. The wind was favorable—or unfavorable, depending on your perspective. The smell of the corpses came in waves. Interspersed were the smoke from the fires, a snatch of song from the large tent, and somewhere a persistent coughing fit.

"You'd think," said Tam, "that fame would at least take a break when someone dies."

"Fame doesn't take breaks," said the priest who had followed us. "It only changes owners."

I stepped onto a spot where the ground hadn't quite leveled. It was clear someone had lain there. I couldn't remember who. Only that someone had. The grass was gone, the mud darker. A fly circled. That was all that remained.

"How long do you think something like this will last?" I asked. "Until another battle is fought here? Or until some farmer plows his fields and wonders why the soil is so rich?"

"It depends on how thick the lies are that they cover it up," said Fergus. "The better the stories, the less people pay attention."

"Perhaps that's better," Ruairi murmured. "If you count every tear, you'll never escape the grief."

"Or from drinking," Tam added.

We stood there in silence, staring into the darkness. I felt again that faint, underlying humming, not coming from the camp: somewhere at the edge of perception, like a tooth about to be pulled. The hole was quiet, the depression still, but the land had remembered what had happened here. It was as if all the dead eyes were pointing downwards, and beneath them was something grinning.

"Fame is like a cloak thrown over a dead man," the priest said quietly. "It doesn't keep him warm, but those standing nearby feel better dressed."

I laughed briefly, without joy. "Maybe someone should sing honestly," I said. "Not about banners, not about victories. But about the smell. About the flies. About the fact that when we pee, we hit the same ground where our friends lie."

"Nobody pays for a song like that," said Fergus.

"Perhaps someday," said the priest. "When enough time has passed. When no one is left alive who can smell the truth in the air. Then they can even sell that."

We went back to the fire because at some point the body needs something warmer than thoughts. The night was cold, and even fame fears the cold. The voices from the large tent grew louder, a brief cheer, then a muffled murmur again. They had probably just found a particularly beautiful way to say "God was on our side."

I eventually lay down, pulled the blanket up to my chin, placed the shield against my back, and the knife at my side. The gap in my teeth throbbed, as did my muscles. The smell of smoke in the blanket was stronger than the smell of decay in my memory. That was the kind of comfort you got here: not clean, but sufficient.

Just before drifting off to sleep, I thought that maybe someday they would grant us a sliver of glory. A name on a list, a few words in a song, a line in a chronicle. "Men who fought bravely." Nothing more. No details. No scent.

And yet, as much as I hated it: Part of me wanted at least one person to remember that I was there. The other part just wanted no one to put my name in the same sentence as "fame." Because now I knew what that really smelled like.

I fell asleep with my hand on the knife, in a camp that puffed on its own stories like a drunk on a pipe. The fame stayed outside the ceiling. The stench, too. Only the images came in. But at least those were still mine.

Traitors have clean hands

The day I understood what betrayal truly looked like wasn't one with fanfares or daggers in dark alleys. No clandestine meeting in the rain, no hood, no dramatic "Shh, come alone." Betrayal wore a clean shirt, clean hands, and clean words. And it didn't smell of blood, but of wax, paper, and wine drunk not from a wooden cup, but from one that gleamed.

It began with a simple order: "Third wedge, right wing – to the main tent." That alone was suspicious. We were rarely called to where the canvas was thicker and the voices quieter. We usually belonged where the mud sloshed the loudest.

The sergeant looked at the messenger who brought us the news – a thin man with finger-thin legs and a face that hadn't seen much sun. "All of us?" he asked.

"Not all the men," the messenger said. "Only the leader of your unit. And..." He let his gaze wander over us, probing, weighing, "...a few of the, as they say, seasoned fighters. Those who were at the front of the bridge."

Experienced fighters. I tasted the word like an overly sweet morsel stuck between my teeth.

"So, those who still have legs," Tam murmured. "Dear selection."

In the end, the sergeant, Broc, Fergus, Aidan, and I were sent. Maybe because we had survived. Maybe because we had no good reason to say no. Maybe because someone with clean hands, somewhere, had scribbled our names on a list without ever having seen us.

The path to the main tent led along the cleared edge of the battlefield. The earth was still unsteady, as if it had digestive problems. The smell had lessened, but it still lingered, like an old argument that no one speaks of anymore, but which still governs everything.

The tent itself was a monstrous thing made of fabric. More house than tent. High arch, reinforced poles, guards in front who looked as if they hadn't sprung from the same mud as us. Their armor was polished, their faces clean-shaven, their gazes using you like inventory.

We had to hand over our weapons before we were allowed in. Spears, swords, axes – all into a box, as if we were attending a festival at a harbor tavern where you first have to prove that you won't immediately slaughter each other.

As I laid down my sword and spear, the guard already reached for the knife at my side.

"That too," he said.

I tightened my fingers around the handle. Moira's blade vibrated almost imperceptibly, as if she understood that someone was trying to touch her who didn't have the right to. "That stays," I said.

"Order," said the guard. "No blades in the tent."

"Then you start with yourselves," I said, staring at the sword at his side.

The sergeant took a step forward. "Let him have the knife," he said quietly, but with that layer of steel in his tone that only comes from surviving long enough. "If it calms him down, he won't stab so quickly."

The guard was about to protest when the tent door swung open and a man with a different kind of authority stepped out. Not a warrior. A scribe or advisor, thin, with pale fingers that had seen more ink than blood. He was finely dressed, without being ostentatious. The kind of person who commands respect not through sheer muscle, but through sheer presence.

His gaze swept over us, lingering briefly on me, on the knife, on my posture, on my eyes, which still hadn't decided to duck. "Let him," he said. "If he wants to kill someone in here, we won't be able to count them in time anyway."

A soft murmur, a few of the onlookers grinned. I tucked Moira's blade back onto my belt. The knife calmed down, as if it had won. Or as if it had remembered who it might like later.

It was warmer in the tent. That alone puzzled me. While outside men outside gasped for air, their scarves wrapped in shawls, in here the air was soft. It smelled of wax, leather, and dried herbs. And of that delicate aroma of wine, not from a cracked jug, but from one that probably had its own name.

The ground was covered with carpets. Carpets. In a field that lay directly next to a mass grave. My boots left muddy tracks. I saw the writer's mouth twitch briefly, almost imperceptibly. Not indignation, more like, "Not again."

In the center of the tent stood a wide table, covered with cards. Not one, but twenty. Weighted down with stones, marked with lines, crosses, arrows, and small figures meant to represent men and banners. Around the edges of the table stood lords, clan leaders, a few clergymen, one or two men who looked more suited to calculating than fighting. And Wallace.

He wasn't at the head of the table, but close. His armor still bore the marks of battle, but it had been cleaned. His face was tired, but not sorrowful. He looked as if he had slept less than any of us since the victory. His hands rested on the edge of the table, and unlike the others, they weren't clean. There was still some mud under his fingernails.

You could tell who among them had truly been in the field. By their hands. By their nails. By the way they stood. Some of these men had the bearing of an arrow: straight, smooth, proud. Wallace had the bearing of an axe: used, sharp, notched.

The writer stood beside the table. The entire tent gazed upon us. Not hostile, but scrutinizing. Five men from the gutter, who today were to represent something that could later be dissected into words.

"So these are them," said one of the lords, a man with a grey beard and overly smooth hands. "Those who held the line at the bridge."

He said it as if he were talking about tools. "These are the hammers that hit the nail." Not: "These are men who almost died."

"There are some," Wallace said, and there was something raspy in his voice that wasn't from wine. "Not all of them. Some who should be here today are... busy elsewhere."

“By God,” a clergyman interjected.

“In holes,” Fergus corrected quietly, but I was sure that at least Wallace heard it. The corner of his mouth twitched briefly.

The clerk gestured for us to come closer to the table. “We want your report,” he said. “Not the officers’ report. The report of your hands, your eyes. We want to know how the enemy reacted, how the men were positioned, where the pressure was. For further planning. And...” He hesitated for a moment, as if the word were too soft for him, “...for the records.”

I looked at the maps. Lines across the land, arrows indicating where the men should go. One showed the bridge, the river, Stirling, the surrounding hills. Small wooden stones with symbols scratched into them. One of them stood exactly where I’d almost lost my tooth yesterday. A stone. No blood.

“What can I say?” I asked. “We set off, we pushed, we didn’t pray, we cursed. We saw men fall and didn’t fall with them. The country remembered where we stood, with more honesty than any map.”

A murmur. The writer looked slightly annoyed. “Perhaps a little more... precise,” he said. “Spacing. Formations. Reactions of the English. How you perceived the moment they began to waver.”

The sergeant spoke first. He was better at it. He explained how we had been positioned in wedges, how the arrows fell, how the pressure increased, what shouts the English had made, which gaps we exploited. Technically, matter-of-factly, as if he were reading from one of his battle diaries in his head. The men at the table nodded. One pointed to a line on the map, moved a small wooden figure, as if he could rearrange the past with it.

Then it was my turn. Not officially, no one pointed at me and said, “Your turn.” But Wallace looked at me, directly, and his gaze meant: Say what you have to say.

So I did. I spoke of the bridge as a throat too narrow, through which too many wanted to scream. Of faces that weren’t heroic, only frightened or angry. Of hands that trembled but held shields. Of the moment you forget your own name and only know: I stand or I fall. Of the river that doesn’t discriminate against what it takes.

I didn’t mention the holes. Not the dip. Not the buzzing. Not the knife. There was no room for that in this tent. In here, only things that could be scribbled with a quill pen on the edge of a map were taken seriously.

“The English,” I concluded, “believed we would retreat because they always made us believe that. But we didn’t leave. And at some point, they realized themselves that you can’t stop and flee on a bridge at the same time. The rest was just pushing. And falling.”

Some nodded. A lord with a narrow face and eyes that were too calm raised an eyebrow. “A man of words,” he murmured. “For one who fights with his fists.”

“I fight with what is there,” I said. “Sometimes it’s a sword. Sometimes a curse. Sometimes a sentence that one never forgets.”

Clean hands rested around the table on cards, chalices, and prayer beads. No calluses on the knuckles, no new cracks in the skin. And yet, it was they who would now decide the fate of what we had done. I felt a cold rage strike me—not like the sharp rage on the bridge, but like something that slowly creeps into the bones.

Wallace noticed this. He briefly placed his hand on the table, not far from my view. His fingernails were also torn and dirty. A single patch of mud on the carpet, at that end.

“These men,” he said suddenly, loudly enough that even the man with the white ruff flinched, “didn’t just do what they were told. They stayed when every reason to stay had disappeared. When you talk about Stirling, mention their names. Not just mine.”

A few of the lords seemed irritated. The clerk raised his quill pen. “We will... try to record as much as possible,” he said. The sentence reeked of an excuse.

“Try,” Fergus repeated later, when we were outside. “They’ll try not to forget us completely. How merciful.”

Before we left, something happened that seemed like a mere aside in the day, but stuck with us like a splinter: an English messenger had arrived. Under a white flag, of course. Clean, even now. He waited outside the tent, closely guarded, but not tortured. His hands were bound, but his nails were clean, his fingers thin, not deformed by sword hilts. He wore no armor. Just a good, sturdy doublet, undamaged.

As we left the tent, our paths briefly crossed. He didn’t look at us, but past the tent, at the castle. At the flags. At the future.

"What does he want?" asked Tam.

“Talking,” said the sergeant. “What else? After every battle, someone with clean hands comes along and pretends he had nothing to do with the blood. They call it negotiations.”

"And what are they negotiating?" asked Ruairi.

“Us,” I said. “They are negotiating with us.”

We were already a few steps away when I saw one of the Scottish lords—grey beard, smooth fingers—emerge from the tent and approach the Englishman. They exchanged words, too quietly to be heard, too familiar to be accidental. The way they stood wasn’t that of enemies. Rather, it was that of men discussing a deal.

"Do you see that?" I murmured.

The priest nodded. "Traitors have clean hands," he said quietly. "You can recognize them by the fact that they always have them, no matter how close they are to the battlefield."

I looked at my own hands. Cracks, scabs, dirt in the creases. Hands that had touched more dead people than bread today. No chance of getting them clean, even if I wanted to. And suddenly I wasn't sure if that wasn't the most honest thing about me.

We walked back through the mud, to the fire, to the men who still thought fame was something you could wear around your neck. Behind us, in the tent, quill pens scratched across parchment. Clean hands moved figures across maps, shifted lines, negotiated words.

I felt the knife vibrate at my side. Very slightly. Not like a hole in the ground, more like a dog picking up the scent of something no one wants to see. Perhaps Moira's blade disliked betrayal as much as I did. Perhaps it already sensed where those clean hands would eventually reach.

And as I trudged through the dirt, it dawned on me: the next enemy wouldn't just be an Englishman on a horse. The next enemy would be one who signs a treaty with weak fingers while we believe he's writing us free.

The days following the visit to the tent were like a hangover that you don't drink away, but negotiate. Outwardly, everything was normal, as normal as one can be in the shadow of a battlefield. Guards were assigned, patrols made their rounds, weapons were sharpened, as if all this were just a lull between two familiar bloodbaths. But beneath the surface of the camp, new lines were being drawn, thin as cracks in ice. You could hear it in the murmurs at night, in the pauses between curses and snores: "Did you hear, so-and-so was in the big tent...", "They're already talking about tributes...", "Some say a few of the bigwigs want to speak with the English king."

The word "speak" acquired a negative connotation, as if it had been steeped in stale wine. It used to mean: someone speaks before striking, so that God would know who started it. Now it means: someone speaks so that others will strike, and then he can claim he was only using words.

We sat around the fire, trying to thicken the meager food with stories. Tam was telling, for the third time, how he'd supposedly hit an Englishman so hard with his shield that the Englishman's helmet was now serving as a cooking pot in the camp of a clan we both knew talked more than fought. I was only half listening. My gaze kept drifting towards the center, to the main tent, to the other, smaller tents around it, which had suddenly become important.

"You're not listening at all," said Tam, throwing a bone at my feet.

"I've already heard the story," I said. "And if it gets any better, my head will explode."

Fergus laughed. "Leave him alone," he said. "Our bastard has new worries. He's seen clean hands and can't get them out of his head."

"I can't get the dirty ones out of my head," I said. "Ours. And theirs. And how they act like they're two different kinds that have nothing to do with each other."

The priest arrived and sat down, as if he'd been traveling longer than his legs had allowed. His hands were dirty too: traces of blood, dirt, ink. He took the first thing offered to him, a cup, sniffed it, drank, and briefly grimaced, but not as if refusing. "They negotiated again today," he said, without anyone having asked.

"With whom?" asked Ruairi.

“With the Englishman with the thin fingers,” said the priest. “And with others who looked as if they would have preferred to be sitting in a hall, far away from mud.”

"And about what?" asked Tam. "Did they like our holes?"

“Tribute,” said the priest. “Borders. Prisoners. Rights. Who with whom, when, and why not. Words. Many words.”

"Words instead of blades," Aidan murmured. "Sounds good, doesn't it?"

"It depends," I said. "A blade shows you immediately whether it intends to hit you. Words sometimes only make you realize years later where they've gone."

Fergus grinned crookedly. "There speaks someone who's received more sentences than cuts," he said.

“I learned on the streets,” I said. “In pubs, in dark corners, in beds where there weren’t enough blankets. Betrayal rarely comes with a scream. It comes with a nod and a ‘We’ll manage, trust me.’”

The mood in the camp was strangely divided. Some of the men clung to every rumor as if we were on the verge of reshaping the world: "Our own laws," "Our own king," "No more English tax collectors." Others heard the word "contract" and got that hard look you see on men who've already experienced a piece of paper taking more from them than a sword.

“I don’t trust these conversations,” Broc said later, as we took turns keeping watch. The sky had cleared, as if the wind had decided to at least blow away the smoke, since it was going to leave us with the rest. “Too much quiet in the tent, too much noise outside.”

"What do you think they're doing?" I asked.

He spat in the dirt, as if he didn't want to utter the word at all. "They're counting," he said. "People, land, coins. What they've gained, what they can hold onto, what they have to sell to keep the rest. And at some point, they realize that the cheapest part of the equation is us."

“We?” asked Ruairi, who was standing next to us.

“Those who fight,” said Broc. “Those who are sent into battle and left out of the stories when you negotiate with people who also have clean hands. You don’t seriously believe that those people in there are talking about how to make us rich and happy.”

I thought of the Englishman with the thin fingers. Of the Scottish lord with the same thin fingers, only a different heraldic ring. Between them, the table, the cards, the wine. Our names had probably already turned to blocks of wood. A third of this wedge, half of that clan, so many "able men." Words like "alliance," "loyalty," "common cause" hovered above the table, while below in the earth lay men to whom no one offered anything.

“Betrayal,” the priest once said, when we were alone and I asked him what he thought about it, “isn’t just when someone sells you out. Betrayal is also when someone deals in things that don’t belong to them. And nothing belongs to a man less than the blood that others have shed for him.”

"Well said," I muttered. "But it won't help us if they decide tomorrow that it's better to shake hands with an English king as long as their own chair remains stable."

"That's what hands are so practical for," he said. "You can hold them anywhere that gets uncomfortable."

Over the next few days, I noticed how some of our own "greats" suddenly became more polished. Men who had stood in the mud outside Stirling, helmets open and fists dirty, now wore cleaner clothes, clean sashes, and spoke clear voices. They spoke a different Scotsman—one more suited to the ears of courts than to those of men around the fire.

A clan leader, whom I knew as a rather boisterous bully, suddenly started talking about "diplomacy" and "long-term thinking." He patted men on the shoulders who were still wearing bandages and said things like, "You've given us a good negotiating position." I felt like shoving his head into the mud and asking him if his base felt as good there.

"Watch out," said Fergus when we saw that. "That's the moment they start valuing their own fur and ours only as an extra."

"Will they tell us?" asked Cailean, who still looked so young that I didn't know how he could stand the smell here.

"Not yet," I said. "This is just the prelude. Before the betrayal, there's always a little honey. A few kind words. An extra barrel or two for the men, a little attention for the wounded, as if to say: Look, we care. And then when you say 'thank you,' you think you're on the same side."

"And then?" he asked.

"Then you'll realize," I said, "that pages have nothing to do with mud, but with ink."

One evening, messengers were sent out. Not just to our people, but also to the north, the west, somewhere where the Highlands began to chew the world. They spoke of "summonses," "assemblies," "grand councils." The men around the fire heard these words and imagined round tables where they would decide together how to proceed. I imagined long tables where those who had never stood on the bridge would sit.

We weren't asked what we wanted. Why would we be? No chronicle begins with, "We inquired of the men in the third wedge, right wing, how they envisioned their future."

"Do you know how things used to be in our village?" Tam said one evening, as the two of us went away from the camp for a bit. "If the landowner wanted to change something, he always said first, 'This is better for all of you.' And then he moved the fences."

"And?" I asked.

"So?" He spat. "The cows had less space. He had more land. End of story."

"And what did people do?"

“Nodded,” he said. “What were they supposed to do? If someone who could pay more swords than you moved the fence, you had to say ‘thank you’ loudly if you didn’t want someone to show you just how tight the stable could get.”

I looked at his hands. Dirty. Cracked. Honest. Then I thought of the hands inside the tent. Clean. Smooth. Dangerous.

The knife at my side remained strangely quiet these past few days. No buzzing like at the holes, no twitching like at the dip. Perhaps it preferred open warfare. Perhaps it didn't understand the kind of danger that came with neat handwriting. Perhaps it knew it was powerless against ink. Steel only helps you as long as someone is stupid enough to stand right in front of you.

Once, in the middle of the night, I woke up because the air sounded different. No scream, no horn. Just that muffled rustling sound many people make when they're trying to be quiet. I sat up, automatically reaching for my knife, feeling its familiar weight, then heard footsteps. The sergeant pushed his way through the sleeping crowd, lightly nudging my boot.

"Stand up," he said quietly. "They've decided that a few of us have the honor of securing an important hill."

"A hill?" I grumbled. "In the middle of the night?"

"They want him on the cards tomorrow," he said. "So they need some dirty feet up there today."

We set off. A handful of men, tired, half-awake, with weapons and the inevitable feeling that something was being withheld from us. The hill wasn't far, just a short distance beyond a line of bushes and low stones. Nothing special. No sacred site. Just a rise from which the English campfires were more visible.

“Why us?” Aidan asked as we positioned ourselves up there.

“Because we’ve already been where things got dirty,” Fergus said. “If someone later says, ‘This hill is important,’ they can say, ‘The same men who stood at the bridge were standing there.’ Sounds nice in speeches.”

We stood there, gazing into the night. The English fires flickered calmly. Our own were like a second starry sky beneath one that simply refused to be clear. The wind was biting, the ground hard. No hole, no humming, no invisible beast baring its teeth today. Only the silence between two wars.

“Why do they call that treason?” Cailean asked suddenly. “If they down there talk to the English and maybe find a way so that fewer of us die – isn’t that... good?”

I thought about it. It wasn't a stupid question. It was the kind of question you only ask when you haven't become completely jaded.

“Treason isn’t trying to reduce the number of deaths,” I said. “Treason is deciding whose life is worth less. When he says, ‘We’ll give them a little bit so we can keep more back there.’ And ‘they’ are never the ones who sign the contracts. They’re men like us.”

"And how do you know that someone is doing exactly that?" he asked.

"By his hands," I said. "When someone has no cracks after the battle and yet acts as if he risked everything. When someone with a clean shirt talks more about blood than those who were in it. When someone speaks of 'our sacrifice' and you don't know exactly when he claims to have made his."

Fergus nodded slowly. "Traitors are like bards," he said. "Only without an instrument. They play with your deeds. Only instead of singing, they sign their names."

Down in the camp, we saw the shadows of the large tents. Somewhere there, lights flickered until well past midnight. Clean hands worked. Clean minds thought. Dirty feet stood on mounds, holding their positions so that their names could later appear as a "strong presence" in some sentence.

I placed my hand on the knife. It didn't vibrate. But my fingers twitched. Perhaps, I thought, it wouldn't be the first thing to buzz if the betrayal came. Perhaps I would feel it in the old-fashioned way, in the pit of my stomach, long before anyone had the courage to openly tell us what they had sold out.

"If they betray us," I said quietly, more to myself than to the others, "they will call it freedom. And they will say we wanted it that way."

The wind didn't answer. It just passed over the hill, over our backs, over our dirty hands. Down in the valley, behind the tent walls, others polished their fingers on goblets and quills. Clean. Calm. Ready.

And I knew: The knife at my side wouldn't help me when the blow came. It could only slash through what was revealed. Betrayal rarely revealed itself. Betrayal signs its name.

The hill eventually became nothing more than a dark stain beneath our boots, and the night descended so slowly that I felt it was lingering out of laziness. We stood in circles, switching roles, shivering, cursing, and pretending that none of it made any difference. Fires burned below, and so did the enemy's fires over there, and in between lay a stretch of land upon which more lies than rain would soon fall.

When we were relieved early in the morning and stumbled back to camp, the sky was so pale it looked as if it had lain awake all night. I just wanted to collapse into something soft that wasn't mud. Instead, we walked past the large tents, and I saw that a light was still burning in one of them—small, but persistent. Not a campfire, not a forge fire. Candlelight.

"They're still not asleep," Aidan murmured.

"Clean hands get especially tired from thinking," said Fergus. "They take longer to put the cup down."

I don't know why I stopped. Perhaps it was just tiredness, perhaps curiosity, perhaps that faint tug at my spine that I'd come to recognize as a sign that something was wrong. I stood still, a little apart, while the others continued on, towards the fire, towards the blankets, towards the thin stew.

“Are you coming?” asked Tam, who had noticed that I wasn’t coming with him.

"In a minute," I said. "I just want to quickly... check if the tent is breathing yet."

He looked at me, about to make a comment, then refrained. "Don't fall asleep around here," was all he said. "Otherwise we'll wake up and they'll have turned you into a footnote."

I grinned wearily, waved him away, and leaned back in the shade of a wagon wheel. From here I could see the entrance to the tent. Two guards with spears, again the polished kind who'd spent more time in the mirror than in the mud. The candle burned inside, casting flat shadows on the fabric. Voices drifted out. Muffled. But not entirely.

I never had good hearing, but I was good at filtering out the wrong stuff. Loud chatter is just a cover for quiet words. And that's what I heard now.

“...this can’t go on forever,” said a voice I recognized by now. Dry, irritated, with that tone that betrays she never has to shout to be heard. A lord who had been standing in the card game, gray beard, fingers too smooth.

“No one is asking for forever,” another voice replied. In English. Softer, but not weak. “We are only asking for... reason. Order. An end to this wild rebellion. You wouldn’t want your country burned down just because one man decided to be a symbol, would you?”

I knew immediately who he meant. They never meant a farmer when they said "a man." They meant the one whose name was already on their tongues. Wallace.

“You call it rebellion,” said the Scotsman. “Our people call it freedom.”

“Words,” said the Englishman. “Freedom from what? From us? From your own king? From your laws? Freedom is a fine song, but you can’t pay mercenaries, winter stores, or bridges with it. We offer peace. Protection. Trade. You offer... songs.”

Afterwards, there was silence. I saw the shadow of a man move slightly inside the tent. The Scotsman, presumably, rubbing his forehead as if the words themselves suddenly hurt him.

“We held Stirling,” he finally said. “That wasn’t a song.”

“No,” said the Englishman. “That was a mistake on our part. One we won’t repeat. You have proven that you can fight. Good. That makes you dangerous enemies – or useful friends. The question is, how long can you afford to remain enemies?”

I felt that very specific kind of anger rising within me. Not the burning, bright kind that had shot through my arm and into the blade on the bridge. This was the cold, slippery kind. The kind that sinks down and stays there.

“Our men are dying for this fight,” said the Scotsman. “I can’t just...”

“Your men always die,” the Englishman interrupted. “Whether for us, for you, for a name on a banner, or for a fight over cows. That’s their job. Ours is to make sure it’s worth it. For us.”

That "us" was the most honest thing he had ever said. I leaned my head against the wheel and let the knife spin in its sheath at my side. It vibrated slightly, as if it were listening.

"We are not talking about surrender," the Scotsman said after a while. "Only about conditions."

There it was. The word I didn't want to hear, yet had expected. Conditions. Not for the enemy. For us.

"Of course not," the Englishman said immediately. "No one is demanding your unconditional submission. We are not barbarians. You will keep your titles, your lands. You will only pledge allegiance to our king. You will pay tribute—not too much, a token of goodwill. And you will ensure that... certain troublemakers... are no longer able to muster men."

The candle in the tent flickered as if nervous. I thought of the hill, the bridge, the holes. And then I thought of Wallace. Of his face on the dais, of the way he had spoken, not like a man who liked to talk, but like one who knew that talking is sometimes all that stands between men and nothingness.

"You want his head," the Scotsman said quietly. No question. A statement.

"We want peace and quiet," said the Englishman. "How you resolve this is up to you. It would be... regrettable if a man of his abilities were to have such a short life. But men like him force the world to make decisions. And the world rarely has time for its idealism."

I could have vomited. Not because I was surprised by what he said. But because I knew perfectly well that somewhere in that tent, someone with very clean hands was now thinking about how to translate this offer into words for us.

The Scotsman remained silent for a long time. You could hear the silence if you knew how. It was the kind of silence you have when someone stands before a large barrel, wondering whether to open it, knowing that the smell will never leave them.

"You are asking too much," he finally said. "You are asking us to stab our own men in the back."

"We demand," said the Englishman, "that you do not sacrifice your country to a man who is already half dead without knowing it. Do you seriously want to still be living in tents in ten years, with weapons that no one can afford, because you have become fixated on a war that will never materialize? Or do you want castles, markets, security? Your grandchildren will thank you. They will read books, not shovel battlefields."

Books, I thought. Chronicles. Clean hands writing that men like Wallace were "dangerous elements." That they had to be gotten rid of "for the greater good." That the "reasonable" had prevailed.

I caught snatches of words. Words like "advice," "hostages," "guarantee." Nothing that hadn't already been said somewhere else in this broken world. Then someone approached the tent entrance, and I knew I should get out of there before someone saw me who doesn't ask the right questions, but only knows the right punishments.

I went back to the fire, not running, but faster than necessary. My legs felt like they'd been filled with lead. The others sat there, half awake, half dead, holding bowls that they hadn't dropped out of sheer habit.

"You look like you've seen a ghost," said Tam.

"I did," I said. "But he was wearing shoes without mud."

The priest looked up. In his eyes was that faint look of attentiveness I had come to recognize when he sensed I was about to say something he couldn't include in his prayers. "Were you listening?" he asked.

"I heard what anyone could hear if they were looking," I said. "They're talking about our worth. And about how you can turn a man we cheered for yesterday into a problem that needs solving tomorrow."

"Wallace?" Aidan asked.

I nodded. "For them, he's a pebble in their shoe. They're looking for a polite way to get rid of him without getting their feet dirty."

Fergus exhaled as if someone had landed on his stomach. "Of course," he said. "It was only a matter of time. Men like him are fine as long as you can throw them forward. But when they start having their own ideas, they become inconvenient. And inconvenient things get sold. To the highest bidder."

"They will say he is too radical," the priest murmured. "Too dangerous. Too unpredictable. That he is leading the country to ruin. And that they, the reasonable ones, had to stop him with heavy hearts."

"With a heavy heart," Tam mocked. "While they count with their other hand how many crowns they'll get for it."

I looked at my hands. Dirty. Chapped. A blister on one finger had burst, the skin torn. The hands of a man who, in the last few weeks, had touched more corpses than bread. I imagined those same hands perhaps one day pulling on a rope. Or a lever. Or on a man they called a "traitor" because he stood against the clean hands, not with them.

"What do we do?" Cailean asked quietly. He sounded like a boy who was realizing for the first time that stories don't end with the hero getting the girl, but with someone deciding he's in the way.

I shrugged. "We're the foot soldiers," I said. "We do what we always do. We stand where it hurts and hope they don't sell us out the moment we take a deep breath."

"And Wallace?", Aidan asked.

"Wallace will continue," the priest said. "Because he can't do otherwise. Men like him don't stop because a few councilmen whisper. They stop when someone pulls the rug out from under them. Or their neck."

The knife at my side vibrated briefly as the priest spoke. Just a twitch, but I felt it all the way down to my wrist. As if the blade had heard which way the future was tilting.

“Perhaps we should warn him,” Ruairi said. “Tell him what you heard.”

I thought of his face when he stood on the platform. The way he had looked down at the men—not from above, but from within. Someone like him knew that nothing was free. He probably already knew that somewhere, someone was willing to trade their future for a quieter night in a castle.

“I don’t know,” I said. “What am I supposed to tell him? ‘William, they’re planning to make you a problem so their chairs feel more stable?’ Do you think he doesn’t know that? Do you think he’ll sleep better if I explain to him the words they’ll use to sell us on later?”

“If I knew that someone was negotiating my head,” said Tam, “I would still want to hear it.”

The priest looked into the fire. “Sometimes knowledge is a curse,” he said. “But ignorance is the greater curse. Most are betrayed while they still believe their honor is at stake. Few get the chance to sense it beforehand.”

“Smell?” I asked.

“Yes,” he said. “Betrayal has no smell like decay. But it has a temperature. You eventually feel that it’s getting colder, even though the fire remains the same.”

I pulled the blanket closer around my shoulders, even though the embers were warm. Something had gathered in my stomach that had nothing to do with hunger. More like that knowing that settles like a stone and says: I’m staying.

I slept badly that night. Every time I closed my eyes, I saw hands—clean, silent, gliding over cards, over parchment, over goblets. Interspersed among them were dirty hands, ours, holding swords, shields, dead men. And somewhere in this mix stood Wallace, perhaps at a table, perhaps in a field, perhaps on a rope that no one had yet grasped, but that some already had in mind.

The knife only truly vibrated once. Just before dawn, just before sleep pulled me over the edge for a few minutes. It wasn’t a buzzing like with the holes, not a pulling sensation like with the thing in the hollow. It was more of a sharp, brief “watch out.” As if the blade were saying: Something’s coming. Not a beast, not a hole. Something that will devour even more.

Traitors carry clean hands, the priest had said. I believed him. But that night I understood something else: they also carry clean words. And when they’re finished, your name might still be there—but it will belong to them.

I woke up sometime later with the taste of ink in my mouth, even though I hadn’t drunk anything. Outside, a rooster crowed in a coop that smelled of too many men. The camp stirred. The war was still there. So were the English. And that thing in the shadows, of course. But now I knew: a new enemy had joined the fray. One that looked like calm. One that smiled when it said “unity.”

And I, William, a bastard in the dirt, one tooth missing, a dead woman's knife at my side, knew: sooner or later they would try to sell us this newfound peace as a victory. And I wasn't sure if I didn't prefer the old, honest terror.

Money, crowns, and bought souls

Money has no smell, the rich say. They say this while sitting in houses that smell of warm meat, wax, and wood that doesn't rot. To me, money always smelled of everything you had to do to get it: cold nights outside tavern doors, fists in alleyways, vomit behind sheds, and blood in backyards. In Stirling, money eventually began to smell of something new: treason that washed its hands before being counted.

It started with a table. So much starts with a table when men think they're important. Shortly after our nights on the hill and the whispering in the tent, they built a kind of makeshift hall near the main camp out of tarpaulins and wooden frames. Not a proper building, but with enough effort to make it clear: this wasn't about soup. In the middle, a long table, not as big as the card altar, but big enough for several men to stretch their elbows out on and pretend they owned pieces of the sky.

The table was covered with pouches. Leather, thick and soft, some embroidered with coats of arms, others crudely stitched, the way you make them when the only concern is keeping everything contained. Scattered beside them were individual coins. Not many, but enough to make them wink, disgustingly, in the dim afternoon sun. Scottish coins, English crowns, something in between. Money that had traveled far to do here what it was created for: to decide a man's worth without asking him.

We weren't summoned there directly, but you'd have to be blind not to see that this table had suddenly become the new sun around which everything revolved. Clan chiefs went there, standard-bearers, a few of the higher-ranking warriors who had stayed so close to the banners in battle that no one could accuse them of cowardice. They went in with straight backs and came out with faces that had shifted—as if someone had thrown a stone into a scale that had previously consisted only of pride.

“What are they doing?” asked Cailean, as we passed by one of the days and again saw that line of clean-faced guards standing in front of the tarpaulin hall, as if they were guarding a treasure that didn't stink.

“They're counting crowns,” said Fergus. “They're counting our bones in crowns.”

“They don't call it that,” murmured the priest who was walking with us. “They call it pay, compensation, support, securing supplies, preparation for the next campaigns. Words have many pockets into which one can put coins.”

Once I saw one of our clan chiefs come out—a man I'd always respected for being as willing to fight in the dirt as we did. His face was paler than usual, but not from fear. More like from calculating. His hands fiddled with a pouch on his belt, as if he'd suddenly realized there was something hanging there that weighed more than the rest of him. He glanced at us briefly, his men, his “sons,” as he always called us when he sent us into battle. His gaze swept over our

torn sleeves, our open abrasions, our toothless mouths. Then he looked away. Not out of shame. Out of habit.

"Did you see that?" Tam asked.

"I noticed his belt had gotten thicker," I said. "And his gaze thinner."

"He's entitled to a share," Ruairi interjected. "He led us, he took responsibility, he..."

"...led us into holes," Fergus interrupted, not angrily, just matter-of-factly. "And yes, that's his job. But now he sees the hole in his wallet and not the one in the field."

That evening, the first figures were uttered. Not from above, who rarely speak in clear sums. From below. Men can't help but measure everything in terms of something tangible. "That clan over there is getting so many pounds in support," "that one there negotiated a promise of a new piece of land," "that one is furious because he got less than his neighbor."

"Less for what?" Aidan asked.

"For us," Broc said. "For what we have done and what we still have to do. For our blood, for our time, for our bones."

"And what about us?" asked Cailean. "What do we get?"

"Bread, if things go well," I said. "Beatings, if we ask too many questions. And maybe someday a pit where our name is forgotten before the rain fills it."

The next day a messenger came to our fire. Not a scribe, not a lord. One of the middlemen. The worst kind: too important to be ignored, too unimportant to be truly honest. He carried a bag, neither large nor small. He threw it into the center of our circle, as if tossing a bone to dogs.

"For you," he said. "Pay and recognition of the services of the third wedge, right wing."

The pouch made a dull thud as it fell to the ground. The clinking of coins, the fine rustle of leather that is used but not worn out.

Nobody moved at first. Then Tam picked it up, not greedily, more skeptically. He untied the string and tipped the contents into his palm. A handful of coins, some new, some worn, some with a profile that looked so arrogant I felt like spitting.

"Is this for all of us?" he asked.

The messenger shrugged. "That's how it was decided," he said. "There's nothing more we can do at the moment. The coffers are strained, the war is costing us money, the supplies..."

"The supplies are still in the stomachs of those over there," Fergus cut him off, pointing towards the fields of corpses. "The river has fed well."

The messenger jutted out his lower lip, as if he possessed enough courtesy not to contradict aloud. "You can be satisfied," he said. "Other units are getting less. And besides..." He

glanced around briefly, lowered his voice, "...not everything has been distributed yet. Those who prove themselves will be considered."

"Those who prove themselves," I repeated. "We stood at the bridge. We stood at the dip. We stood on that damned hill. How much more proof do you need to stamp us as genuine?"

He looked at me, scrutinized me as if I were some kind of animal he hadn't yet categorized. "That's not for me to decide," he said. "I'm just here to carry out what's been decided."

"By whom?" I asked.

"From the council," he said.

"From clean hands," murmured the priest.

The messenger pretended not to hear, which was the wisest decision of his day. He turned and left. Back to tents, tables, bags. Back to where money had no weight, except on parchment.

We sat there and looked at the coins in Tam's hand as if they held something sacred. Not because of their value. Because of what they meant: We had been judged. Our bleeding had been assigned a number.

"How do we divide it?" asked Ruairi.

"Right away," the sergeant said immediately. "No one gets more, no one gets less. Whoever stood here gets a share. Whoever fell and has a family, we'll set aside their share if we ever find them again."

"Soon," I repeated. "Soon is nice. It's just a shame that soon only starts here. Up there, it never starts soon."

We counted. It wasn't much. Divided by the number of people, it was enough for a good buzz or a few weeks' worth of bread, depending on how confident you were in your life expectancy. It was too little to fill you up, too much to pretend it wasn't anything. Exactly the kind of amount you need to keep people quiet.

Later, when the coins had been distributed and everyone had held the cold metal once before putting it in some pocket, a shoe, a bandage, one remained. A single one. Old, worn, its face so scraped on one side that it was no longer possible to clearly discern which king had once inhaled important air through his nose while having his image minted.

"What do we do with her?" Aidan asked.

"We'll throw them into the river," I said.

They stared at me as if I had suggested we all throw in our weapons too.

"Why?" asked Tam.

“Because the river has already taken everything else,” I said. “Why not also the part of the money that will probably become a problem for us anyway if we start arguing about who it belongs to?”

"That's just a coin," Ruairi said.

"It's a sign," the priest said quietly. "Not for God. He has enough. For us."

"A sign of what?" asked Fergus.

“That not everything that glitters has to be kept,” I said. “That we remember that we don’t just walk because someone holds out a bag to us. But because – ridiculous as it sounds – we once believed that Scotland was more than a number on a piece of paper.”

They were silent for a moment. Then the sergeant stood up. "Good," he said. "William will throw it."

"Why me?" I asked.

“Because you came up with the idea,” he said. “And because you’re the one who most often reaches for the knife when someone tries to sell us on with sweet talk. Maybe then the river will turn its attention to the right prey.”

We went to the river. Not all of us, just a few. The rest stayed by the fire, with the stew, with the usual worries of a day when no one was actually stabbing anyone. The river had grown calmer. No more corpses floating by. Those it wanted to keep were long gone further downstream, somewhere heading towards the sea, or wedged against a rock where fish were fighting over the remains.

I stood on the bank, the coin in my hand. It felt heavier than it was. A small, round piece of metal that wouldn't change anything about what was happening at the table in the tent. But sometimes you need gestures to remind yourself that you haven't quite entered the new game yet.

"Say something," Tam said from behind me. "Otherwise it's just throwing it away."

I looked at the water, at its reflective, dirty surface. "Money, crowns, and bought souls," I said softly. "We have too little of the one, too much of the other, and they're trying to buy the third from us right now. So that one day the river will remember who belonged to whom first."

Then I threw it. No grand throw, no heroic swing. Just a quick, decisive flick of the wrist. The coin flew, short, with a sickeningly elegant quality, a dull glint as if to say: I could have taken a different route. Then it disappeared into the water with a barely audible plop. The river didn't react. It took it, as it took everything. Without thanks, without hesitation, without song.

"That doesn't solve the problem," said Ruairi.

“No,” I said. “But at least we remembered that we have one.”

As we walked back to the camp, I saw the table again in the distance. The tarpaulin hall, the guards, the bags. Men went in, men came out. Crowns changed hands. Rights were discussed,

promises made, backs patted. Somewhere in these conversations, we were included. Not by name, not by face. As units, as numbers, as "about this many".

I reached for the knife. It vibrated faintly. Not like in the hollow. Not like in the holes. More like a reminder: Don't forget there's more to cut than just meat.

We sat down by the fire again. Everyone had their coins. Mine lay in my pocket, heavy like small decisions I hadn't yet made. They would be spent on something – food, alcohol, a night under a dry roof, maybe a prostitute who would make you believe for a few hours that your body was more than a tool.

Money, crowns, and bought souls, I thought. I already knew the first two. I was just learning about the last one. And I knew: Soon someone would come along trying to offer ours for less than they deserve.

It wasn't even a week before the first souls changed hands. Not like someone stood up and shouted, "I'm for sale now, bidding starts at three silver pieces." That's not how it works. It always starts smaller. From the outside, it looked like normal things: a few men suddenly sitting around a different fire, a clan moving their tents closer to the castle, a father starting to say things like, "We have to think of the children too," in a tone that sounded less like care and more like deprivation.

The camp was divided into zones. Before, there was only front, back, and middle. Now there was closer to the masters' tents and farther away. And closer suddenly meant lukewarm soup instead of cold, dry bread instead of moldy, rumors first instead of last. We'd been placed somewhere in between. Close enough to see them. Too far away to be counted.

One evening, when the wind blew off the river and the fires smelled of damp ash, a man from another troop joined us. He was one of those you remember because they talk too much to remain invisible, but fight too little to be truly important. Broad shoulders, a broad grin, a belly that betrayed he was fuller more often than most of us. He sat down as if he'd been invited, pointedly keeping his hands away from the fire so everyone could see the new rings he was suddenly wearing.

"You had a visitor," Fergus said dryly.

"We have an agreement," the man corrected. "With the gentlemen. A fixed salary. For all of us. Not just a handful of coins once in a while, but regular payments. Provided we remain reliable when things get serious."

"Ah," said Tam. "So you're real rent pigs now. Congratulations."

The guy grinned, almost as if it were a compliment. "Call it what you want," he said. "The fact is: when winter comes, my people know we've got something in the bag."

"And what do they want in return?" I asked. "No one gives away crowns just because your face is pretty."

He raised an eyebrow. "They want what they always want," he said. "For us to come when called. For us to stay in line. For us not to run after every idiot who thinks he can turn the whole island upside down with a sword and a big mouth."

That hit home. A glance or two automatically drifted towards the castle, to where we knew Wallace might be. Not necessarily because he was talking, riding, or yelling at someone. Simply because his name had become a familiar sound in the camp.

"And who exactly told you that?" Broc asked. "The 'idiot with the sword'?"

The man fiddled with one of his rings, a nervous tic he probably hadn't even noticed himself. "There are people who think Scotland needs more than a man who stirs up the masses," he said. "Smarter minds. Men who know how to negotiate. How to draw boundaries. How to... create stability."

"Stability," the priest repeated, as if biting into a piece of meat that tasted of candle wax.

"They say," the visitor continued, "that Wallace had his role. Stirling, the battle, the banners, all that. Fine. It was important. But you can't keep a country at war forever. At some point, you need men with a head for numbers. With a head for crowns. Otherwise..." He shrugged. "Otherwise, in ten years, we'll still be standing in the mud, shouting 'Freedom!' into a river that has long since forgotten our name."

"And you decided that you'd rather stand beside the numbers than in the mud," I said.

He grinned, but it was a thinner grin than before. "I decided my men shouldn't die next winter because some hero decided honor is more important than food," he said. "They're giving us supplies. Regular pay. Protection. If things get tough, even land in the rear, far from the front. All we have to do is stand with the right people when the next round of fighting starts."

"The right ones," Fergus repeated. "And who decides who those are? The ones with the most rings?"

"Those with the most castles," the man said. "Those who can talk to the English king without him immediately unleashing his dogs. Men who know when to shout and when to sign."

"And what about Wallace?" Aidan asked directly.

The visitor gazed into the fire, as if searching within it for words that sounded even remotely coherent. "Wallace is good for fighting," he said. "Good for cheering. Good for making history. But he is..." He searched, felt, "...uncomfortable. For negotiations. For people who think long-term."

"Inconvenient for whom?" I asked. "For the English or for those who are currently filling their bags?"

He shrugged. "Those are things men above me worry about," he said. "All I know is: anyone seen with the wrong people now might be out of pocket next year. Or out of a job."

"And you think we're the wrong people?" Tam asked.

"I think you have a choice," the man said. "That's why I'm here. Some of the gentlemen are looking at your row. The bridge, the dip, the hill—you've made a name for yourselves. People are talking about you. And when people start talking about you, it's only a matter of time before someone asks themselves which side you're more useful on."

"And what exactly are you offering?" the sergeant asked. His voice was calm, but I knew him well enough to hear that he had already drawn his blade inwardly.

The man leaned forward. "There are considerations," he said, "to bind some of the tried and tested troops more closely to certain lords. Fixed pay, priority for provisions, and, in case of emergency, the possibility of retreating to their lands. No more unruly mobs roaming the Highlands. An organized fighting force. Defense, not just rebellion."

"And for that?" I asked.

"That's why," he said, "you stand, if necessary, wherever you're put. You hold the lines you're shown. You listen to orders from the council, not to everyone who shouts. And..." He looked at me briefly, as if he knew the sentence was mine, "...you refrain from actions that jeopardize the negotiations."

"Actions like this?" asked Fergus. "Like killing Englishmen? That's what we're here for."

"Actions like... unauthorized campaigns," the man said. "Raids, pillaging, illicit alliances. Things that make a man like Wallace do what he does best, even when you're trying to achieve more with crowns than with blades."

For a moment there was silence. Only the fire crackled, and somewhere in the background someone coughed as if trying to apologize with their lungs.

I felt the knife twitch at my side. No buzzing, no big fuss. Just that small, subtle tremor that said: Something's wrong here, even if it sounds perfectly normal.

"You want us to be bought off," I said calmly. "So that when the time comes, someone can say: 'Those from the third wedge are behind us, not behind him.'"

"I want you to survive," the man said. "And for you to get something out of it. You are good fighters. You deserve more than a wet blanket and a name in a song that no one listens to all the way through."

The priest chuckled softly. It wasn't a joyful laugh. More the sound of a man who had seen too many funerals where no one liked the deceased. "Every betrayal begins with someone saying they only want you to survive," he said. "The question is always: Survive what?"

The visitor grimaced. "You're harder to convince than they said," he muttered. "But think about it. The offer won't last forever. The coffers aren't inexhaustible."

"Unlike our graves," I said. "They still have room."

He stood up and, as a formality, brushed the dust off his trousers, even though there was hardly anything to remove. "Talk to your men," he said to the sergeant. "Anyone who doesn't want to stay mired in filth forever should know that there is an alternative."

"And that would be?" asked the sergeant.

"Discipline," the man said. "Structure. Security. And yes, money." He grinned again, but with a hint of impatience. "The world is changing. You can go with it or be swept away by it."

"I've been steamrolled my whole life," I said. "By people who talk like you."

He left without looking back. The rings on his fingers glinted in the firelight. It wasn't a strong glitter. More like the kind you see out of the corner of your eye and can't get rid of later.

We were silent for a while. Everyone stared into the fire, as if they could find the right answer there, between the bones and the sooty pot.

"So?" Ruairi finally asked. "What do you think?"

"I think he's more afraid of us than of the English," said Fergus. "Otherwise, he wouldn't be so desperate to tie us to a bag of money."

"I think," said Tam, "that a regular salary feels good when you have children who shouldn't grow up in the mud."

We all looked at him. He shrugged. "I'm just saying how it is," he muttered. "My brother has five mouths to feed at home. If he gets an offer like that, he'll take it."

The sergeant rubbed his face, as if checking if it was still his. "It's not all treason," he said. "Sometimes it's simply survival. But..." He looked around the room, "...there's a limit. At some point, they're not just changing where you sleep, but also what you fight for."

"And where is the border?" asked Cailean.

The priest looked at him. "That's when you start killing men who died for the very thing you originally set out for," he said quietly. "Over there, on the bridge, it was simple. Englishmen there, us here. Now they want us to figure out which Scotsmen are worth more than others. That's the beginning of bought souls."

"Do you think Wallace knows what's going on here?" Aidan asked.

"If he doesn't know, he'll feel it," I said. "Men like him are the first to feel the cold wind when someone starts closing doors."

That night, that half-sleep returned, where you hear more than you see. Voices, laughter, somewhere a fight that ended in hugs because both were too tired to finish it. I lay under my blanket, the knife at my side, the coins in my pocket like small, harsh truths.

I imagined men with clean hands sitting bent over parchment somewhere in a large hall, far from Stirling. They were counting lands, villages, rivers, men. They were drawing lines, drawing borders, scribbling numbers next to our names. "This clan," "this unit," "this region." Everyone received a sum. Everyone a prize.

Money, crowns, and bought souls. The crowns clink, the souls speak nothing. They never belong to those who are paid. Never to those who fall. They belong to those who ultimately call the shots.

The next day the same man came again, this time not alone. Behind him was a scribe with a board and parchment on it. I could smell the ink from here, or perhaps I imagined it. They

were looking for the sergeant, found him, and didn't even bother to pretend they had just happened to be passing by.

"We just wanted to hear if you had thought about our conversation," said the ring bearer.

The sergeant looked at him for a long time. "We kept quiet about it," he said. "Sometimes that says more than anything."

The clerk raised his head, his quill trembling slightly over the page. "It would be wise to reach a decision while conditions are favorable," he said. "One never knows how long the council will be willing to be so generous."

"Generous," I repeated. "A nice word. If I go peeing in the river again, I'll tell it it's generous for taking the dirt we give it."

The clerk pretended not to have heard. "It's not just about money," he said. "It's about order. About the future. The council needs reliable men it can count on to ensure the agreements it has reached are upheld."

"Which agreements?" asked Fergus. "The ones where our blood had a discount day?"

The ring-bearer audibly breathed a sigh of relief. "Negotiations with the Crown are coming," he said. "With England. With people who can bring us long-term stability. Land, trade, rights. For that, we must stop roaming the land like hordes of robbers. We need an army, not a legend."

"And where is Wallace in your beautiful order?" I asked.

The writer looked directly at me, for the first time. His eyes were a watery gray, like quicklime. "A man like him has his place," he said. "Perhaps as a symbol. Perhaps as a cautionary tale. Perhaps as someone who... regrettably stands in the way of peace."

The knife vibrated. This time noticeably. A clear, sharp line from the handle to my hand. The priest made a small movement, as if he too had sensed something that wasn't caused by the wind.

The sergeant stood before us, not hostile, but clear. "We fight for Scotland," he said. "Not for your lists. We fight as long as there is an enemy standing directly opposite us. If you ever order us to march against men who set out for the same thing as us, then you have chosen the wrong troops."

The writer jotted something down. "I understand," he said. "It's always hard to break old habits."

"Listen," I said before the sergeant could stop me. "Write this down: The bastard in the third wedge is not for sale. His knife prefers shadows to crowns. And if anyone tries to turn us against our own cause, let them know we're not only capable of stabbing forward."

The ringman blinked. "Is that a threat?" he asked.

"No," I said. "That's a price quote. Some of us are more expensive than you'd like to afford."

They left. Not offended. Not even particularly impressed. More like shopkeepers with the expressions of shopkeepers who've just been told by a customer, "I'm just browsing." They knew that time was on their side. That hunger, tiredness, and cold are good salespeople. That you rarely buy men with a single conversation, but with many small days when they realize that there's an easier way.

That evening, I took my coins out of my pocket. I placed them in my hand, turned them over, and examined the worn faces and coats of arms. It wasn't much. But it was enough to make me wonder what I would do if it were suddenly three times as much. Ten times as much. The promise of a piece of land, a roof over my head, a spring in which I would no longer have to kill on command.

The priest sat down next to me. "Money isn't evil," he said. "It's stupid. It just makes more visible what's already inside a person."

"And what's inside me?" I asked.

He looked at the coins, then at the knife. "Anger," he said. "Honor, even though you hate it. Fear, even though you despise it. And that damned refusal to be made to look cheap."

"Doesn't sound like a soul that's easy to sell," I said.

"I hope so," he murmured. "For all of us."

That night I dreamt of a market. Not a normal one. One where you don't buy cows, barrels, or cloth. The stalls were full of armor, banners, and names. At each stall stood a man with clean hands, saying, "This one is a brave fighter, barely used, only slightly traumatized. Who bids?" The buyers were faceless. The voices were soft. And somewhere at the edge, Wallace lay on a table, not as a man, but as an offer: "A hero, used once, slight signs of wear, but still usable as a warning."

I woke up with the feeling of having sand in my mouth. It was still dark outside. A dog barked somewhere. Someone cursed in their sleep. The knife lay calmly by my side, as if it had all been just a bad dream.

But the table with the bags was still there when the sun rose. The rings still glittered on the wrong fingers. And somewhere, between Stirling and the rest of the world, men began to find their prize.

Money, crowns, and purchased souls. I had a vague feeling that we'd only just begun to see the full extent of the bill. Some figures were still missing. But someone had already started writing.

The coins were still in my hand, as if they refused to belong to any pocket. They always say money wants to migrate, from hand to hand, from purse to purse. Mine didn't. Maybe it was me. Maybe they were afraid of what would happen to them if they stayed too long near my knife.

"What are you going to do with it now?" Tam asked.

We sat a little way from the fire, far enough away that the warmth was just enough to keep the frost from seeping completely into our bones. The others did what men do when they try not to think about things bigger than themselves: they drank, argued, and laughed too loudly. There was always room at the edge for those who couldn't quite join in the laughter.

"I don't know," I said. "Maybe sensible things. Bread. Schnapps. Something I'll shit out later. Then at least the crowns would have had an honest path."

Tam snorted. "I'd get a new kilt if I were you," he said. "That one looks like it's made too many bad decisions."

"That's exactly why I'm keeping him," I said. "He knows the story. A new guy would just be confused."

Later that day, the sergeant sent us down to Stirling. Not as a reward, more as a necessary evil. "Wood, nails, oil, whatever they give you," he said. "We need to fix a few wagons before they drag us across the country again. And watch your coins. The town is hungry, and it'll eat you out of your pockets if you're not careful."

Cities are strange beasts when an army is encamped before them. They play dead, yet simultaneously live more fully than usual. People only half-close their shutters so the gold can still creep in. We walked through the gate like men who aren't entering places for the first time, places where they aren't really wanted, but can't be refused.

Stirling smelled different from the camp. Less of blood, more of overcooked cabbage, old wood, stale smoke, too many bodies in too small a space. It was almost comforting. Death in here was already old, not fresh like outside.

We split up. Aidan and Ruairi went to the blacksmith, Tam and Fergus to some merchant with planks, and I went with the priest and Seoras towards the tavern, because that's where the rumors were stored, which couldn't be stacked on carts.

The tavern's name had something to do with a crown, of course. Almost all of them do. The Crown, the Half Crown, the Golden Crown, the Split Crown. This one was a "Crooked Crown." Finally, some honesty. The sign above the door showed a bent ring on a cushion that looked as if it had once lain in a better tavern and then been banished here.

Inside it was warm and noisy. Soldiers, townspeople, merchants, two bards, a few women who laughed a lot and asked few questions. The smell of beer and cheap brandy mingled with that of leather, damp wool, and nervous hope.

We sat down at a rather rickety table that no one wanted because it wobbled. I liked it immediately. The priest ordered water. I pretended not to see this and got him a cup of the stuff the innkeeper proudly called "whiskey," even though it tasted more like burnt grain alcohol having trouble with its own steam.

"That's not a solution," said the priest, but he took the cup anyway and drank.

"Yes," I said. "Just not a good one."

At the counter stood two men, not in armor, yet looking as if they wielded more power than all those clattering about in iron. Fine fabrics, rings, postures that suggested they had long since grown accustomed to chairs where others were forbidden to sit. One wore a Scottish crest on his chest, the other an English one, discreetly placed so it could be rendered invisible at the inopportune moment.

They spoke softly, but not softly enough. The tavern was loud, but between the shouts and snatches of song, I heard snippets. "Tariffs," "Customs duties," "Division," "Oaths of allegiance," "Securities." Words that sounded like sorting a stable, not a country.

"There they are again," the priest murmured. "Money in words. Blood in numbers. God as a footnote, in case anyone asks."

The innkeeper placed the mugs in front of us, heavy, dirty, more honest than what was being negotiated at the bar. Seoras took a deep drag and sighed. "At least betrayal still tastes of barley here," he said.

"Listen," I murmured.

"I've been listening for days," said the priest. "I wish I could stop."

The two men at the bar laughed briefly. It was the kind of laugh that never quite reaches the eyes. Then the Englishman placed a bag on the counter, not large, but it sounded heavy as it hit the ground. The Scotsman put his hand on it, not as if he wanted to push it away, but rather as if he needed to feel it for a moment before deciding whether it deserved it.

"For the assurance of your support," I heard the Englishman say. "And for the effort to convince your people..."

The Scotsman nodded, slowly. "They want security," he said. "They want to hold something in their hands. A piece of land, a promise, a bag. Men are easier to lead when they are not hungry."

"Men are always hungry," said the Englishman. "The trick is to show them whose hand they are eating from."

I felt my fingers clench around the jug. The knife blunted against my hip in its sheath, as if saying: Not yet. Not yet. We're inside here and they're out of reach.

The priest touched my arm. "No," he said softly.

"I didn't do anything," I growled.

"But your eyes are," he replied. "And sometimes they're faster than your hands."

The door opened, a rush of cold air came in, and with it new voices. And among them one I now recognized without even looking. Rough, deep, not loud, but built in such a way that it passed right through others. Wallace.

He didn't enter like a king. He entered like a man who'd forgotten that others were supposed to hold the door open for him. No coat of arms, no pomp. Just the body of someone who'd

slept in the saddle too often, a face that looked as if it'd seen more wind than women. The tavern didn't fall silent. That only happens in bad stories. But near the bar, a note dropped. The laughter grew shorter, the sentences more cautious.

The Scotsman with the bag instinctively pulled his hand away as if he had been burned. The bag lay there, innocent as a stone.

Wallace glanced around the room. Not searching, more counting. Glances met his, bounced off, or lingered. He saw us too, but only briefly. I could have sworn there was a fleeting recognition in his gaze. "Ah, those from the bridge. They're still alive." Then he moved on, to the bar.

"I didn't think he'd show up in shops like that," Seoras murmured.

"Where else should he go? To church?" I asked.

The innkeeper suddenly became eager. "What can I get you, sir? The good..."

"Water," Wallace said. "And something strong for the men in the corner back there who look like they've carried more bodies than jugs."

We all turned our heads at once. He wasn't referring to us—he meant another group, further back, complete with bandages, sweaty faces, and slumped shoulders. But the statement still resonated. Someone who knew where he was.

The Englishman at the bar smiled politely. "Sir Wallace," he said. "It's an honor. People talk a lot about you."

"People always talk a lot about those who aren't dead yet," Wallace said. "That changes quickly when they are."

The Scotsman with the bag cleared his throat. "We've just..."

"Traded," Wallace interrupted. "I can smell it."

"It's about supplies," said the Scotsman. "About providing for the men. About an order that..."

"Money, crowns, and bought souls," Wallace said calmly. "I know what that smells like. I haven't just arrived in this world yesterday."

The Englishman raised his hands defensively, as if to show that they were clean. "We are negotiating terms," he said. "For a possible peace. For the good of your people."

"My people are out there in the mud," Wallace said. "Their well-being looks different than the sound of coins on a table."

A few of the men in the tavern looked shyly into their mugs. None of them wanted to be directly involved in this conversation, yet everyone listened.

"You can't rule a country with swords alone," the Englishman said. "You need agreements. Structures. Treaties."

"I have nothing against contracts," Wallace said. "As long as they are not signed in someone else's blood."

The Scotsman with the bag said nothing. He stared around the room, past everyone, somewhere where no one was standing. I knew that look. It was the look of someone who realized he had crossed a line and hoped no one had seen – while knowing full well that they hadn't.

I stood up without realizing it. The knife rested heavily at my side. The priest also stood up. Not to stop me, but because he knew that sometimes staying seated and watching was worse.

Wallace turned a few times. His eyes flickered over me. For just a heartbeat. But long enough. I stopped. There was something in his gaze that said: Not today. Not yet. I have enough enemies who want to kill me with feather-light hands. I don't need any more who try it with dirty ones.

He took his water, drank, and left the cup as if he weren't interested in it. Then he turned away from the counter, not without casting one last glance at the bag. No dramatic push, no "How could you?" Just that brief expression: I saw you. Don't forget that.

As he left, a few glances followed him. Not all of them. Some lingered on the rings, the bags, the fuller jugs.

The Englishman sighed slightly. "Charismatic," he said. "But unrealistic."

The Scotsman didn't answer. He drew the pouch towards him, more slowly this time. He tied it shut and tucked it into his belt. The sound was muffled.

"Did you see that?" whispered Tam, who had suddenly appeared next to me. "He could have nailed him to the wall. Instead, he lets him go."

"He knows the nail isn't enough," I said. "It's not in the bag. It's in his head."

We left the tavern later than necessary. Outside it had grown colder, the air clearer, the city smell sharper. The priest paused briefly as we headed back towards the camp.

"What?" I asked.

"I was just thinking whether God is interested in conversations like these," he said. "In there. Purses, crowns, words. And in men like that one." He gestured vaguely toward the castle, where Wallace was somewhere. "Maybe he sees both. Maybe neither."

"I think God stopped caring about our business a long time ago," I said. "The river takes care of it. It has more morals than most people around here."

When we got back to camp, the table with the bags was still there. It's still there, I thought, even if someone takes down the tarpaulins. There's always a table like that somewhere. In

front of it, men with rings; behind it, men with swords. And in between, those who have to decide whether they belong to themselves or to someone else.

I sat down by the fire, tossed a coin into the air, and caught it again. The metal was cold against my fingers. A small crown adorned it, worn smooth. A face that had once been important, now merely decoration. I thought of my own. Not the one in my mouth—I'd given that up long ago—but the ones they would one day place on our heads: "Heroes of Stirling," "Loyal Men of the Crown," "Better-Paid Traitors."

The knife at my side vibrated slightly. I placed the coin on it. Just like that. To test it.

Nothing happened, of course. No spark, no magic that melted the metal. They lay there, blade and crown, as if they were from the same world. Perhaps they were. One creates the stories, the other pays for them.

"What are you doing?" asked Fergus.

"I'm checking," I said. "Whether the knife has an opinion."

"And?" he asked.

I shrugged. "If it has one, it keeps it to itself," I said. "Just like most people in this camp."

That night, when the camp fell silent and only scattered coughs and soft murmurs remained, I lay there, the blanket over me, the coins in my pocket, the knife at my side. I thought of the Englishman in the tavern. Of the Scotsman with the bag. Of Wallace, drinking water as if afraid of ruining his last clear vision with wine.

Money, crowns, and bought souls. Some sell themselves loudly, with a contract and witnesses. Others quietly, with a nod and a coin in the dark. I knew only one thing: if they ever came and said it would be for peace if we turned our backs on the man in the dirty armor, they would offer us more than just those few silver pieces.

And I knew something else: If I ever agree to sell my soul, then at least I want to set the price myself. Not from a table. From a field. With a knife in my hand. Anything else would be cheating.

Nighttime conversations with one's own shadow

The night is an honest dog. It doesn't bark at you when you stagger drunkenly into the camp, it doesn't chase you when you run, it simply asks you one question: Do you really want to sleep, or are you afraid? In Stirling, after all those days with holes in the ground, holes in the flesh, and holes in trust, the point came when sleep no longer came willingly. It had to be beaten, with alcohol, with exhaustion, with the kind of tiredness where the body eventually says: Screw your thoughts, I'm just going to switch off for a bit.

That night he refused. I lay under a blanket that was too thin, my shield at my back, my knife at my side, the coins in my pocket, and felt the camp around me slowly fall into that strange

breathing men have when they're not in immediate danger, but not truly safe either. Tam snored softly, in short bursts, as if he were arguing. Aidan muttered in his sleep, some half-sentences in which "mother" and "blood" were placed side by side, as if that were normal. The priest was awake, I knew that without looking. There are people whose wakefulness shines in the darkness, not brightly, but persistently.

Eventually, I'd had enough. I pushed the blanket aside, stood up, quietly, as quietly as someone can be who's been treading on bone and mud all day. The knife followed me as if it were a part of me, not an extra. My boots found their way between bodies, shields, and discarded helmets. Walking through an army camp at night is like walking through a museum of possible futures: here's someone who'll have no legs tomorrow, there's someone who'll disappear into a hole the day after, and over there is someone who, in ten years, will tell his children how he was never afraid, even though tonight he's still fiddling with his belt with trembling hands.

I stopped at the edge of the camp. The guards nodded at me, one of them who knew us from the bridge. "Can't sleep?" he asked quietly.

"I want to see if my shadow is still there," I said.

He grinned wearily. "If you find one, send me one too," he said. "Mine ran away at some point."

Outside it was a bit quieter. The sky was clearer, a few stars, nothing spectacular. Just the kind that shows you that beneath all the filth there's something that doesn't give a damn who sells whom which crown. The river murmured softly, as if gathering itself for the next time someone thinks they can use it to make history.

I walked a little way down the slope until I was out of the circle of fire. There, where the shadows no longer came from flames, but from yourself. I stopped when the ground beneath me became a little harder, a patch not yet completely soaked with blood and sweat. The moon was positioned so that my shadow ran diagonally beside me, long, thin, distorted, with the edges of a man who had spent more time in war than in a warm bed.

"Well," I said quietly, "there you are."

The shadow said nothing, of course. It did what shadows do: it stayed there as long as the light wanted it to. But at night, when you're tired enough, things start to have answers in your own mind.

"You've changed," I murmured. "You used to be broader. Or I was. You didn't used to have that knife on your side. You used to walk through alleys, not through dips that swallow people."

In my head I heard him laughing. Not loudly, more like the way I laugh when someone tells a joke that's too close to the truth. "Back then," he said, "it was enough for you not to fall into bed drunk. Now you think you've grown just because you've seen a few Englishmen who swim worse than you."

I sat down, knees drawn up, hands resting loosely on them. The shadow sat down with me. Faithful dog. "You know what pisses me off, Blackie?" I asked. I'd called him "Blackie" since

I was a child. Not for any reason, but because the world is easier to bear when things have names.

"Everything," he answered in my head. "But go ahead and say it. You're in a talkative mood today."

"I'm starting to lose track of what I'm running for," I said. "At first it was simple. The English push, we push back. Someone shouts 'Freedom,' we shout along because the word tastes better than 'tax.' Then came the holes. That thing. Moira's knife. And I thought: Okay, maybe this is bigger than just 'us against them.' Maybe the world is currently devouring something that neither the Scots nor the English can control."

The shadow was silent for a moment, as if packing a pipe it didn't have. "And now?" it asked.

"Now," I said, "I sit in taverns and watch clean hands push bags while they dissect Wallace into sentences that no one speaks aloud. And I wonder if the hole in the ground might be more honest than anything that's being negotiated in Stirling right now."

The river responded with a soft gurgle. Perhaps it was laughing. Perhaps it was just swallowing air.

"The hole will eat you without telling you why," said the shadow. "Money will eat you while telling you it's for your own good. Take your pick."

"I don't want to be eaten," I muttered. "By either of them."

"Then you shouldn't have been born," he said. "The world is a big mouth. The rest is decoration."

I gave a dry laugh. "Thank you," I said. "You're being especially helpful again today."

A gust of wind came up from the river, rustled through the reeds, brushed past my ears as if whispering something to me. Beyond it, darker, deeper, was that other sound I knew. Not a true hum, more a sensation behaving like a hum. The thing wasn't here, not directly. But the world had changed since I'd first seen it. As if someone had ripped open the skin beneath the earth and stitched it back together poorly.

"Do you think it will come back?" I asked the shadow. "The hole. The beast. The whatever."

"Do you seriously think something like that only happens once?" he retorted. "It hasn't disappeared, William. It just realized that you're all too busy selling yourselves in circles."

I closed my eyes, heard the camp behind me. A cough, a soft cry, someone calling in their sleep for their mother, who had long since lain under a stone. Somewhere a quiet argument, which no one wanted to escalate, because tomorrow they would all have to stand in the same line again.

"Tell me," I said quietly, "wouldn't it be easier to just run away?"

The shadow shrugged. I saw it, even though it was nothing but darkness. "Where to?" he asked. "Back to some alleyways? To a village where they call you 'bastard' and you have to

count their teeth again? To a hut by the hole where you hear things eating beneath you at night? You're pretending there's a place where you're not yourself."

"Perhaps somewhere without Wallace," I murmured. "Without Englishmen. Without crowns. Without holes."

"Well, in heaven," said the shadow. "I'm afraid I have to disappoint you. They don't take bastards with knives made from dead people very well."

I breathed in through my nose, slowly, as if trying to smell something other than the camp, the river, and my own thoughts. Nothing. Perhaps that was the problem: no new smell, everything already familiar.

"You talk to me more often since we saw the beast," said the shadow.

"You make it easier for me too," I replied. "Before you were just a shadowy figure going along for the ride. Now at least you're an asshole with an opinion."

"Well," he said. "You wanted company. And you didn't want a friend. So you got me."

I thought of Wallace in the tavern. Of his gaze at the pouch, that short, heavy nod that was directed at no one and at everyone. I thought that someone like him probably negotiated with his own shadow every night, wondering if it was worth it. Not just the fighting. The whole thing. The being on the front lines. The being the face.

"Do you think he knows they want to sell him?" I asked.

"Of course he knows," said the shadow. "Men like him can smell betrayal before the traitors even know they are traitors."

"And yet he stays," I said.

"Yes," he said. "Because someone has to stay. And because he doesn't want to end up in the dirt of history, but on the podium."

"A platform made of what?" I asked. "Stone? Wood? Lies?"

"From what's left when you're finished," said the shadow. "From bones and sentences."

I grasped the handle of the knife. Moira's blade was silent, but warm. It no longer felt like a foreign object. More like something waiting for me to finally decide what I actually wanted to be with it.

"You are afraid," said the shadow.

"Of course," I said. "Every idiot here is scared. Some just don't admit it."

"Not before the war," he said. "You're used to that. You're afraid of what comes after. Of what they'll make of you when they're finished. Hero, butcher, footnote, traitor. A coin to turn over when they need a story."

I nodded, even though it was silly to agree with a lot of darkness. "I don't want to find myself in a song that lies at the crucial parts," I said.

"Then you must tell your own story," said the shadow. "At least to yourself. At night. When no one is listening but me."

"That's not a large audience," I said.

"But the most honest one," he replied.

Behind me in the camp, someone called softly for water. Another cursed in his sleep. Somewhere metal clanged. I thought of the Englishman with the thin fingers, the Scotsman with the bag, the scribes with their ink, the words "troublemaker," "symbol," "threat to peace."

"Do you think," I asked the shadow, "that they will eventually force us to run against the wrong men?"

The shadow was silent. For a while. Longer than I would have liked.

"They won't call it coercion," he said then. "They'll call it duty. Or necessity. Or 'in the name of Scotland.' And they'll tell you that those you kill are traitors. Heretics. Persecutors of the grand plan. The terms are flexible. The blades are not."

"And what do I do then?" I asked.

"Then you must decide," said the shadow. "Whether your sword belongs to the crown or to what you were before you started thinking about freedom. The bastard in the rain. The boy with the fists. The man who stood in the hollow while something other than Englishmen wanted to eat."

I thought of the rain of my childhood, the wet clay soil, the fists that taught me the first blow is rarely the last. I thought of the first time I'd heard "freedom," not as a word, but as a feeling, when you punch someone in the face whom you thought you weren't allowed to. Perhaps that was the only thing that had remained real: that little stirring inside when someone tells you they know better than you who you are.

"I'm not going to kill again for a man who's going to sell me out in the same breath," I said.

"Then don't do it," said the shadow.

"It's not that simple," I said.

"Of course not," he replied. "If it were easy, you wouldn't need nights to talk to your own shadow."

We sat there for a while longer, side by side, me of flesh, him of nothing. The river rushed, the camp breathed, the sky pretended not to know any of us.

"Do you know what the worst part is?" I asked.

"You'll tell me in a minute," he said.

"That I believe Wallace," I said quietly. "When he speaks of freedom. That I listen to every muscle in my body saying 'yes.' And at the same time, I know that men like him always end up on crosses, ropes, or on wheels. And that the same people who are drinking with him in the tavern today will say tomorrow that they would have wanted it any other way."

The shadow nodded. "You're too smart to follow blindly," he said. "And too broken to simply walk away. Congratulations. You've landed right in the middle. Where it hurts the most."

"And where are you?" I asked.

"Where you are," he said. "I've got the same dirt on my feet. Just fewer problems with wet boots."

A final gust of wind came off the river, cool, sharp, with a hint of something that didn't quite belong. Perhaps it was just the memory of the hole. Perhaps just my fear, newly clothed.

I finally stood up. My bones cracked, my back protested, and so did my knees. The shadow stood up with me.

"Are you coming with me?" I asked him, half jokingly.

"Do I have a choice?" he asked in return.

I went back to the camp. I weaved my way between the sleeping bodies, pulling the blanket over me again, knife at my side, coins pressed into my pocket, as if they wanted to hear what we had decided. I told them nothing. Not yet.

Just before I drifted off to sleep, I heard my own voice in my head: "If they sell Wallace, they're selling a piece of us with him." And another, darker voice, mine or his, said: "Then make sure they don't get away with it cheaply."

The night clung to me. But eventually, it let go. Sleep came like a slap in the face, not friendly, but effective. The shadow lay down beside me. And for a few hours, we were in agreement: tomorrow is early enough to decide again to whom we belong.

The next day acted as if it were perfectly normal. Days like to do that before they later tell you: By the way, I was the beginning of something truly ugly. The sun rose sluggishly over the hills, the ground was damp, men cursed their boots that wouldn't dry, and somewhere someone wailed because, upon getting up, he'd realized his leg no longer had what you'd call "full cooperation." Everything as usual, you might say.

Except that since the night with the shadow, my thoughts no longer pretended that "business as usual" was even an option anymore. They ran in circles, like a dog on a chain that already knows how far it can get, but tries again and again anyway.

"You look like you've been arguing with God all night," said Tam over his thin morning porridge. "Or with a worse opponent."

"I had an argument with someone who at least listens," I muttered. "That doesn't automatically include God."

The priest raised an eyebrow but let it go. Aidan stirred his wooden bowl listlessly, as if he might thereby uncover something edible that had been too proud to reveal itself.

"There will be a meeting today," Ruairi said. "I heard they want to gather the men. Say words. Make plans. Maybe distribute new banners so we feel more important."

"Maybe they'll give each of us a piece of parchment," Fergus said. "It will say: 'You are now part of the grand plan. Shut up when money is involved.'"

The assembly did indeed come. Around noon, as the ground was just beginning to change from wet to sticky, we were summoned. Not a parade, we're too ugly for that. More of a slow, gradual convergence. Troop by troop, clan by clan, wedge by wedge. Like a herd not quite sure whether it's being led to the watering hole or the slaughter.

They erected a makeshift platform out of planks and barrels. Not a proper general's podium, more like the kind you build when you want to give a stage to a day that doesn't deserve one. On top of it: a few of the usual faces. Lords with well-groomed beards, a couple of clergymen with grave eyes, a clerk who looked as if he were only there to make sure no one misquoted a word. And Wallace.

He looked as if he would have preferred to be somewhere else. Not because he was afraid of the crowd, but because he knew the cost of words when repeated often enough. His armor was open, his sword at his side, his hands bare. Dirt still clung to his fingernails. That alone was enough to distinguish him from half the men on the platform.

The gray-bearded lord, whom I had by now recognized as a kind of self-appointed spokesman for the "reasonable ones," stepped forward. He raised his hands as if opening a mass. The voices fell silent, not out of respect, but rather out of curiosity as to whether someone would once again twist the word "freedom" so drastically that it was unrecognizable.

"Men of Scotland," he began. Of course he began that way. "You have accomplished great things in Stirling. You have shown the world that we are not a people who kneel when a foreign king waves his sword."

A few shouts, cheers, fists in the air. Words are cheap, but they work.

"But war..." he continued, "...is more than a battle. Stirling was a victory, yes. But it was only one step. We must now plan how to secure this victory, how to protect our country, how to ensure that our children..."

"There it is," I whispered to the shadow in my head. "Always the children. When one of them starts talking about children, you know he's about to take something away from you."

"...not starving every winter because we are trapped in perpetual conflict," said the Lord. "We need order. Leadership. Unity."

He made a sweeping gesture towards Wallace. "And we have men who were willing to step forward. Sir William Wallace, here at my side, has shown what courage is capable of. His name will go down in history, of that I am certain."

I saw Wallace wince inwardly at the word "Sir." As if someone had suddenly put a strange suit of armor on him.

"But," said the lord, and that word was so heavy you could almost hear it creaking on the boards, "courage alone is not enough. We must also be wise. Calculating, if necessary. We are facing negotiations with the Crown of England. There is an opportunity to secure rights, territories, trade routes, protection for our people."

A low murmur rippled through the rows. "Negotiations." "Crown." "Protection." These were words that stung. Everyone heard them a little differently.

"For that," the lord continued, "we need unity among ourselves. We cannot afford discord. No loose gangs acting according to their own whims, thereby gambling away with the sword what we gain at the table."

His gaze swept over us, not searching, but assuming. "Men like William..." he tapped Wallace on the arm almost chummyly, "...are important. They are symbols. Torches. But the torch can't decide for itself where it's held. That's done by those who have the overview."

I felt the blood rush to my head. Next to me, Tam clenched his fists. Fergus was grinding his teeth so loudly that I could hear it over the murmuring.

"Now listen," said the shadow in my head. "Now, in this 'but' everything is contained."

"We will be reorganizing units in the coming days," the Lord said. "Creating structures. Some of you will be more closely tied to specific houses. For pay, for supplies, for protection. Others will be deployed as mobile troops to fight where needed. And some..." He made a vague gesture, "...must understand that individual actions, however heroic they may seem, can harm the greater cause."

There it was. That wasn't a blow that knocked you to the ground. That was one that took your breath away. No one screamed. Not yet.

Wallace stepped forward. His face was tired, but clear. "There is no freedom without men willing to act," he said. No grand gesture, just his voice, which nonetheless cut through the ranks. "Treaties, titles, crowns—all these are merely things that exist on parchment, as long as someone is willing to back them with steel. If you want me to be a torch, then stop treating me like a tool you discard when you no longer like the light."

A few men gave short, dry laughs. Others nodded. The grey-bearded lord smiled thinly, the smile of a man who had long since adjusted to a different stage.

"No one questions your actions," he said. "No one. But we must also think about tomorrow. About our obligations to our allies, our lords, our king..." He paused briefly, as if realizing he was going too fast.

"Which one?" shouted someone from the crowd. "The one in London, or the one you promise us sometime when you have enough bags full?"

A laugh rippled through the ranks, a raw, dangerous kind. The lord pretended not to hear it. Wallace hadn't. Something flickered in his eyes—anger, yes, but also something like fear. Not for himself. For what they intended to make of this fight.

The scribe beside the lord leaned forward and whispered something in his ear. I couldn't hear the words, but I didn't need to. I knew that kind of whisper. "Be careful. The mob isn't ready yet. Give him a piece of bread before you pull his teeth."

"None of you," the lord said louder, "will be forced to fight against your own people. I promise you that."

The shadow in my head laughed so sharply I almost thought it was loud. "There it is," he said. "The first promise they'll break. Remember the taste."

"But," the lord added, "we expect discipline. We expect you not to follow every voice that leads you to ruin simply because it shouts 'freedom.' Sometimes freedom means foregoing the sword when a piece of parchment will achieve the same effect."

I looked at Wallace. Two things were fighting in his face: the urge to tell him straight to his face where he could shove that "parchment", and the weariness of a man who has realized that open anger is sometimes exactly what the wrong people are waiting for.

He said nothing. And that was precisely the loudest thing that day.

The assembly dissolved without clear orders. That's the insidious thing about it: they don't give you anything concrete to defend yourself against. Only moods. Hints. Temptations.

Back by the fire, the chatter erupted like a gaping wound. "Did you hear, they said 'reorganize'...", "...my clan leader was already in the tent yesterday, I bet we'll get a fixed salary...", "...if they tie us to a lord who has a roof over his head, I won't say no...", "...if they take Wallace out, so be it, I just don't want to freeze anymore..."

"They are starting to pit us against each other," the priest said. "Those who think they have something to gain against those who know they have everything to lose."

"I don't want a second battle where we don't know who's on the other side," Aidan said.

"You will get her," murmured the shadow in my head. "Sooner or later."

The sergeant sat down and rubbed his eyes as if the day had been dusty. "They'll make us offers," he said. "To each of us. Some as a squad. Some as a clan. And some..." His gaze briefly flickered over me, "...individually."

"What could they possibly offer me?" I asked. "More holes? More shadows? A bigger knife?"

"They will offer you the chance to be part of something they call 'stability,'" he said. "And you will laugh in their face. That is also a form of negotiation."

In the evening, as the camp reverted to its somewhat skewed daily routine, I sat down once more at the edge, where the ground gave way to darkness a few steps further on, and the river sounded as if it were chewing secrets.

The shadow appeared beside me, as always punctually when I wanted to be alone.

"So?" he asked. "Did you enjoy the day? Fine words, blatant lies, a hero standing in the crowd as if it were his own funeral."

"He stopped them again today," I said. "With a few sentences. Not enough to overturn the table. But enough that they still need it."

"Still," the shadow emphasized. "You sound like someone who knows that 'still' is a very thin piece of wood."

"I wonder," I murmured, "if I'm more like him than I want to be. He stands at the front and talks about freedom. I stand further back and curse crowns. In the end, they turn both of us into stories. They call one a legend, the other a footnote."

"You are not a footnote," said the shadow. "You are the dirt between the lines. Without you, the story has no foundation."

I laughed dryly. "That's the shittiest way to tell someone they're important," I said.

"You never wanted flowers," he said. "You got thorns."

We sat there in silence for a while. The sounds of the camp seemed farther away this time. Perhaps because I didn't want to hear them. Perhaps because they really had become quieter.

"What if I end up on the wrong side someday?" I asked quietly. "Not because I want to be, but because they shifted the sides while I was standing in the mud."

"Then at some point you have to stop seeing yourself only as a soldier," said the shadow. "A soldier runs where he's told. A bastard decides when to stop."

The knife at my side vibrated slightly. Not because of a hole. Not because of a beast. Because of a thought.

"What do you want, Black guy?" I asked. "For me to leave? For me to stay? For me to crawl into a tent one night and show one of those guys up there how honest steel is?"

"I don't want anything," said the shadow. "I'm you, only without excuses. You already know what you won't go along with. You're just looking for a way to phrase it that doesn't sound like suicide."

I stared at my hands. Dirty, cracked, scars beginning to overlap. The hands of a man who had touched too much that wasn't his: strangers' necks, strangers' blood, strangers' weapons, strangers' hopes.

"When the day comes," I said slowly, "when they send us against him, I won't be in the front row."

"No," said the shadow. "You will stand somewhere where you can see who has their back to whom. And then you will decide."

"You talk as if it's certain that this day will come," I said.

"Of course he'll come," he said. "That's just how the world works. Men like Wallace are pebbles in the shoes of men with crowns. Sooner or later, someone will throw away the shoe or the pebble. And nobody likes throwing away their shoes."

The river gurgled again. I imagined all the crowns, the faces of kings ever etched, lying down there someday. Cold, useless, worn. Perhaps the river was the only thing that ultimately made everyone equal.

"Perhaps," I said, "the only one who doesn't lie in the end is the one who eats without asking."

"Then don't pray to God," said the shadow. "Pray to the river."

"I don't pray at all," I said. "I talk to you. That's enough religion."

"Good choice," he said. "I don't forgive sins. I just remember them."

The wind grew colder. I stood up, brushing the dirt off my knees, as if it weren't pointless anyway. The shadow rose with me, step by step.

"You know," he added before we went back into the camp, "that talking at night doesn't change anything, right?"

"They're changing me," I said.

"That's enough," he said. "For starters."

I lay down again, among the others. Tam grunted in his sleep, Aidan murmured less, the priest breathed calmly but alertly. The knife lay at my side. The coins pressed against my hip. And somewhere in Stirling, behind thick walls, over clean tables, they were already counting the days until they would dare to turn hints into commands.

I pulled the blanket higher. "If you think you can buy us all," I murmured, half awake, half out, "then you've never negotiated with a shadow."

The shadow laughed in my head. A quiet, dark laugh. And I finally fell asleep. Not peacefully. But deeply enough to face the next day with my back more or less straight.

The following night decided to test me. At least, that's how it felt. Sometimes I get the feeling that darkness has its own sense of humor. By day, it deceives itself in corners and under helmets, in eyes that stare at maps for too long. At night, it comes out, sits down next to you, and says: Show me what you're really thinking when no one's listening but your own filth.

I was awake before they called for the relief shift. That semi-automatic sitting up you get into when you know you're sleeping in a camp where nobody's as safe as they pretend to be. My

bones creaked, as if complaining that I was going to take them with me again. Tam grunted, turned around, and muttered something about "not enough beer for so much shit." I got him.

"Guard," the sergeant said curtly. "You, Aidan, priest. Outer ring, toward the river." He didn't speak loudly, but that was enough. When he spoke like that, it meant: I want to see you right where the night has the most teeth.

We shouldered our weapons, pulled the blankets a little tighter around our shoulders before laying them down completely. The knife at my side vibrated once, briefly, as if saying: Finally, something other than lying down. Aidan looked tired, but awake enough to still curse. The priest looked as he always did between evening and morning: as if he were arguing with some god no one else could see.

The outer ring wasn't even a real ring. More like a loosely imagined line of men pretending to be a fence against anything trying to get in. In reality, we were just markers. Small burning points in a vast darkness. If something really wanted to get in—Englishman, beast, treason—it wouldn't stick with us for long. But it felt better when someone stood there and said: This far.

We walked silently for a while, then Aidan stopped and rubbed his hands together. "I hate this hour," he said. "Too late to drink, too early to die."

"There is no such thing as dying too soon," the priest murmured. "Death knows no hour. Only opportunity."

"You are a ray of sunshine," I said.

We stood on a small ledge where we could see the river. It was different at night. During the day, it seemed to want to have its say. At night, it simply flowed. It took away what no one wanted to keep, and a few things that everyone did. I thought of the coin we had offered it. Perhaps it lay somewhere in the mud, ashamed because it was no longer allowed to count.

For a while we said nothing. The wind was cold, but not brutal. The kind of cold that keeps you awake, not the kind that kills you. I looked at my elongated, skewed reflection in the dark grass, the reflection the moon had made of me behind me. The shadow had stretched out as if it were relaxed. I didn't believe a word he said.

"So," the priest said at one point, "what did your shadow teach you last night?"

I grinned crookedly. "That I'm too smart to follow blindly, and too broken to walk away," I said. "And that this is the kind of life you don't usually pay for willingly."

Aidan snorted. "If your shadow can talk like that, you're either drinking too little or too much," he said. "Mine just always tells me to keep my head down."

"Yours is more sensible," I said.

The priest glanced sideways at me. "Do you know what the old folks around here called that?" he asked. "When someone talks at night to something no one can see?"

"Crazy?" I asked.

“Gifted,” he said. “At least that’s what they claimed as long as they were still afraid of their own ghosts. Today, at best, it’s called ‘tired’.”

“I’m just... full,” I said. “The depression, the hole, the river, the crowns, Wallace, the clean hands – it’s all racing through my head at once. I have to ask myself something, who am I anymore in this filth?”

“Bastard,” Aidan said. “With a knife. That’s more than many people can say about themselves.”

I was just about to say something, some sort of dirty remark, when it happened. It didn't start dramatically. No trembling in the earth, no infernal growl. Just a faint tug on the knife. A buzzing, deep in the handle, as if someone below us had stretched a thread and pulled on it.

I paused. The shadow remained still. The river rushed, but in between there was another sound, very faint. Like opening an old door underground.

"Do you notice that?" I asked.

The priest stiffened. Aidan glanced nervously at the water. "Please tell me you just need to pee," he murmured.

“This isn’t my bubble,” I said. “This is... it.”

The feeling wasn't as intense as in the hollow. But familiar. Like the scent of a man you thought long buried, suddenly standing in the same room. Something beneath us was awake. Not in a hole, not in a visible crack. More like a shadow in the ground.

"Perhaps it has drawn closer," the priest said softly. "Perhaps it doesn't just follow holes and battles. Perhaps it follows us."

"Great," Aidan muttered. "As if we didn't already have enough eating us alive."

I kept my hand on the knife. It vibrated again, briefly, sharply. Not a cry of panic. More like a "watch out." The river seemed to slow down for a moment, then speed up again, as if it were swerving.

"Do you see anything?" I asked my shadow. Of course, it didn't answer aloud. But in my head, I heard it say: "Of course not. I am one myself. But believe me: Something down there is smiling."

Perhaps I imagined it, but I suddenly had the image in my mind: Stirling, years later. No tents, no armies. Just a city built on the bones of what we leave behind. Children running over the bank, throwing stones into the water, laughing. And beneath them, something that has seen it all before. Other wars, other banners, other men who thought they mattered.

"What if the thing is just waiting until we're done with our little freedom circus?" I asked quietly. "Until we've all sold out, betrayed, and overextended ourselves. And then it will eat what's left."

“Then it is more honest than most here,” said the priest. “It takes without making promises.”

We stood there for a while longer until the buzzing subsided. The humming receded, like a tide that had decided it was enough for today. Perhaps it had just wanted to check if we were still there. Perhaps it wanted to hear what we were talking about.

"I saw someone, by the way," the priest finally said, as we walked a few more steps along the line. "Yesterday, in town. In the tavern. A woman. She looked at you longer than was probably good for you."

I blinked. "A woman?" I said. "In Stirling? Really? I've only seen crowns and squishy noses."

"You were staring too much at Beutel and Wallace," he said. "She was standing in the back, by the fireplace. Dark hair, eyes that knew more than the place deserved. She was looking at you as if she were memorizing the way you walk."

"Maybe she just wanted to know if I had anything in my pockets," I said.

"Maybe," he said. "But she looked at you as if she were also noticing how you fall."

Aidan grinned weakly. "Now you're starting with women too," he said. "As if we didn't have enough problems. First beasts, then traitors, now women. I'm going back to bed."

I remained silent. The mention touched something inside me that I'd pushed aside for weeks. Women in my life had always meant two things: fleeting warmth and lasting emptiness. Moira had been the exception, and look what became of her and her knife. Ever since that blade was glued to my side, I'd decided to forgo new relationships. One curse per lifetime is enough.

"She recognized you," the priest added. "Not as a hero. As one of those who have seen too much to place their hopes in clean hands. You rarely see looks like that in taverns. If you see her again..."

"...I'll tell her to run away," I interrupted. "Before she ends up hanging from a rope with our song stuck in her head."

He sighed. "Maybe she'll tell you the same thing."

The watch continued. We made our rounds, changed positions, yawned, overthought things. Eventually, others relieved us, tired faces that looked like ours, only with different scars. The camp was quieter when I returned. The men slept soundly, as if the day had drained them of all their anger, leaving only exhaustion.

I lay down, but sleep didn't come immediately. Instead, the shadow came and sat on my chest, invisible, but heavy.

"Well," he said. "A woman, eh? That's just what we needed."

"Shut up," I muttered. "We don't even know if it was real. Maybe it was just one of the bards' fantasies that got lost."

"You have Moira's knife at your side," he said. "You seriously think chance is still going to leave you alone?"

I thought of dark hair I hadn't consciously noticed, of eyes the priest had described, of all the faces I'd forgotten because blood and dirt had gotten in the way. Maybe it was nothing. Maybe it was the beginning of something that would hurt even more than any battle.

"Are you afraid?" asked the shadow.

"In front of a woman?" I asked in return.

He laughed. "You survived hole monsters, Englishmen, traitors. But this is different. They can hurt you without making you bleed. We never liked that."

I turned onto my side. The knife pressed into one hip, the coins into the other. Between steel and money, I thought, maybe somewhere something like love could squeeze in, if it was foolish enough. Or persistent enough.

"Let's just survive tomorrow first," I muttered. "Then we can still think about women."

"The next day," said the shadow, "usually brings what the night promised."

"Then I hope," I said, "that this night, for once, will be lying."

Sleep came, finally, stumbling, like a drunkard who's somehow managed to wander into your bed. I took it as it was. With muddy boots and too much luggage. In the dreams, everything mingled: the river, the table with the crowns, Wallace on a pedestal that was also a chopping block, a shadow with my eyes, and somewhere in the background, laughter that didn't sound cruel, but sad. Perhaps a woman. Perhaps myself, a few years too late.

When I woke up, the sky was gray, the camp noisy, the world as usual. But there was a new rift in my mind. Between what I was willing to accept and what they wanted from me. And somewhere in between ran a trail leading from the tavern to some door, behind which stood someone who had seen me, without knowing what they were seeing.

Nighttime conversations with my own shadow, I thought. And with things that aren't even shadows. Someday I'd have to answer them all: the beast in the ground, the crowns on the table, the man on the pedestal, the woman by the fireplace. And I knew I'd talk myself hoarse.

But not today. There were other things to do today. The war wasn't over with us. And we weren't over with it.

Love in the space between battles

Love is a word that sounds on a battlefield like a fart in church. Everyone pretends not to hear it, a few giggle, and the rest just think: Please, not now. We've had enough to deal with that could rip our heads off outright. We don't need another feeling that has the same effect, only slower.

It didn't start with a glance, but with a cough. We tend to imagine these kinds of stories more romantically: two eyes finding each other in a crowd, a slow cut, some wind suddenly

becoming important. For me, it was a dry cough in a packed tavern that reeked of sweat, stale beer, and wet leather. Stirling, again.

We'd been sent down to fetch something that would ultimately prove insufficient back at camp. Nails, salt, oil, scraps of cloth to pass for bandages. The sergeant had said, "Go in groups of three, come back in groups of three, and don't waste everything you have in your pockets on drinks and empty promises." I'd nodded, knowing I'd ignore his advice as far as the right poison was concerned.

The "Crooked Crown" was more crowded than on our last visit. The army had discovered the place like a mouse discovers a granary, and now it was only a matter of time before the granary decided it would rather poison mice than feed them. We pushed our way through the throng, squeezing between half-drunk men who cheered us as if we were old friends and others who looked at us as if we were competitors in a race for the last mug.

The innkeeper saw us and gave a brief nod. We were regulars by now, not in a good way. More like rain: unwelcome, but inevitable. He placed three cups in front of us, filled with a concoction that claimed to be whiskey and probably offended God more than the priest with all his sermons of doubt.

I stood with my back to the fireplace. The warmth crept down my neck, and for the first time in days, I didn't feel like the wind was trying to nibble at my bones. I took a deep gulp, letting the stuff burn inside me as long as possible before swallowing. It hurt, so it was good.

Then came the cough. Not a dramatic attack, no spitting blood into a handkerchief that was then folded meaningfully. Just a short, dry cough behind me, so subtle it should have been lost in the noise. But it wasn't. Perhaps because it didn't match the muffled throats that otherwise filled the air.

I turned around.

She stood there, half in the shadow of the fireplace, half in the firelight. Not a girl. Her eyes were too old for that. Not a lady. Her hands were too rough for that. Something in between. Perhaps exactly what I've always been, only in a different form.

Dark hair, not clean, but not completely smothered in filth either. It fell in strands around her face, which she didn't brush aside because she needed both hands: in one she held a jug, in the other a cloth she was just taking from her mouth. No blood. Just a fine red stain, which I might have imagined. Her eyes were the opposite. Dark. Alert. Not that empty look of women who have waited too often for men who didn't come back. More like the look of someone who had seen too often that they did come back—and rarely better.

She looked at me, not startled, not surprised. More as if she were adding me to a list of things she already knew: men with scars, men with weariness, men with knives. Her gaze lingered on the gap in my teeth, then slid to Moira's knife at my side, peeking out from under my belt like a dog checking if it's about to be put in its lane.

"You're standing on the train," she said. Her voice was hoarse, but not from alcohol. More likely from too much smoke, too many nights in stuffy rooms.

"Where am I?" I asked.

"On the train," she repeated, nodding her chin behind her. Behind me was the aisle the staff used to carry jugs. "If he bumps into you, the jug is more important than you. You don't just feel it in your back."

I stepped aside, out of the imaginary flow. "Thank you," I murmured. "I'm not used to being warned about dishes."

She shrugged. "Most of them aren't used to being warned at all," she said. "Especially not in a place like this."

Tam, who was standing next to me, nudged me. "You know each other?" he asked loudly enough that half the bar could have heard.

"No," I said quickly.

"Not yet," she said at the same time.

Our eyes met again. For a moment, there was that feeling I usually only experience in combat: that awareness that the other person is about to make a move, and you're not sure whether to block it or go with it.

"I'll bring you something to eat," she said. "Otherwise you'll fall off your stools here and think it's because of the war and not your empty stomachs."

"We didn't order it," I said.

"I didn't say that," she said and disappeared towards the kitchen.

The priest watched me as I watched her. "There goes one who is worse than any beast in the hole," he said dryly.

"She didn't show any teeth," I murmured.

"They never do that at the beginning," he said.

She came back with a wooden board. Bread that cost more teeth than it replaced, something that could pass for a stew, and some leftover cheese that had seen better days. She set it down, routinely, without grand gestures, but in such a way that each of us could reach it.

"On whose account?" Fergus asked suspiciously.

"To those who suffered from the war," she said. "You brought it on yourselves, so it's okay if it treats you."

"That's not how it works," I said.

"Yes," she said. "In my mind, yes."

She stayed at the table instead of immediately running off again. That was the moment I realized she was either very stupid or very brave. Women who talk to warriors usually do so

for one of two reasons: work or necessity. In her case, it seemed like both—and something else that I didn't immediately recognize.

"What's your name?" Tam asked, without any subtlety.

"That depends on who's asking," she said.

"The one with the gap," I said. "Not him." I pointed at myself.

She looked me over briefly. "I've heard too many names to care anymore what I'm called," she said. "But if you need one, call me Iona."

The knife at my side vibrated slightly. Almost curiously.

"Iona too," I said. "Like the island."

"The island isn't named that because of me," she said. "I'm not named that because of her. And you?"

"William," I said. I left out the rest. The bastard, the knife, the hole.

She nodded, as if she already knew. "They whisper your name," she said. "Not as loudly as the one up there." She gestured with a barely perceptible nod toward the castle. "But loud enough that it's practically living in my ear by now."

"Then throw him out," I said. "I don't pay rent."

She grinned. Not a broad, seductive grin like you hear about in bad songs. More like one that flickers briefly and disappears again, as if afraid someone might see it and mistake it for weakness.

"You're one of them," she said. "The ones who were standing by the bridge. And by that other thing."

The other thing. Nobody said "beast" out loud unless they were completely drunk.

"I stood at many things," I said. "Bridges. Holes. Tables with too many crowns on them. None of it made me richer."

"You're still alive," she said. "That's more than I can say for some who weren't there."

The priest looked at her. "How do you know so much?" he asked.

She looked back, not a trace of subservience. "You talk loudly," she said. "Men in armor always think words are quieter when steel is around. They aren't. And messengers drink. And men loaded into tents can't keep their mouths shut. The city has ears. I collect what falls."

"And what do you do with it?" I asked.

"I decide who I serve when things get really bad," she said. "I let go of a man too stupid to realize what's going on. I keep an eye on one who's too smart to be bought off."

The knife vibrated more intensely. My fingers automatically closed around the handle. Not as a threat. As a reaction.

"And what do you think I am?" I asked.

She looked me in the eyes. Really into my eyes, not past me, not at my scars, not at the blade, not at the gap. I held her gaze, on principle.

"You're the one in between," she said. "Too broken to believe in fine speeches anymore. Too angry to simply let yourself be sold out. The kind of man who always ends up somewhere where blood is spilled, even though he swore to himself that he'd stay away next time."

"You don't know me," I said.

"Not yet," she said. "But I recognize the pattern. Stirling is full of you."

Tam choked on the bread. "Is there a reason why you're looking at him so closely and not at me?" he asked, half jokingly, half offended.

"You'd sell your soul for a barrel of beer," she said. "That's boring. Men who know they have a soul are more interesting."

"I don't have any," I said.

"Then explain to me why you sit by the river at night and talk to your shadow," she said dryly.

That hit me hard. Coldly. Like a blow that isn't physical, but makes everything inside you twitch briefly.

"How do you know that?" I asked. My voice was rougher than I wanted it to be.

She shrugged. "There are guards who talk. There are men who describe you when they try to cram you into a song. 'The bastard who talks more to the night than to the crown.' Or something like that. Bards are bad with accurate quotes, but good with imagery."

The priest grinned into his cup. "There, you see?" he said softly. "You are already poetry, whether you like it or not."

"I don't want to," I said.

"Then you're exactly the right person," said Iona. "Those who want poetry aren't suited for it. Those who hate it will be drowned in it."

She placed her palm out as if offering something that wasn't there. "I have no wreath to place on your head," she said. "No cloth to make you cleaner. No prayer to clear your mind. I only have eyes to see you as you are. And a tongue to tell you, even if you don't want to hear it. If you're looking for something else, go to the women who whisper 'hero' in your ear while they count your coins."

I looked at her hand. Rough, with small scars, a few red spots where the skin had been burned by the hot water. Hands that had worked just like mine, only on different things. I felt something inside me rebel—not against her, but against what it all meant.

Love. Not the grand word that appears in songs. Not what priests bless and lords arrange. More like the small, ugly thing that scratches at your door at night when you think you're safe.

"What do you want from me?" I asked.

She didn't look away. "Nothing at all," she said. "You haven't done anything to me. I haven't done anything to you. I just want to know if you're one of those who run away when the music stops. Or one who stays when everyone else goes to collect their pay."

I thought of the shadow. The hole. Wallace on the pedestal. The crowns on the table. And of her, here, in this in-between space that wasn't one: not a battlefield, not home, not a bed, not an altar. A tavern in the middle of nowhere, where someone dared to ask me who I would be when it was all over.

"I don't know," I said. More honestly than I wanted to. "I don't know if I'll stay. I don't even know if I'll see next winter. All I know is that I'm sick of being told by men with clean fingers what I owe Scotland."

She nodded slowly. "Good answer," she said. "Just bad for living. But a good truth."

Tam had stopped listening and drifted over to the next table, where someone was unpacking cards. Fergus was half with us, half talking to a merchant who claimed he could procure a better sword if he was paid enough. The priest watched Iona as if she were a rare animal that had turned up in the wrong place.

"Next time you talk to your shadow by the river," she said, "come by beforehand. I'll give you something to drink, something to remind you that you still have a body. Otherwise, with all that talking to the darkness, you'll forget it eventually."

"And what are you drinking?" I asked.

"Enough to sleep," she said. "Not enough to forget. Forgetting is for people who think they deserved something different before."

I took my mug and tapped it lightly against hers, which was half empty. No cheers, no "to ours." Just that brief clack of wood on wood, saying: I heard you.

The shadow behind me stretched in the flickering fire, as if yawning. "Well, wonderful," I heard it in my head. "Now you not only have wars, crowns, and beasts hanging around your neck, but also a woman who sees you too closely. Congratulations, William."

I drank. It burned. She drank. It probably burned just as much. And for a moment, a stupid, small moment in a far too long war, I felt that this in-between space—between two battles, between two nights, between two wrong decisions—held something like love within it. Not the grand, pure kind. The dirty, tired, defiantly alive kind.

And that's exactly the one that stays the longest.

Love doesn't make you better. It just softens you in places where you actually wished you had calluses. I'd spent my whole life working to make sure nothing really affected me anymore, except steel and halfway decent alcohol. And then there was a woman in a tavern who looked at me as if she were counting my insides, checking if there was anything left that shouldn't be thrown away immediately.

After she left, I did what any halfway sane man in war does when something affects him: I pretended nothing had happened. I ate the stale bread, I drank the bad whiskey, I joked with the others, who all laughed too loudly because we all knew we had to, otherwise we'd stop. But somewhere in the back of my mind, she was like a shadow in the doorway, one you can't shake even when the room is full.

"You're staring," the priest said later, when we sat alone at the table for a moment, the others playing cards and lying.

"I have a face," I growled. "What else am I supposed to do?"

"You're staring at a particular corner of the room," he said. "And it's not there right now."

I drank. "Maybe I'm talking to my shadow," I murmured. "It's darker back there."

"Your shadow wears skirts," he said. "It's new."

As we stumbled back to camp that evening, I had more inside me than necessary and less than I wanted. The path up the slope was familiar, the wind cold, the campfire light like a weary wreath around everything we called "home," even though it was just a collection of damp tents. I lay down, knife at my side, coins in my pocket, Iona on my mind, even though I'd broken myself of the habit of taking faces with me years ago.

The next few days pretended to be all about war. Messengers came and went, talking of movements in the south, of English troops regrouping, of some lord who had promised more than he could deliver and now needed men to back up his lies. Wallace was constantly on the move, on a horse that looked more like it was carrying him than supporting him. The gray-bearded lord with the clean fingers gave more speeches than necessary, always saying the same things in different words: order, unity, reason, crowns, negotiations. Somewhere in between, he also threw in the word "honor," just to keep the fools quiet.

We trained as best we could in a camp that was more mud than soil. Spears up, shields forward, steps in time, as if the enemy were politely waiting for us to finish counting. Fergus's bandits reluctantly learned to stand more or less in formation, and the peasants reluctantly learned to thrust, as if it weren't just about the next sack of grain.

But at night, when the day had finally made enough noise, that other thing crept closer again: the in-between spaces. Those narrow strips where you neither fight, nor sleep, nor drink. Where your hands don't know what to do, because there's no one around to punch in the face or beat the back of.

"You're going down again," Tam said on the third day, when we were once again assigned to fetch supplies. "It shows. You walk differently when you know there's someone down there who isn't just looking at you because of your sword."

"I'm going down because the sergeant said so," I growled. "Not because someone's waiting somewhere with a mug."

"Sometimes it's the same thing," he said.

Stirling greeted us again with that smell of too much life in too little space. With every step, I felt the camp from above detach itself from my bones and something else creep into them—not peace, that would be a lie. More like a bad compromise: down here, the war was further away, but not gone. It was on every corner in the form of men with crests, soldiers with blank stares, beggars too young to look so old.

The "Crooked Crown" was less noisy this time. Perhaps it was the time of day, perhaps it was because it was a day when rumors of the coming frost spread faster than those of the coming victory. We entered, and I immediately felt my body tense differently. Not like before a battle. Like before a question to which one has no prepared answer.

She was there. Of course she was. Behind the counter this time, not by the fireplace. She was wiping cups, blindfolded, her hands doing it of their own accord, her eyes in the room. When we entered, they lingered on us for a moment. On me. Again that look, too long to be accidental, and too short to become possession.

"Do you see?" whispered the shadow in my head. "The night continues to tell its story."

"It's you again," said Iona. "I thought the war had already digested you."

"War only chews," I said. "Spitting takes time."

She raised an eyebrow. "The metaphors are getting better," she said. "Sit down. You look like your bones are about to fall out of your boots."

We sat down again at the rickety table. It was practically our regular spot. The innkeeper brought us drinks without asking what we wanted. He knew we were the kind of men who couldn't be picky because life chose us anyway.

"Did you talk to your shadow again at night?" Iona asked as she handed out jugs.

"Yes," I said. "This time he complained that I was involving him too much in stories."

"Shadows like stories," she said. "They are the only ones who aren't in them and yet are still there."

The priest stared at her. "You would make a good preacher," he said.

"I've seen enough corpses," she replied. "I don't need any more with incense still on them."

I noticed myself trying to categorize her. The world was simpler when you could put people in boxes: whore, maid, peasant woman, widow, merchant. But she didn't quite fit. Too awake to merely serve. Too tired to still dream. Too sharp to merely endure.

"What will you do when we no longer come?" I asked. "When the war moves on and Stirling is just a memory in songs that no one sings properly?"

She leaned against the counter, looked at me as if I'd asked whether March follows February. "Then I'll keep going," she said. "I started breathing before you guys showed up. I'm not going to stop just because you think you're the most important thing that's ever happened to this place."

"Hard," Tam murmured.

"Not harsh," she said. "Used. Warriors come and go. Some leave coins here, some blood, some children. In the end, we remain, the ones who get to clean everything up."

"And what will remain of you?" I asked.

She blinked briefly, as if she hadn't expected that question. Probably no one else ever asked her any that didn't start with "How much?"

"I don't know," she said. "Maybe a few stories that aren't quite true. Maybe a girl who calls me 'mother' once, even though it's not certain I deserve it. Maybe nothing at all. Maybe just the certainty that I didn't just stand by and watch you all destroy each other."

I felt something stir within me that had been dormant for a long time. Not pride, not anger. A kind of recognition. Someone who didn't pretend to be a victim just because he wasn't wearing armor.

"You see, bastard," whispered the shadow, "the world isn't just breaking for you."

The days dragged on, and somehow I suddenly had a new point on my mental map. There was the river, there was the hole, there were the tents, there was the castle—and there was a tavern where a woman stood looking at me as if I weren't just a weapon with legs. You'd think something like that would be a joy. In reality, it was more like an additional front.

I started laying the groundwork. That sounds grand, but in the end it was just this: if we were sent down to Stirling, I made sure I went along. If we weren't sent, I made sure there were reasons to go anyway. A broken belt, a missing hammer, the rumor that a trader down there had better arrowheads. You learn quickly how to bend orders in the desired direction when you've spent your whole life practicing getting your way with your fists.

Sometimes she was there, sometimes not. On the days she was absent, the tavern felt like any other: just wood, just smoke, just voices. On the days she was there, the room took on a kind of shape, and I realized I was beginning to get used to the idea that someone knew my footsteps before I even took them.

Once, it was late, the shop half empty, most people already staggered towards the alley or fallen asleep on the tables, and I sat there alone. Tam had disappeared somewhere with a card game, Fergus had retreated to a corner with a merchant, and the priest had vanished into the back room with a terminally ill man to alleviate his fear of a god he himself barely believed in.

Iona wiped the tables, one after the other. When she got to mine, she sat down on the bench opposite instead of clearing it immediately.

"You come often," she said.

"The war is sending me," I said.

"No," she said. "The war sends many. I only see most of them once before they disappear into some songs or pits. You come often."

I turned the mug over in my hand. "I like the bottom," I said. "It wobbles. Feels more honest than the boards in the council tents."

"You can't lie," she said. "At least not well."

"I'm a very good liar," I said. "I do it all the time. To myself. To them." I pointed in a direction where the camp was located. "In front of the river. In front of the hole. In front of the knife."

Her eyes narrowed. "But not in front of me," she said.

The knife vibrated. The shadow laughed softly.

"What do you want to hear?" I asked.

She thought for a moment. "I want to know," she said finally, "what you think will happen when all this is over. Not with Scotland. With you."

I'd never really thought about it. Not properly, anyway. When I'd thought about "afterwards," it was always just a vague patch beyond the next battle, beyond the next winter, beyond the next betrayal. A room with a bed, a hole with a stone, a dark corner in a city where no one knew me.

"I think I'm going to die somewhere," I said. "Not a particularly big place, not a particularly small one. Maybe in a battle, maybe in an alley, maybe in a bed I fall into drunk. Someone might know my name, most won't. If I'm lucky, the knife will still be at my side. If I'm unlucky, someone else will be wearing it."

She looked at me for a long time. "And until then?" she asked.

"Until then," I said, "I'll hit those I'm supposed to hit, try not to become what they want me to become, and talk to my shadow at night so I don't completely forget who I once was."

She nodded slowly. "No woman in the picture," she said. Not accusingly. Simply stating a fact.

"Women" – I searched for words – "make pictures complicated."

"Men too," she said. "But we'll get them anyway."

I grinned crookedly. "I have nothing to offer you," I said. "No house, no land, no guarantee that I won't be lying in a ditch somewhere tomorrow. I only have a broken body, a knife that isn't mine, and a story that no one wants to read because it's not clean."

"I'm no princess," she said dryly. "I don't need a court. I have a tavern that isn't mine, a back that has aged too soon, and nights when I hear more stories than are good for one person. I'm not asking for a house. I'm asking if you'll stay when everyone else leaves."

"I can't stay," I said. "The war won't let me."

"I didn't say you had to be here all the time," she said. "I'm asking if you'll come back. If you won't be the first to take the opportunity to stay away when you have the choice."

That was it. No grand vows, no "forever." Just one small, dangerous question: Will you come back?

"I don't know," I said. "I only know that I won't run away because it's easier not to feel anymore."

She smiled briefly, exhausted. "That's enough," she said. "For now."

She stood up, took my empty cup, but her fingers brushed briefly against mine. Not accidentally, not deliberately. Just a fleeting contact, warm, rough, real. It shot through my body like a blow, but not the kind that knocks your teeth out. The kind that reminds you you still have some.

Later, as we climbed the hill again, more sober than we would have liked, I paused briefly and looked back. The tavern was just a yellowish stain in the night, another salivating mouth in a city full of hungry openings. But I knew that inside, a woman was stacking plates, washing jugs, talking to men who might be forgotten by tomorrow—and that I was now one of those she would remember.

"You will die, bastard," whispered the shadow. "But perhaps not completely empty."

"Shut your mouth," I said. "Or I'll lead you back to the hole."

He laughed. "Too late," he said. "You've dug yourself a new one. Right under your breast."

I lay down under my blanket, the knife warm at my side, my bones heavy, my head full. War outside, betrayal above, beast below, love somewhere in between, in a dirty room with bad beer and honest eyes. I knew that things like this rarely end well. But since when did I begin this life hoping for a happy ending?

I fell asleep with the taste of old whiskey in my mouth and the vague feeling of a touch on my hand. And for the first time in a long time, I didn't dream of the hole. Instead, I dreamt of a door with a crooked sign, upon which hung a crooked crown. Behind it, a voice that knew my name without any bard having twisted it beforehand.

Perhaps, I thought briefly, this is exactly the kind of love we deserve here: not grand, not pure, not for eternity. But persistent enough to dig its way into the crevices of our bones between battles. And sometimes, that's all the world has left to offer.

It took me a while to realize she wasn't just a temporary interruption. At first, I really thought she was. A kind of human hiccup in a war that otherwise consisted only of shouting, orders,

and stupid remarks. Something that would eventually disappear when the next mission came along or the next lord decided we should all die somewhere else.

But gaps can become larger than you think.

The days slipped by like blunt knives. Reconnaissance missions, small skirmishes, calls from messengers who brought more dust than news. The English moved, we moved, Wallace sometimes disappeared for days, then reappeared, with new lines on his forehead and a voice that sounded a little rougher each time. The gentlemen with clean hands talked of council meetings, conditions, safeguards. The usual poison, only in different bottles.

We were sent to Stirling more often. At least, that's how it felt. Maybe it really was, maybe I've just finally started counting. Every march down those few miles was like a path between two lives: up there, the camp, the men, the knife, the hole in the head. Down there, the town, the tavern, the feeling that there might be something other than dying and being sold.

Of course, I told myself I was only going for the provisions. Or the nails. Or because the innkeeper supposedly had new schnapps so strong that even the priest might briefly believe in miracles. Everyone who knew me knew that was a lie. Even the one who knew me best: the Shadow.

"You're not leaving for the jugs," he murmured as we trudged down the slope once again. "You're leaving because someone is looking at you with eyes that don't treat you like a placeholder for a grave marker."

"Fuck you," I said to myself.

"You just hope she doesn't," he replied.

The "Crooked Crown" smelled of stew and fear that day. A strange mixture. It was more crowded than usual, full of strangers, some wearing English cuts under Scottish coats, others Scottish faces with English eyes. Money was finding new ways to change hands, and you could see it in their eyes: some were hoping, others calculating.

Iona was behind the counter, her sleeves rolled up, her hair twisted into a bun that was already half falling apart. She seemed more tense than usual, like someone who already knows the day is going to be longer than is good for them.

When she saw us, a brief spark flickered across her face before she pushed it away again. I was sure I didn't have to invent it.

"You have great timing," she said. "The rats are just leaving the ship, you come in and find a seat."

"We are not rats," said Tam. "We are the holes in the ship."

"That makes it better," she muttered, placing mugs in front of us. "It's louder than usual today. If you're looking for trouble, you don't even have to try."

She was right. In a corner sat two men with a coat of arms that meant nothing to me, but looked expensive. One of them was talking to a bard who was more caressing his lute than

playing it. I heard words like "ballad," "Stirling," "courage," "unforgettable." When I listened more closely, I realized it wasn't about us. It was about some lord who had supposedly made a "decisive" contribution to the battle by showing "strategic restraint" at the right moment. In other words: by being a coward. The bard nodded eagerly, already picturing the coins in his purse glittering.

"They buy songs," said the priest beside me. "They don't even earn fame for themselves anymore."

"Then let them," I murmured. "If we're lucky, they'll forget about us and we can die in peace."

"You have a strange idea of happiness," said Iona, who had overheard it.

She stood still, a moment too long. The innkeeper called her, some guest held up the empty jug, but she didn't react immediately.

"They were talking again," she said softly, only to me. "Upstairs. In the castle. Men who no longer know what mud smells like. I can hear it in the messengers, the way they walk. Light-footed. He who brings good news does not stumble."

"And?" I asked.

"They're talking about an offer from the English king," she said. "About amnesties, titles, land grants. And about... setting an example."

The knife vibrated against my side. Examples. Not a good word when it comes from people with crowns.

"For whom?" I asked.

She looked me straight in the eyes. "For him," was all she said.

I didn't have to ask who she meant. The name was there between us, even if we didn't say it. William Wallace. The man who was supposed to be a torch, but was slowly being treated like a problem that needed a polite solution.

"Rumors," I muttered. "Everything is just rumors until someone is standing there with a noose in their hand."

"Rumors are often right here," she said. "Ink runs faster than blood. And when they're already talking about it in taverns, it means the decision is almost made."

I drank not because I was thirsty, but because I didn't know what to do with my hands.

"And you?" I asked. "What will you do if they sell it? If they tell us it's for order, peace, the children, the stars, and their God?"

She looked away for a moment, over my shoulder, into the room. Men, jugs, lies, laughter. Stirling in one breath.

"I decide," she then said, "for whom I leave the door open."

Later, as the noise grew louder and the day's steam settled on the ceiling, something shifted. They were small things. A few men with boots that were too clean, pretending to be peasants. A bard who changed his name mid-song, a name that was meant to be cheered. A merchant who suddenly accepted English coins without a murmur. The city swayed, quietly, like a board you slowly put weight on.

Tam and Fergus were somewhere deep in discussion about dice and cheating. The priest was arguing under his breath with another clergyman about whether God cared more about battles or debts. I sat there, knife at my side, shadow in my mind, and a seat opposite me that was only half empty because Iona walked by every few minutes doing something unnecessary. Moving jugs. Wiping up crumbs. Breathing.

As the shop slowly emptied, the voices deepened, the songs became more off-key, she finally stayed seated. Just like that. She had a pitcher for herself, water, I thought. She rarely drank when she was working. Someone had to keep things under control.

"You listen too much," she said.

"I'm just listening," I said. "There's too much going on up there. Too much talking, too much calculating, too much forgetting."

"You listen to your inner voice too much," she corrected. "Your head is louder than this shop."

I thought about it. "Maybe," I said. "The other noises are easier to drown out."

She looked at my hands. "You're not trembling," she observed.

"Not yet," I said.

"Most people who have seen as much as you do tremble," she said. "If not their hands, then their eyes. With you, it's your mouth. You talk when you should stop, and you're silent when you should speak."

"You sound like my shadow," I said.

"Then your shadow should work in taverns more often," she replied.

The innkeeper called her about some crate, she waved him off. "He's been waiting for ten years, he can wait a while longer," she muttered.

"Why are you doing this to yourself?" I asked after a while. "Us. Warriors. Drunks. Men who stare at you like you're the last piece of meat on a table full of dogs."

She looked at me sharply. "You're staring differently," she said. "You're looking as if you're waiting for me to send you away."

I didn't know whether to laugh or curse. So I did nothing.

"I put myself through this because I have nowhere else to go," she finally said. "And because at least here I can have a say in who gets on my nerves. Out there, it's always other people who decide who can stand whom."

I took a deep breath. The words burned inside me before I even spoke them.

"If..." I began, realizing how ridiculous the word sounded in my mouth, "...if this all blows up. Seriously. Not just little skirmishes. If they start throwing heads around to make their contracts more credible – then get the hell out of here."

She grimaced. "Where to?" she asked. "To a village where they look at me as if I'd personally invited the war? To the mountains, to some relatives who only remind me of who I should have been? At least here I know the rats."

"Go somewhere where they don't know your name," I said. "It's easier to start over when no one knows who you've served."

"And you?" she asked. "Do you also go somewhere where they don't know your name? Or do you stay right where they shout it the loudest before they open something?"

I looked at my hands. Calluses, scars, dirt. Hands that had held more than was good for them: weapons, bodies, lies.

"I'm good at staying," I said. "And bad at disappearing."

She nodded slowly. "I know," she said. "That's why I'm telling you something."

She leaned forward, closer than she'd ever been before. I smelled smoke in her hair, sweat on her skin, the lingering scent of beer on her breath. No perfume, no roses, no bullshit. Just life.

"If they sell you," she said quietly, "and I'm still here – I'll remember who you were before they make a story out of you."

The knife vibrated. The shadow fell silent.

"And what if they catch you?" I asked.

She shrugged. "Then that's it," she said. "Everyone has their own way of leaving this play. Some survive and are still dead. Some die and yet remain."

She placed her hand on mine. Not as fleetingly as the first time. Firmer. Not demanding. Not pleading. Just there. Her fingers were warm and rough, her nails short, a cut on one knuckle that hadn't healed.

I could have pulled my hand away. Could have joked around. Could have downplayed everything, like I always did when anyone got too close to anything that smacked of "us." I didn't. My fingers closed around hers, and for a moment, I was still inside. No hole, no river, no traitor, no Wallace. Just two hands finding each other, even though they should have known better.

"You are a mistake," said the shadow in my head. "But a necessary one."

"Maybe I'm your fault too," I thought back.

We sat like that until someone shouted that the curfew for soldiers was the same—some official nonsense meant only to play at maintaining order. She withdrew her hand, quickly, but not with shame. More like someone who knows that different rules apply now.

"Go," she said. "Before I get used to you being here."

"Too late," I said.

She smiled crookedly. "Then hurry up and stay alive," she said. "I hate it when stories end abruptly."

On the way back, the slope was steeper than usual. The wind bit more, the ground was more slippery, the shadows longer. Tam babbled on about a successful dice roll, Fergus cursed a merchant who had cheated him, and the priest murmured a quiet prayer for a man who was probably already dead.

My mind was silent. That was new. No grand philosophy, no long sentences. Just a feeling I didn't like because I'd forgotten it: that vague tug in my chest, that there's something there you don't want to lose, even though you know that's exactly what's going to happen.

I lay down in the camp, the knife at my side, the coins in my pocket, the smoke from Stirling still in my hair. The shadow lay down beside me, as always.

"So," he said. "Now you have something to lose."

"I always had something to lose," I thought back. "I just pretended it wasn't anything."

"The war will help you," he said. "It will take away everything that is important to you. Sooner or later."

"He should try," I said. "This time he'll have to fight."

I closed my eyes. For the first time in a long time, sleep wasn't just an escape route. It was also a place where I could see her again without having to run over cliffs or follow orders. In my dreams, she stood in the doorway of the Crooked Crown, the shadow behind her, the light before her, the world in between. And somewhere beyond, quietly, patiently, waited what always waits: the next battle, the next betrayal, the next cut.

Love in the space between battles, I thought, just before it got dark. Maybe that was all we'd get. But damn it – it was more than I'd expected.

When friends turn into lies

Friends are like promises made after the third mug: they sound good, but rarely last. I've never put much stock in the word. On the street, a friend is someone who helps you get into a fight and then steals your wallet if you're sleeping too soundly. In war, a friend is someone who stands by your side while the arrows are flying and then decides whether to drink with you or sell you out.

In the camp, they sometimes called us "brothers." Especially after Stirling, especially after the depression, especially after evenings when too many had survived not to seek an excuse to drink. "Brothers in the dirt," "Brothers in blood," "Brothers in battle." It always reeked of smoke and cheap sentimentality when they said that. Eventually, you realize: the more often someone says "brother," the sooner they'll be holding the sack you're stuffed into later.

It started with Tam laughing less. That might not sound like much, but it's like a river suddenly running less smoothly. Tam wasn't the brightest among us, but he was the one who could always manage a witty remark, even when he was practically scraping a piece of gum stuck to his bread. And then, suddenly, there was silence. Not a long silence, just a slight break in his sentences.

We sat by the fire, the air heavy with the smell of stew and wet socks. It had been a long day – training, messengers, the usual whining from some non-commissioned officers who felt important when they got to yell at us. In the background, they were already gathering men for something new, some march, some "position improvement" that, as always, meant we'd be the first ones where it hurt.

Tam poked around in the pot as if trying to uncover the bottom. Aidan watched him as if there were an animal sitting there he hadn't seen before. Fergus counted coins he'd wrested from some merchant. Ruairi mended his belt, cursing, cursing again. Everything normal—except for Tam's face.

"Spit it out," I said. "Otherwise you'll choke on it."

He looked up as if I had jolted him out of a dream. "What?" he asked.

"You look like you have an English spear in your stomach and you don't want to admit it," I said.

He didn't laugh. That was the moment I realized it was serious.

"I talked to my brother," he finally said. "He was with one of the other groups. Remember that guy who was sitting with us in the tavern the other day? With the rings."

I nodded. The "brokered" pay. The man with the pleasant voice and the unpleasant offers.

"They agreed," said Tam. "My brother and his. Fixed salary, protection, supplies, a piece of land, in case all this isn't so important anymore."

"And you?" I asked.

He pushed the bowl away. "He says I'd be an idiot if I didn't go over there," he muttered. "You there in the bastard wedge'—yes, that's what they call us—you'll be sacrificed when things get serious. Those who aren't tied to a house are the first they throw to the enemy and the beast.' That's what he said. And then he calculated for me what he'd already received. The first payment. Real silver pieces, not this worn-out stuff they throw at us."

"Your brother has always been good at math," Fergus said. "At all things that don't involve him bleeding."

Tam glared at him. "He has a family," he growled. "Five children. A wife who's not in the best of health. What's he supposed to do? Hope for a hole in the ground to swallow him up before winter does?"

"Your brother always put himself first," Fergus said. "For him, family is the word he uses to feed his greed."

I raised my hand. "Argue later," I said. "What do you want, Tam? Not what he wants."

He stared into the fire. The light swirled in his eyes, as if he were half here, half at some hut in a backwater village that smelled of wet straw and missed opportunities.

"I don't want to die like a dog in the dirt," he said quietly. "I also don't want to witness all of you dying while someone sits in a tent somewhere saying, 'Well, it was necessary.' I want..." He paused. "...I want to stand in a field someday and not think about how well the ground is suited for digging graves."

"That's what we all want," Aidan murmured.

"No," Tam objected. "Some of you don't even know that such a thing exists anymore. A field without any corpses in it."

That hit home. I felt something stirring inside me – not anger, but rather a quiet, shitty understanding.

"And?" I asked. "Did he promise you seats? For you?"

Tam nodded slowly. "He said he could speak with his lord," he said. "Someone like me was always needed. Strong, not entirely stupid, used to blood. He said I only had to..." He searched for the word. "...break free."

"By whom?" asked Fergus.

"From you," said Tam.

The silence that followed was heavier than any helmet. I looked at the faces around me. Aidan, pretending to be only looking at his fingernails. Ruairi, who suddenly found the strap very interesting. Fergus, clutching his coins tighter than necessary. We all knew the day would come. The day when the "we" on the paper would become "them." I had only hoped it would come later.

"And?" I asked again. "What do you want?"

He looked at me. "I don't know," he said. "If I stay here, I'll probably die in some hole, in some battle, for some man who doesn't know my name. If I go with my brother, I might die in a different hole, but knowing that my people might have one more winter to eat."

"Or you'll die before them, because then you'll be standing exactly where your lord puts you when he wants to show his new English friend how loyal his men are," Fergus interjected. "Don't think that bought souls live longer. They just die on cleaner ground."

Tam turned around. "Easy for you to say," he snarled. "You have no family. Just knives and memories. You're happy if someone later tells you in a tavern that you once insulted the wrong people."

Fergus's face hardened. "You were family to me too, you jerk," he said. "Do you think we've been putting up with your big mouth for years because we like listening? You're not just a sign next to me. You're..." He trailed off as if he'd choked on the word. "...habit."

"Friend," whispered the shadow in my head. "He means friend."

I took a deep breath. "Tam," I said calmly, "if you want to leave, go. I won't hold you back with grand speeches. I'm not Wallace. I'm not waving any flag here. But if you leave, be honest about it. Don't say you're only doing it for your family. Also say that you can't stand standing beside us anymore, waiting for them to sacrifice us."

He stared at me. "And you?" he asked. "Can you stand it?"

I thought of Iona. Of the river. Of the beast. Of Wallace on the pedestal and the men with the crowns, who already concealed the knives in their words.

"No," I said. "I can't stand it. I'll do it anyway."

He laughed bitterly. "Because you're the great hero, right?"

"Because I can't do anything else," I said. "I grew up in the dirt. I know nothing but kicking something bigger than myself. If I start settling down in houses now, I'll die faster than any English spear could."

The priest, who had remained silent until then, spoke up. "There is no right way," he said. "Only different ways of living with the wrong one. Those who leave don't automatically betray. Those who stay aren't automatically loyal. But..." He looked at Tam. "...if you leave, do us one favor: don't come back one day with a banner raised against us and pretend you had no choice."

"They're always talking about elections," Tam muttered. "As if we ever had one."

"You have one now," I said. "That's the shitty part. As long as you're just being pushed around, you can say it was fate. Now you can decide whose lies you're going along with."

He stood up abruptly, the bowl tipped over, the stew spilled into the ashes. "I want to think," he growled. "And I don't want you talking in my head. You're already in there enough."

We watched him walk away. His back had broadened since Stirling, but at that moment he looked smaller than before, when we used to rob shabby guards in some back alley.

"There he goes," said the shadow. "One of the good ones. They always go first."

"He's not gone yet," I murmured.

"Yes," said the shadow. "Part of him is already in that other camp, with the rings, with the bags. The rest will follow."

The next day, the man with the rings came back. Not to join us by the fire, he wasn't stupid enough for that. He stayed on the sidelines, talking to the sergeant, talking to the priest, talking to a few clan chiefs who pretended to examine the dirt under their fingernails while actually staring at his rings. Tam kept his distance, but not enough. I saw his gaze drift over again and again. Like a dog trying to ignore the sausage on the table while its stomach screams.

I couldn't sleep that night. Not because of the beast, not because of Wallace, not because of the crowns. Because of Tam. Because of the possibility that his blanket would be empty in the morning, not because he'd fallen in battle, but because he'd chosen the more comfortable side of the blade.

I went back to the edge of the camp. The river was a dark scar cutting through the land. Its roar was the only sound that wasn't a lie. I stood there, the shadow beside me, the knife at my side, waiting for something inside me to make the decision for him.

"Friendship is a beautiful word," the shadow whispered in my head. "Until the first messenger arrives with a bag."

"He owes us nothing," I said. "We never swore to die together."

"You're lying," said the shadow. "Not out loud. But you'd like it to be true. You'd like not to be the only one left when everyone else discovers the need to become sane."

I saw my hands in the moonlight. Hardened fingers, split knuckles, the lines of a life that had never learned to hold someone without simultaneously clenching its fist.

"If he leaves," I said, "then he leaves. I won't throw anything after him. I..."

"...you'll still think of him every time you feel a gap beside you in a battle line," the shadow finished. "You'll hope that the same man over there isn't by chance the one who gets his pay from the same purse. That's how friends work. First they're beside you, then they're facing you, and both of them act like they have no choice."

Tam's blanket wasn't empty in the morning. He was sitting there, his eyes red, his jaw hard. He looked as if he'd been fighting the same opponent as me all night.

"And?" I asked as I sat down next to him.

He looked at me, and in his eyes was something I rarely saw: something like shame. "I told him to go to hell," he said. "My brother. And the ringman. I said if they're so proud of their pay, they should first climb into the same holes we did."

"And what did he say?" asked Fergus.

Tam sighed. "He said I was a fool. And that he hopes I die quickly so I don't have to experience them selling me out in the end."

We were silent for a moment. Then I patted him on the shoulder. Not heroically, not brotherly. Just firmly.

"Welcome to the fools," I said. "We get poor pay, but a good chance of not hating ourselves in the mirror later."

"Friends," murmured the shadow. "Sometimes it's just people who commit the same stupidity as you. At the same time."

I knew that wasn't the end of it. Nothing was alright. The betrayal still hung in the air, like smoke settling into every fiber of your being. The beast hadn't gone. Wallace still stood on his precarious pedestal. The crowns continued to roll across tables whose wood we couldn't afford.

But that morning I had lost at least one less thing than I had feared. A man who could have left had stayed. Not out of honor, not out of blindness. Out of defiance. And out of something like... well, friendship.

If friends turn into lies, I thought, then we narrowly escaped it today. Tomorrow it would be someone else's turn. And I was sure that not everyone would make the same decision.

But for that one day, on that one miserable morning in a wet camp somewhere in Scotland, the fire was a little warmer. Not much. But enough that I could hold my hands over it without freezing to death.

It's strange, this whole betrayal thing. You always wait for the big knife in the back, the loud bang, the moment someone screams and everyone sees who's slitting whose throat. But it rarely happens like that. Betrayal usually comes like a damp fog. You only realize you're seeing less when you've already gone one step too far.

After Tam stayed, the camp didn't suddenly become more honest. It just became more complicated. We were no longer just the ones who were apparently too proud or too stupid to be bought. We were also the ones being watched. In a world like that, anyone who isn't for sale is automatically suspect.

It started with little things, as always. One of the scribes kept showing up at our place. Not with parchment in his hand, but with questions on his lips. Friendly questions. Those are the worst.

He was a thin man with ink stains on his fingers that looked like disease. His voice was soft, almost apologetic. The kind of person who apologizes when he takes the water out of the

pitcher you've paid for. He never sat down; he always stayed standing. Another trick. If someone's standing, they can leave faster if they notice what's going on.

"You're the ones from the third wedge, aren't you?" he began.

"It depends on who's asking," said Fergus. "And why."

The clerk smiled. "I only keep lists," he said. "The lords want to know who they can count on."

"The beast keeps lists too," I muttered. "It counts differently."

He pretended not to have heard. "It is said that you proved yourselves to be particularly... steadfast," he continued. "At the bridge. At the dip. And in the negotiations, well, let's just say... unyielding."

"I call it backbone," said Tam.

"Backbone is important," the writer nodded. "But it can also break if you overload it."

I felt my shadow stir beside me, even though the sun wasn't really up. "That one," it whispered in my head, "will later write who was a traitor and who was a hero. Remember his face."

"What do you want?" the sergeant finally asked, as all the polite circling was getting on his nerves.

The clerk cleared his throat. "The council," he said, "has decided to get a more accurate picture of the mood in the army. It is important to know whom the men follow. Which voices carry weight. Which... pose dangers."

"Dangers?" I repeated. "We are dangerous, that's our job."

"Of course," said the scribe. "I mean... men who follow a particular person too much. And not enough the council. The gentlemen agree that the fight for Scotland must not depend on a single name."

There he was again, the shadow of Wallace, whom they now preferred to see on the wall rather than on the field.

"And what does that have to do with us?" Aidan asked.

The scribe looked at each of us individually. I saw his gaze linger longer on some. On Tam, who still looked tired from the night with his brother. On the priest, whose doubts were now palpable. On me, because of the gap in my teeth, the knife, my reputation.

"I've been told," he said, "that you have a good eye for... currents. That you know who talks a lot in the camp and when. Who goes where at night. Who is restless. Who is... receptive."

"Receptive to what?" asked Fergus.

"For grand words," the writer said. "For dangerous things. For people who prefer to create symbols rather than structures."

He said "structures" so lovingly, as if they were children.

"You want us to snitch," I said. I was fed up with the circle. "You want to know who's too attached to Wallace. So you can say later that you were just removing 'dangers' from the way."

The writer didn't avoid my gaze. I give him credit for that. He had more courage than many a man with a sword. "I want," he said, "the right men to be in the right place at the right time. Anyone who looks too much in other directions risks jeopardizing the entire wedge."

"Dangerous for whom?" the priest asked quietly. "For those who fight, or for those who negotiate?"

The writer shifted his weight. "I only write down what is said," he murmured. "I don't decide anything."

"Every hand that touches a pen decides," the priest said. "It decides what is forgotten and what becomes important."

"We won't betray anyone," the sergeant said. "If you want to know what the mood is like, go through the ranks yourself. Talk to the men. Look them in the eye. Write down what you can endure."

The writer didn't flinch. "I understand," he said. "It's difficult to write about friends."

The word hung in the air for a moment. Friends. There it was again. Bad joke, bad timing.

"We are not a bunch of lads from a village who herded cows together," Fergus said. "We are men who didn't die together when they should have. That's enough."

The writer nodded as if he had seen a particularly interesting plant. "Sometimes," he said, "just such ties are enough to sow... unrest." He lowered his voice. "Look at it this way: if you tell us early on who has overly dangerous ideas, we can react before things get bad. For everyone's protection."

I laughed. It wasn't a pleasant laugh. It sounded like rust flaking off. "You want to be warned," I said. "Not us."

He raised his hands. "Think about it," he said. "I'll be back. Maybe one of you will have made some observations then."

He walked, lightly, the ink on his fingers glistening in the light. The knife at my side vibrated dully. The shadow beside me shook its head in my mind.

"So?" asked Aidan. "What was that?"

"That," said Fergus, "was the polite version of hanging."

"He will come back," the priest murmured. "And at some point, someone will talk to him. Not necessarily from here. But from somewhere. And then they will have names."

We all acted as if it were just another burden we already had to bear. But from that day on, I heard things differently. When men spoke about Wallace, I heard not only the content but also the tone. When they mocked the advice, I unconsciously formed faces. Not to betray them, but because I knew that someday someone else would ask about it.

Two days later, the second crack appeared. Smaller than the first, but sharper. And it didn't come from a clerk. It came from one of us.

Murn.

Murn had never particularly stood out. He was one of those people you only notice when they're gone, because suddenly there's a gap you didn't know was there before. A good fighter, not a great orator, but with one of those faces you'd trust because they don't look like they're about to be turned into a song.

I liked him. Not as obviously as Tam, not as familiar as Aidan, not as dirty as Fergus. But he was someone you could share your back with. That's enough.

But that night he wasn't where he was supposed to be. We were on guard duty again, on the outer perimeter. The sergeant assigned us our positions, we walked our assigned points, stood in place, stamped our feet, and cursed under our breath. And at some point, I noticed that the spot where Murn was supposed to be was empty.

"Maybe pee," said Aidan.

"For that long?" I asked.

"Maybe diarrhea," he said. "The stew was a threat again today."

But at some point it wasn't funny anymore. The sergeant noticed it too, and sent one of the boys to find him. After a while, he came back with a face that said: I saw something I didn't like.

"He's by the writer's tent," said the boy. "I heard his voice."

The sergeant cursed softly. "How many?" he asked.

"Two voices. His. And... another. Maybe the one with the ink."

I felt my stomach go cold. Not from fear. From the realization that something was happening that you'd hoped you'd only ever know from stories.

When the watch was over and we were sitting by the fire again, Murn eventually returned. He sat down as if nothing had happened. He took off his boots, rubbed his feet, and stretched his fingers toward the fire. Completely calm. Too calm.

"Where have you been?" asked Fergus.

"Get some water," he said. Without thinking. Too quickly.

"The boy says you were at the clerk's," I said.

Murn looked at me. Briefly, too briefly, then back into the fire. "The boy hears too much," he muttered.

"And you speak too softly," said the priest.

It was quiet. Only the rustling, a cough, the scratching of some rat in a sack.

"What did you want with him?" the sergeant finally asked, his voice flat.

Murn hesitated a fraction too long. "Nothing," he said. "He just called me. Wanted to know... how things were going. I told him how they were. We're tired. We're angry. We don't trust anyone with clean fingernails anymore."

"And what else?" I asked.

He looked at me again. There was something in his eyes that I didn't recognize. A mixture of defiance and shame. Not a good combination.

"He asked about Wallace," Murn said. "Whether he's often with us. Who he talks to. Which men particularly admire him."

"So?" asked Aidan. "What did you say?"

Murn stared into the fire. The flames flickered in his pupils. "I told you, he's rarely here," he murmured. "That he talks to clan chiefs, to bards, to the loud types who like to talk. We..." He gestured toward us, "...are just foot soldiers. Not his inner circle."

It wasn't a lie. But it wasn't honest either.

"And what did he promise you?" asked Fergus.

Murn's jaw was grinding. "Nothing," he said.

"Murn," said the sergeant. "We've slept in holes together. If you farted in your sleep, I know about it. Don't lie to me."

He jerked his head up. "He didn't promise me anything!" he snarled. "He only said it would be... better for all of us if it was clear who stood for what. He meant that men who... follow one man too closely could later be the reason why the whole fight is considered a rebellion, not a legitimate defense."

The priest smiled bitterly. "I know those words," he said. "I've heard them spoken by others. Only what is later written on parchment is 'legitimate.'"

"He said," Murn continued, "that if I helped him get a clear picture, it could... help. So that later on, you don't lump everyone together. So that you can distinguish who was just following orders, and who... was a leader."

"He offered you a place in the clean part of the story," I said.

Murn snorted. "I don't want a place in history," he said. "I just don't want to end up hanging from a rope one day because some bard sang my name wrong."

The anger in his voice was genuine. That made it worse.

"And do you think," Tam asked quietly, "that they will later say: 'Murn was alright, he just dutifully reported what the others thought'? Do you think the English or their Scottish scribes would be able to distinguish so finely?"

Murn clenched his fists. "I won't betray anyone!" he shouted. "I didn't name names. None! I only said that we are not agitators. That we are only fighters. That those who decide are sitting in the tents, not here around the fire."

"But that's not true," said the priest. "We decide every day. When we walk. When we stop. When we participate. When we remain silent."

I looked at Murn. He wasn't a bad person. Just tired. And tired people are the best customers for beautiful lies.

"Listen," I said, as calmly as I could. "I believe you that you didn't intentionally betray anyone. I even believe you that you thought you were protecting us by downplaying our actions. But that's exactly what they want. For us to make ourselves mere extras while they cloak their betrayal in pretty words."

He shook his head. "You don't understand," he muttered. "You've never had a farm bordering a lord's property, one who could throw you out at any moment. You've never had children looking at you as if you were their only protection from everything out there. You've never—"

"That's right," I interrupted him. "I've only had my own life, which no one gave me. And I've seen more dead people than you've seen cows. But let me tell you one thing: if you think you can protect your children by starting today to neatly list your friends, then you're dumber than I thought."

It hurt to say that. It hurt even more to look at him like that. Murn looked away, his jaw muscles tensing.

"I'm just tired," he said quietly. "Tired of heroes, tired of speeches, tired of always holding the blade while others decide whom it hits."

"We are all tired," said Tam. "But if you stand by the clerk while the rope is being tied, at some point you are no longer just tired. You are useful."

The sergeant stared into the fire for a long moment, then into Murn's face. "We're not children," he said. "I'm not forbidding you from talking to anyone. But let me tell you one thing: if you go to that clerk again, thinking you're doing us a favor—come see me first. And if one day you realize they're using you to flag the wrong people, I hope you'll have the backbone to say 'no' before it's too late."

Murn jumped up. "You're acting like I've already betrayed someone!" he shouted. "I haven't done anything! Nothing!"

"Not yet," said the shadow inside me.

Murn left. Not far, just a few steps. But far enough that the fire no longer illuminated him properly. His face became one of those dark shapes you see from a distance, and you don't know if they're getting closer or disappearing.

I looked around. There were fewer of us, even though no one had left. Something was missing that had previously been taken for granted: the knowledge that none of us would go into a tent at night where ink was more important than blood.

"That's how it begins," the priest said softly. "Not with a dagger, but with a quill pen. Not with a scream, but with 'I only wanted to...'"

"When friends become lies," said Fergus, "the lies are the ones they tell themselves. The rest is just execution."

I placed my hand on the knife. It vibrated almost imperceptibly. No hole, no beast. Just the faint reminder that every blade must eventually decide which way it points. Against the enemy. Against one's own camp. Or against the hand that wants to wield it.

That night I spoke to my shadow again. But not by the river. Not outside. I lay under the covers, listening to men snoring, to one calling for his mother in his sleep, to Murn tossing and turning as if trying to escape his own body.

"Here we go," whispered the shadow. "Now they'll test us. Friends. Loyalty. All the filth bards love to pack into their choruses. Let's see who survives a verse."

I closed my eyes and knew: It wasn't just the enemy lurking somewhere beyond the hills that posed a danger. It was what they planted between us: mistrust, offers, clean hands reaching for us while we believed we were merely searching for a rope to hold us.

And the worst part was: I wasn't sure if we were strong enough not to give in to it. Not all of us. Not always.

The next morning, the air was clearer than our heads. It had frozen lightly during the night, a thin, ridiculous layer of ice on the puddles, as if the sky had tried to preserve our tracks before it accounted for us. Men trudged through the white crust, it cracked with a soft pop, just as something inside us kept starting to develop hairline cracks these days.

We did what we always did: we got dressed, cursed the wet wool, checked belts and straps, and pretended we knew what we were supposed to do today. The sergeant hadn't received his orders yet, the priest hadn't received his answers, and I hadn't had my fill of schnapps. Everything was fine, you could say.

Except that Murn avoided us.

It wasn't obvious. He came when we were sitting by the fire, sat at the end of the bench where Tam used to sit when he wanted to annoy everyone with his jokes. He listened, laughed at the

right moments, ate when the pot was passed around. But there was this little thing: he never looked anyone in the eye for more than a breath. He always let his gaze drop halfway, like a stone you accidentally throw too far across the ice.

"He doesn't even dare to look at himself anymore," murmured the shadow in my head. "That's the first step."

I wanted to grab him, push him against the nearest tent wall, and scream: Tell me what you said. Tell me how far you've gone. Tell me if they're writing your name in clean ink now, while mine remains in my blood. Instead, I did what I'd been doing for months whenever something was too much: I stayed silent, watched, and waited until the knife told me when it was time.

The knife remained silent.

During the day, we were ordered to the edge of the camp, somewhere between piles of garbage and an improvised pen. "We have to make room," one of the non-commissioned officers said. "For new units. Reinforcements." He said "reinforcements" as if he were rolling up a new barrel. I didn't believe him.

They arrived around noon. A platoon of soldiers, well-equipped, lined up somewhat neatly. Many new faces, a few old ones, too upright for what they had been through. Among them: Tam's brother.

I recognized him immediately. The same rugged shoulders as Tam, but more finely dressed. His kilt was newer, his coat thicker, his boots better mended. And his gaze was that of someone who had decided he was now more important than the men he'd once fought over the same food bowl with.

Tam saw him too. You heard it before you saw it: that small inhalation, the sound of someone briefly grabbing a knife. He didn't stand up, but his body stiffened like a spear.

The brother – Calum, whose name I'd rarely heard, usually just "my brother's bastard" – initially pretended not to have seen us. Then his gaze "accidentally" fell over, lingered, too long for chance. He took a step out of line, two, and stopped in front of us.

"Tam," he said, as if it were a polite greeting and not a reminder.

"Calum," said Tam. The word came out dryly.

They looked each other over.

"You're still here," Calum said. "I thought you might have..." He made a vague gesture toward the neat rows behind him. "...reconsidered."

"I have," said Tam. "For a long time."

"And?", asked Calum.

"I've decided I'd rather die with the fools than have to live with you," said Tam.

A brief twitch crossed Calum's face. Not a real blow, more of a sting.

"You've always been bad with numbers," he said.

"But good at counting wounds," said Tam. "You could never keep up with that."

Calum's gaze wandered over us. It lingered on my face for a moment too long. "I hear you're from the Third Wedge," he said. "People are talking about you."

"You too?" I asked.

"I was visiting a lord who would like to have you in his ranks," he said. "But they say you are... difficult to manage." He smiled thinly. "Too many thoughts of your own."

"We can walk upright without anyone pulling on our belts," Fergus said. "That's all."

"Walking upright is good," said Calum. "But hanging upright is also an art."

A chill ran down my spine. Not because of the words themselves, but because of the way he said them: not threatening, more descriptive. As if the whole thing had been planned for a long time.

"They have lists now," he continued, more quietly. "They're writing down who was where and when. Who's sitting with whom. Who's talking to whom. They want to be prepared in case... negotiations fail."

"They want to be prepared to save themselves later," said the priest, who had positioned himself unobtrusively. "When it comes to who is considered a troublemaker and who is 'just a soldier.'"

Calum looked at him with a mixture of boredom and unease. Clergymen were only useful to people like him when they muttered blessings over papers, not over people.

"You're old enough to know how this works, man of God," he said. "The world belongs to those who can say in time, 'I was only doing what I was told. And I warned people when it became dangerous.'"

"Dangerous to whom?" I asked.

Calum pretended not to have heard the question. "This won't go on forever," he said to Tam. "They'll need a head. A big one. One they can show off when they're at the table. And when they have that, they won't be satisfied. Then they'll come to you. To those who stood by him when he spoke. They'll call it a purge. For the sake of peace."

"And you?" asked Tam. "Where are you then?"

Calum smiled. "I'm standing on the side where the ropes are held, not on the side where they end."

That was it, the point. The moment you know that a brother has become a boundary.

Tam stood up slowly. Not threateningly, not loudly. He simply stood. He was half a head taller than Calum, broader, heavier. But at that moment, Calum looked as if he carried more weight. Not in muscle. In potential.

"You've always been good at making excuses," Tam said. "It used to be 'Father sent me,' then 'duty calls.' Now it's 'council said so.' You know what's missing from all of that? You."

Calum shrugged. "I do what I have to do to ensure my people's lives," he said. "You do what you have to do to ease your conscience. We'll see whose children are fed later."

I took a step forward, not threateningly, just to be visible. "Listen," I said. "You want to warn us, is that right? Or do you just want to see us get scared?"

He looked at me, at the gap in my teeth, the knife, the dirt. "I don't want my brother to one day stand next to someone they'll call a 'traitor,'" he said. "I don't want him to die at the same time as his hero, just because he was sitting by the wrong fire at the wrong time."

"Our hero is not Wallace," I said. "Our hero is the one who is not sold out."

Calum chuckled softly. "Then you have a problem," he said. "Because even heroes sell out. If not for money, then for fame. Or for a song."

"Not all of them," the priest interjected. "Some can only be sold if you slit their throats. That's the difference."

Calum snorted. "You're talking a good game," he said. "Once they've tied the ropes, it won't matter. Then only the names written on the parchment will count."

He turned around and stomped back to his line. I saw an officer give him a brief nod. A silent exchange: Well done. Or: Done. Or simply: We'll see you.

"Friends," murmured the shadow. "Sometimes they carry your face. And say things that feel like someone has slashed your back."

The writer returned in the evening. Of course he did. Fog always comes in waves.

He stopped again, politely, his hands folded in front of him as if he were asking for bread.

"I don't want to disturb you," he said.

"Too late," said Fergus. "You're already doing it by breathing."

The writer smiled thinly. "I heard there were visitors today," he said. "New units. Old acquaintances. It's good to see the ranks filling up."

"That makes it easier to count us, yes," I said.

He glanced briefly at Murn. Murn pretended to be only concerned with his sword, but his fingers were too stiff.

"I just wanted to ask," the writer continued, "if there had been any... incidents. Unrest. Conversations. Sometimes new troops bring new... moods with them."

"You mean: new lies," said the priest.

"I mean: new dangers," the writer corrected. "It's important that we know early on if... camps are forming."

"We are the camp," Tam said. "Not part of it."

The writer raised his eyebrows. "You're Tam's brother, aren't you?" he asked.

"No," I said. "He is Tam's conscience. So far, no lord has been willing to buy it."

A few of the men laughed. Short, shrill laughs. The writer grimaced, as if he had hoped for something better.

"It's a shame," he said quietly. "You're good people. Strong fighters. It would be wise if you... remained flexible." He looked around the room. "The council will remember who helped keep things under control. And they'll remember who... was stubborn."

"Being stubborn is our job," I said. "If we were flexible, we would be scrolls."

The writer glanced at Murn once more. It wasn't a long second, but I saw it. A thread stretched taut.

"Think of your own lives," he added. "And the lives of your families. Heroic songs don't feed children."

"Nor ink, by the way," said the priest.

The writer left. The night remained. And with it, the void left by his words.

"He was with him again," said the shadow, barely audible. "With his eyes, if not his feet."

Later, when most were already lying down, I was still awake. The fire was small, almost just embers. Murn sat opposite me, his knees drawn up, his eyes red.

"You went there again, didn't you?" I asked quietly.

He shook his head. "No," he said. "But I've thought about it."

"That's the first step," murmured the shadow. "Thoughts are just actions without legs."

I rubbed my face. I was tired. Too tired for long speeches. "Listen," I said. "I'm not your judge. Not your father. Not your priest. But let me tell you one thing: if you ever think you can save us by feeding them—you're mistaken. They're never full."

Murn looked at me. There was this thing in his eyes: fear. Not of the enemy. Of the choice.

"I don't want to end up as a traitor," he said quietly.

"Then don't start by portraying yourself as a victim," I said. "Traitors always start by saying, 'I had to.'"

He nodded, slowly, as if he were swallowing the sentence.

"And what if I already am?" he whispered. "What if I've already gone too far?"

I looked at his hands. They were trembling slightly. Not from alcohol. From knowledge.

"Then stop," I said. "Now. Not tomorrow. Not 'after the next conversation.' Now. And if the writer comes back, tell him to go to hell. Or better yet: to the priest. At least he can tell him to his face who he's really writing for."

The priest, who had been lying nearby the whole time, turned around. "I heard you," he murmured. "And let me tell you something, Murn: God forgives many things. I don't know if I do. But I'll try. Those up there don't forgive anything. They just rewrite the rules."

Murn closed his eyes. "I'll try," he said. "I'll try."

"Friends," the shadow in my head whispered. "Sometimes they're just the people you don't give up on immediately, even when the world is already holding the noose for you."

The days that followed were tense. Every step through the camp was like walking on thin ice. Not because of arrows. Because of glances. Who spoke to whom. Who sat silently by the fire with whom. Who turned their head too quickly when Wallace passed. Who looked too long in the direction of the cluster of tents where the writers spent their pale nights.

I noticed myself becoming suspicious. Not just of clean hands, but also of dirty ones. And I hated that almost more than them.

"That's how they do it," whispered the shadow. "They don't have to separate us directly. They just have to teach us that with everyone we call a friend, we should first look for the price."

One evening, as the cold began to bite through my shoes again, I stood alone at the edge of the camp. The river was just a dark strip, the sky a torn cloth. I heard footsteps behind me, heavy, familiar.

Tam. Murn. Aidan. Fergus. The priest. The sergeant. They joined them. Without words, without fanfare. One after the other.

We stood there, shoulder to shoulder, in a line no lord had drawn. No order had told us, "Stand up." No scribe recorded who was there.

"What are we doing here?" Aidan asked after a while.

"We remember," said the priest. "That we know each other before they tell us who we are supposed to be."

I looked into the dark expanse before us, where our shadows were lost. "Someday," I said, "they'll say one of us betrayed the others. Or one of us was more dangerous than the enemy."

Or one of us, by his actions, prevented peace. When that day comes, I want to remember how we stood here. Without parchment. Without rings. Just with the dirt on our boots."

"Friends," said the shadow. "They exist. They are just more fragile than songs suggest."

I placed my hand on the knife. It vibrated warmly, not dangerously. More like a heart remembering it was still beating.

When friends become lies, I thought, it doesn't start with the lies they tell. It starts with the ones they have to believe to keep looking in the mirror. And we were standing on the edge of a world where many mirrors would shatter.

The river rushed. Behind us, the camp slumbered. Ahead of us lay everything that was yet to come: ropes, crowns, candles, contracts, beasts. And somewhere in between, a tavern in Stirling, where a woman might be washing jugs, unaware that she was part of a story in which friendship would eventually become more precious than gold.

I took a deep breath, smelling water, earth, cold smoke. Others were breathing beside me. For now.

Tomorrow, I knew, one of us would be gone. Or different. Or gone. But today, in that one shitty, cold minute, we were what they would never allow us to be: not just foot soldiers. Not just names on a list. But men who knew what it felt like when friends almost became lies—and who still chose to endure the truth for one more day.

Rats under the royal table

The rats were there first. Before crowns, before banners, before any decorated lord sat his greasy backside on a chair carved by others. In Stirling, you could hear them when the noise of the men subsided for a moment. That soft scraping under the floorboards, the gnawing at beams, at scraps, at anything that fell. I realized at some point: those aren't the real rats. The real ones are upstairs.

We'd been summoned up again. Not as an honor guard, we looked far too much like what we were: worn-out men with more scars than patience. But they needed "tried and tested people" on the castle hill if "important talks" were to take place. Which, in other words, meant they didn't want some drunken farmer with a pitchfork huffing and puffing at the wrong people while they were gambling with the fate of Scotland.

The path up to the castle had become steeper since I'd learned what lay beyond it. Before, it was just stone and steps, wet wind, heavy doors. Now it was like a throat through which we were pushed until we reached the point where it was decided whose blood would fill our stomachs.

I walked with Tam and Fergus in front. Aidan, Murn, Ruairi, the priest, and the sergeant were behind us. We weren't wearing any fancy armor, just the usual stuff that stank and lasted. But they'd made us wipe our shields clean, as if shiny edges could hide what was behind them.

At the inner gate stood a man so clad in fabric and metal that you couldn't tell where his clothing ended and his costume began. A castellan, some kind of deputy to someone else, who didn't want to be exposed himself. He let his gaze sweep over us like someone checking barrels.

“Those ones,” he finally said, referring to us. “Third row by the side door. If someone wants to get through, only let them in if they’re wearing more rings than you have fingers.”

“Counting isn’t our strong suit,” Fergus muttered, quietly enough for only us to hear. “I simply don’t let anyone in who doesn’t smell like dirt.”

We stood where they put us. Third row, side door, suck in your gut, hold the sign, look dangerous and don't think. That was the role they had assigned us.

The hall was full, but not loud. Not like in a tavern, where voices stumble over each other, drunkenly climbing all over one another. It was that hushed, complacent murmur you get when men with money and power are among themselves. They spoke softly, forcing everyone to move closer to hear what they were saying. Power isn't just possession; it's also whispered control.

The "royal table"—that's what they called the thing up front, even though there wasn't a king in sight, just men who wanted to smell like one—stood on a slightly raised platform. Not much, just high enough to remind you where your place was. The tabletop was made of heavy wood, with notches, old wine stains, and carved symbols. If you stared at it long enough, you could see all the past lies etched into it like tree rings.

They sat around the table: Scottish lords with thick rings and even thicker necks, a few English envoys with smooth faces that looked as if they'd never smelled mud, except on their servants' boots. Behind them, scribes, always scribes, with sharp quills and dead eyes. Somewhere further back, a few clergymen, for decoration. God was allowed to sit at the table, as long as he kept his mouth shut.

Wallace was there. Not at the table, of course not. He stood a little behind it, slightly to the side, so that he could be seen but ignored. His armor was open, his cloak threadbare, his sword at his side like an uninvited dog. His gaze didn't sweep over the men's heads, like someone used to everyone following him. He looked directly at the table. At the hands. At the rings. At the pouches. At the scrolls.

"They want to turn him into a ghost," whispered the shadow in my head. "Present, but untouchable."

An English envoy had the floor. Thin lips, a face like flour, eyes that pretended to be gentle. He spoke Scots better than I cared to admit. If they can pronounce your language clearly, they can also tell you clearly why you're going to die.

“...and of course,” he was saying, “His Majesty in London is very interested in securing peace. These rebellions—” he made a gesture that pushed the word into the air like dirt from a carpet, “—may be born of necessity, but they are not a long-term solution. Neither for you, nor for us.”

A murmur rippled through the row of Scottish lords. "Rebellion" was a word they disliked hearing from the English. They wanted to be called "defense." "Pursuit of just order." Anything but what they were: men who shifted their allegiances depending on the wind direction.

"It is no wonder," the Englishman continued, "that ordinary men..." – there we were, the rats in the background – "...take up arms when they feel oppressed. But the responsibility to wield those weapons lies with you. You are the masters of this land. You bear the names. You have the crowns on your banners."

"Not yet," the shadow commented dryly.

A Scottish lord with a grey beard and rosy cheeks, one of those who always looked as if they'd just devoured half a pig by themselves, leaned forward. I knew him by now: the same one who had rambled on about "structures" and "stability" at our meeting.

"We are aware of our responsibility," he said. "That's why we're sitting here with you. That's why we're willing to listen to conditions. But Scotland is not a piece of land that you can use as a footnote in your treaties."

"Scotland is currently a battlefield," the Englishman said calmly. "And a battlefield doesn't generate tax revenue. It devours men. And profit. That's neither in our interest nor yours."

He placed his hands on the table. Thin fingers, but with the self-assurance of a man accustomed to being stared at. He turned one of his rings as he spoke. On it was a crest with a crown. A fake one, but gleaming nonetheless.

"The king is prepared to make concessions," he said. "Local autonomy on certain issues. Confirmation of your titles. Trading rights. Protection from attacks by his own troops." He smiled. "You know how difficult it is to control soldiers when they feel like they are fighting in a foreign country."

My stomach churned. Protection from their own dogs, which they themselves had sent into the yard. Nice.

"In return," he said, and the word was so heavy you could almost hear it slap on the table, "His Majesty expects loyalty. Recognition of his sovereignty. And..." He let his voice drop briefly. "...the removal of certain elements that endanger the peace."

It wasn't a grand moment. No dramatic silence in which someone drops the chalice. It was a brief sentence that slipped into the room like a rat between chair legs.

"Which elements?" asked the grey-bearded lord, although he already knew the answer.

The Englishman glanced around the room. Not at us, not at the writers. He lingered only briefly on Wallace. Not long. Long enough.

"Men," he said, "who feel more committed to unrest than to order. Who see themselves as the voice of the people without bearing the heavy burden of responsibility that titles and land bring. Men capable of stirring up large groups. Who appear in songs before they appear in treaties."

"Heroes," murmured the priest beside me. "You mean heroes."

Wallace didn't move. He stood there like a tree they had already selected but not yet felled. He heard everything. He knew they were talking about his neck as if it were a stain on a sleeve.

Another Scottish lord, younger, with a smoother beard and nervous hands, interjected. "You're talking about men like... Wallace," he said. There was no question about it.

A shudder ran through the room. The name had been uttered. Like a blade placed on the table, flat side down, to remain polite.

The Englishman inclined his head. "Sir William Wallace," he said, as if tasting a wine. "Yes. Among other things. A capable man. Courageous, without a doubt. But also... unpredictable."

"Unpredictable for whom?" I heard myself thinking before I said it. Thankfully.

The grey-bearded lord spoke again. "Wallace fought for Scotland," he said. "Without him, Stirling would have fallen. Without him, we wouldn't be sitting here, but in chains."

The Englishman smiled. "I don't question his merits," he said. "But sometimes men who were useful in war are... a hindrance in peacetime. They have learned to lead by shouting. That is a force. But not the kind you need in negotiations."

"They want him on a rope," said the shadow. "But politely."

I looked down. Under the table, where our eyes no longer allowed us to go, I could see movement. Small, swift shadows. Rats, real ones, scurried back and forth between the table legs, searching for crumbs, scraps, anything that had fallen. One of them climbed up a cloth, sniffed, and disappeared again. The men upstairs were laughing at some half-baked joke, while the rats downstairs celebrated their own version of the feast.

"You want us to extradite him," said the gray-bearded lord. He said it calmly. Matter-of-factly. As if he had already considered the word many times.

The Englishman raised his hands defensively. "Delivery," he said, "is such an ugly word. I'm talking about an act of responsibility. A sign. A gesture of goodwill. You want His Majesty to trust you—show him that you are capable of maintaining order within your own ranks."

Order. I thought of Murn at the clerk's. Of Tam's brother in his new armor. Of the table of bags in the camp. For them, order always meant: pushing anything that could be dangerous to them where it was alone.

Wallace did move now. Not much, just a step forward, almost to the edge of the unspoken circle. He said nothing. But the room sensed him.

The Englishman noticed, but pretended it didn't matter. "Once the troublemakers are gone," he continued, "we can talk. About leases, about taxes, about trade routes. Your position could emerge strengthened from this period. You wouldn't be seen as rebels, but as wise lords who were able to channel their anger in the right direction."

I felt sick. Not because of the words themselves. Because of the looks. Some of the Scottish lords looked pensive, like men considering whether to accept a merchant's terms. Others looked away, as if it were none of their business. A few looked directly at Wallace—briefly, with a mixture of guilt and calculation.

"And what about the men who followed him?" asked one I didn't know, whose coat of arms displayed more horses than I'd ever seen in my life. "The peasants, the fighters, the bandits?"

"They will receive amnesty," the Englishman said. "Of course, not all of them. There are always cases that need to be treated as examples. But the majority will be able to return to their fields, to their normal lives."

Normal life. I thought of our cabin that had never existed. Of fields we had never tilled. Of some place they imagined when they said "people." A mass of faces without names.

"And who decides who is exemplary?" the priest next to me asked quietly.

"The rats under the table," whispered the shadow in my head. "And the ones on it."

One of the rats below had grabbed a crumb, bigger than herself. She tugged at it, pulled, struggled, and bit. Another came along and joined in. For a moment, they seemed like allies. Then the second one bit the first in the back, snatched up the rest, and disappeared into the shadows.

I had to laugh. A quiet, bitter laugh. A security guard next to me gave me a sideways glance. "What is it?" he hissed.

"Nothing," I said. "I'm looking at the future."

At that moment, Wallace turned his head for the first time, away from the table, away from the rings, away from the faces, and looked—not directly at me, but in our direction. At us. At the rows of those who were simply standing, standing, standing, until someone decided whether we would still be needed tomorrow.

Our eyes didn't really meet; the distance was too great. But something in his face changed slightly. There was this knowing: he understood exactly what was happening. That they wouldn't attack him directly. That they would first de-energize the room, then tell him he could leave if he wanted—only that the ropes were already prepared outside.

"They won't ask you," said the shadow. "When they come for him. They'll pretend it's for increased security. You'll hold shields. Guard doors. And later stand there and say, 'We were just doing what we were told.'"

The thought made me sick. I felt the knife vibrate at my side, ever so slightly. Not like the beast's. Different. Like a dog that senses someone intending to betray its master.

"If they come for him," I thought, "will I still be there? Will I be standing next to him? Or will I be standing somewhere where I don't have to look?"

Rats under the royal table, I thought. Some gnawing on crumbs, others on ropes. And the crown above doesn't notice that the wood has long since become hollow underneath.

The meeting continued. Numbers were mentioned, locations, conditions. Territories were negotiated as if they were loaves of bread being shared. No one mentioned that people lived there who had no chairs. It was a play without an audience, only with armed extras.

Finally, the Englishman stood up and inclined his head as if he had just made a friendly offer.

"Think about it," he said. "No one is asking you to decide today. But time doesn't work for unrest. It works for order. The sooner you give us a sign, the more lenient the sentence will be—for all of you."

"Time is on the side of the hole," said the shadow. "And on the rope."

They left the hall one by one. Those who were seated became standing, those who were standing went to other rooms where better wines and quieter lies awaited. We stayed by the side door. Third row. Shields up, shut up.

A rat scurried out of a crack and paused briefly in the light. Black, wet, its eyes like tiny holes. It looked at us, then at the table, then back at us. I could have sworn it twitched its whiskers as if it were laughing.

"Well, sister," I murmured, so quietly that no one heard. "At least you know who eats what around here."

The knife vibrated once more. No command, no vision. Only this silent, dull understanding: We had reached a point where the war was no longer decided solely in the mud. But on a table beneath which rats ate, while above, people tried to stab each other with clean hands.

And us? We stood in between. Third-row shadows with knives, teeth, and too much clarity in our minds to still believe that friend, foe, and master were clearly distinct words.

When they let us out of the hall, the air outside was colder than inside, but more honest. Inside, there had been warmth from candles and men's bodies, from breath that smelled of wine and fat. Outside, there was only wind. It knew nothing of "acts of goodwill" or "making an example." It simply stung your neck and reminded you that, beneath all the talk, bones can still freeze.

We stood for a moment beneath the archway, as if we'd forgotten how to walk. Men streamed past us: servants with trays, messengers with hurried steps, scribes with rolled-up parchments that looked like small, carefully packed ropes. No one really saw us. That's the thing about foot soldiers: they only see you when you interrupt their work or need their blood.

"They've made him a topic of discussion," the priest murmured. "This is the beginning of the end."

"They made him a problem," I said. "Problems are solved. Heroes are just in the way."

Tam spat into the snow, which had turned to grey slush at the edge of the path. "They talk as if they created him," he growled. "As if he were just a piece they can move around on the board."

"They needed him," said the sergeant. "That's worse. What you create, you can destroy and call an accident. What you need, you must first devalue before you can kill it."

We started moving because standing still in a situation like that looked suspicious. If you stay too long in a place where shitty things are decided, they'll eventually see you as someone who overthinks things. And men who overthink are more dangerous than those who act too quickly.

On the way down, we passed a side entrance, half-hidden by a fabric curtain that must once have been magnificent, before too many hands and years had used it. Behind it, I heard voices. Not loud, but clear enough. It was the kind of tone men use when they think they're alone.

"...he has been useful, yes," said a voice I recognized as that of the gray-bearded lord. "But usefulness in war is no guarantee of usefulness in peace."

"Be honest," replied another voice, smooth, with the muscularity of an Englishman who believes he has the upper hand. "He's not just useless. He's dangerous. As long as he lives, there will always be men who would rather follow his call than your instructions."

I stopped. Not completely, just a fraction of a second slower. The sergeant gave me a look, that "keep moving, but not too fast" kind of look. I pretended to adjust my boot.

"You demand much," said the grey lord. "The people see him as..."

"...a rebel," the Englishman interrupted. "A rioter. Exactly what His Majesty cannot tolerate. You can call him a 'hero' if you like when you tell stories around the fire. But on paper, he must disappear. And preferably with an ending that will deter him."

"You want to hang him," said the lord. No drama. Just a weary observation.

"He's made more heads roll than I care to count," said the Englishman. "It would only be fair if he bowed to the rules he so readily disregarded."

Fair enough. I could have laughed if my stomach hadn't been burning with anger.

"There will be unrest," said the Lord. "Men who have seen him. Who have fought with him. Who believe what he says."

"Then it's better that you already know who he is," said the Englishman. "We don't want an execution to spark a debate. We want a lesson, not a martyr."

The word hung in the air for a moment before the wind snatched it away. Martyr. Another lovely thing that priests love and scribes exploit.

"Move on," the sergeant growled. His voice was low but sharp. I pulled up my boot and marched. The shadow beside me trudged along.

"They talk about him as if he were already dead," said the shadow in my head.

"Maybe he is," I thought. "At least in their minds."

Down at the foot of the castle, the courtyard was bustling with activity. Wagoners were being loaded, horses groomed, and some kitchen boy was chasing a chicken that seemed to know more about life than half the men here. We were dismissed with a curt "You can go," like dogs being sent off after the hunt has been decided.

"Where to?" asked Fergus as we walked down the slope towards the camp. "Back to the dirt, to our places, or to the city, to the other rats?"

"To the tavern," said Tam. "I need something in my stomach that isn't just poison from above."

I knew what he meant. And I knew I wanted to see someone else to whom I could tell what I had seen, before the bards made something else out of it.

The sergeant let us go with a look that said: Don't bring me any more problems. I nodded. I couldn't promise anything.

Stirling greeted us with the same smell as always: cold smoke, refuse, people who were more than any one person could bear. But something was different. No visible difference, just this tension hanging in the air like a thin rope. People spoke more quietly, the traders shouted with less force. As if they had all decided at once to be less conspicuous.

The "Krumme Krone" was half full. Not the usual noisy crowd, more of a subdued mass of heavy shoulders and quick eyes. The landlord nodded to us as we entered and wiped the same spot on the counter for the fifth time. A good sign: when the landlord is cleaning, he's nervous.

I saw her there immediately. Iona, at the edge of the room, a tray in her hand that could hold more than most of the men here. She was distributing jugs, taking coins, exchanging words, short, sharp ones, which she handed out like a barman handing out schnapps: only to those who could take it. Her eyes found us, faster than her feet.

"You look like you've heard something you don't like," she said when she arrived at our table.

"We saw them talking about someone as if he were a piece of meat on this table," I said. "And the rats underneath were more honest than the men above."

She placed three jugs of water there, strong enough to loosen tongues. "Sit down," she said. "And speak before the wrong people do."

We told the story. Not everything, not every word. But enough: the "elements," the "troublemakers," the "example," the "sign of goodwill." Enough for everyone at the table to understand what was at stake: they had begun to dismantle Wallace long before anyone raised an axe.

Iona listened without unnecessary interruptions. She held the tray in her hand as if it were a shield, and every now and then her thumb brushed along the edge when she heard a sentence that was too difficult.

“They won’t protect him publicly,” she said finally. “Not anymore. They’ll use him as long as they need his face, and then they’ll put him somewhere out of the public eye—and forget about him there until someone comes along who remembers why he was dangerous.”

“They want us to be the ones to get him,” said Tam. “They want it to look like a clean operation, carried out on behalf of the Council, not as English revenge. Then they can say later, ‘We had no choice. We had to.’”

Iona put down the tray and sat down with us, even though the innkeeper needed her. “They always had a choice,” she said. “They just forgot it the moment they won their first titles.”

“They don’t want martyrs,” the priest murmured. “They want cautionary tales. The kind you tell children later: ‘See what happens when you get too loud?’”

I thought of my own nights by the river. Of the conversations with the shadow. Of the knife, of Moira, of the beast in the ground. And of what it would be like if one day they spoke my name, not as a command, but as a warning.

“What do you do?” I asked Iona. “When they start bringing people in, not just him. When they declare his presence to be sin, betrayal, disorder. When they say, ‘Whoever was near him has blood on their hands.’”

She looked around the room, not at me. “I’ll know who really has blood on their hands,” she said. “Ink washes off more easily than blood. But the smell remains.”

“That won’t help him,” said Tam. “We can’t lick his hands clean if they’re going to rip his head off.”

“Maybe he doesn’t even want clean hands,” she said. “Heroes with clean hands are suspicious.”

For a moment, no one said anything. The tavern seemed to tilt, as if listening to the conversation.

“They’ll need people,” Fergus said finally. “People who know the way. Who know where he sleeps, where he sits, who he drinks with. They won’t send just any squad. They’ll send the ones who have seen him before. The ones who can say, ‘We know what we’re doing.’”

“You mean us,” said Aidan.

Fergus shrugged. “I mean, if they need a bastard who’s been in holes and fought for others, they don’t ask the bard.”

I felt the knife at my side. It lay there, still, as if it had no opinion of its own. But it vibrated, ever so slightly, as if something far below us had been listening.

“If they send us,” I said, “we won’t go.”

Tam laughed briefly, harshly. “That’s what you say now,” he said. “But when the sergeant comes, with orders on his face and a noose around his neck, things will look different.”

"Then we'll see," I said. "But let me tell you one thing: I'm not going to draw my sword against him so that a few men with rings can afford a clean finish."

The priest nodded. "There are moments when disobedience is the only thing that doesn't reek of betrayal," he said.

Iona looked at me, long, searchingly. "Be careful," she said quietly. "They won't ask you directly. They'll start with something small. 'Just accompany him.' 'Just be there when we talk.' 'Just hold the door.' Until you eventually realize that you were part of the chain they put around his neck."

"They're good at breaking things down into small steps," said the shadow in my head. "So that everyone can say, 'I only did...'"

Someone stumbled past our table, a young soldier, barely bearded, but with a powerful voice. He bellowed some verse about Stirling, in which the name of a lord appeared twice and Wallace's not at all. A bard in the corner joined in, half-heartedly. The coins that passed from one side of the room to the other spoke volumes more than the music.

"They're already rewriting the songs before the story is even over," Iona said.

"Then at least let's keep our own version," I muttered.

"You can't write songs," said the shadow. "You can only make sure they don't all lie."

We stayed in the tavern longer than necessary. Not out of laziness. Out of fear. Outside, the camp awaited, the orders, the structures. In here, there were still spaces. Few, but they existed.

When we finally got up, it was late. Most of the guests had left, the candles were small, the floor sticky. Iona was clearing away, collecting empty jugs that stood around like small, headless bodies.

"If they come and ask," she said as she left, "then ask them back. Who sent them. And where they want to take him. And why you. If they don't know the answer to any of the questions or evade you – don't go."

"And what if I have no choice?" I asked.

"You always have one," she said. "Maybe not one you like. But you have one."

Outside, it had started to snow. Small, hard flakes that looked more like ash. Stirling seemed quieter, enveloped in something that pretended to be peace. We trudged up the slope, our boots heavy, our thoughts heavier.

"Rats under the royal table," the priest said when we were almost at the top. "I wonder if they realize that the rats don't just eat the bread."

"They eat your feet too," said Fergus. "They start at your toes while you're sleeping."

"We will not sleep," I said. "Not as long as they continue to pretend that everything is just a negotiation."

"You talk as if you can change anything," said the shadow.

"I'm talking so I can remember it later," I thought. "If they try to tell me I only dreamed it all."

The camp was quiet. Too quiet. The guards nodded, the fire was small, men lay around like fallen tree trunks. I lay down, the knife at my side, the day's grime still in my mouth. Above me hung a sky I couldn't see, below me an earth that knew more than it spoke.

Just before I drifted off to sleep, I heard the scraping under the floorboards of the hall once more, saw the table before me, the hands, the rings, the parchments, the rats. And I knew: We were not just combatants in a war. We were also extras in a play in which they were currently assigning the roles of traitors, martyrs, and insignificant dead.

I had no idea what role they had in mind for me. But I knew I wouldn't let them dictate how they spelled my name without a fight. Not on their lists. And not under their table.

The next morning, Stirling looked as if someone had thrown a dirty cloth over everything. No clear snow, no proper rain, just a wet sludge falling from the sky and mixing with what we already had lying down below. The camp was quieter than usual. Not that normal weariness that smells of too little sleep and too much stew. More like a hunched silence. Like before a thunderstorm that everyone knows is coming, but no one can say from which direction.

I woke up before anyone kicked me or yelled at me. The knife lay at my side, as if on guard. The shadow was there, as always, lengthened by the pale light dripping through the tent canvas. I sat up slowly, and could already tell from the sounds outside that something was different. No normal shouting, no laughter, no cursing about oversalted broth. More like a concentrated murmur, like in a church just before the priest reads the unpleasant passage.

Tam lay on his back, staring at the tarpaulin as if he could see through the fabric. Aidan was already sitting up, his cloak draped over his shoulders, his eyes awake though the rest of him was still asleep. Murn was gone. Not entirely; his blanket lay there, half-slipped, but the man was missing. The priest knelt in the corner, pretending to pray. I knew him well enough by now to know he was really just trying to quiet his thoughts.

"What's going on?" I asked the room.

"They say one of them has disappeared," Aidan said. "Last night. From a tent up by the castle."

"Did it jump or was it fetched?" I asked.

"It depends on who you ask," Tam murmured.

Outside, someone pulled the tent canvas aside. The sergeant poked his head inside, his eyes harder than usual. "Stand up," he said. "Fall in. There are announcements."

Announcements. A word that smelled of parchment and the bad breath of important men.

We got dressed quickly, routinely. Straps, belts, leather, metal. The usual gear that protects you from being easily penetrated, but not from having the ground pulled out from under your

feet. Outside, a group of men were already standing, half-circled around one of the officers, who held a rolled-up piece of parchment like a priest a relic.

We squeezed in. The ground was both soft and frozen, a mixture of mud and brittle ice that cracked and stuck under our boots. The air burned coldly in our noses, but no one ducked their head. Everyone wanted to see what they'd throw at our feet this time.

The officer, a man with a face like a crooked turnip, cleared his throat importantly. He wasn't one of those with rings, but one of those who had gotten close enough to the rats under the table to get a few breadcrumbs.

"On behalf of the Council," he began, "and in light of the upcoming negotiations with the Crown of England..."

I saw the priest close his eyes. "If they start with 'in the light,' darkness will follow immediately," he murmured.

"...the following is hereby announced," the officer continued. "Certain individuals whose actions are likely to endanger peace and order in the country will henceforth no longer be considered legitimate representatives of the Scottish will to fight."

He handed the parchment to a scribe beside him, who continued reading in a thin voice. The ink was still fresh, its scent mingling with that of cold smoke.

"William Wallace is hereby..." the clerk read, and my stomach did a jump, "...provisionally relieved of his mandate to speak and act on behalf of the united Scottish gentlemen."

It continued. Words about "unilateral actions," "danger of escalation," "uncoordinated military steps." No "traitor," not yet. But the word was already there, waiting for someone to make way for it.

"He will be tolerated for the time being as a fighter against external enemies," the writer read, "but it is expressly pointed out that no actions taken in his name will be considered binding on the Council or the conduct of negotiations."

That was political rhetoric for: If he does something, we'll abandon him.

I felt Tam's hands clench into fists beside me. Fergus was biting down so hard on his jaw that I thought he was going to break a tooth. Murn still hadn't arrived.

"Furthermore," the scribe continued, "all units are instructed to strictly adhere to the orders of their respective lord and the commanders appointed by the council within the command structure. Any initiative in the form of personal oaths of loyalty..." – he almost spat out the word – "...is considered potentially dangerous."

"They'll cut out his tongue," said the shadow in my head. "And his ears. So that no one can say they heard something more important than their contracts."

"Are there any names?" someone from the crowd shouted. "Besides his?"

“Not at the moment,” the officer said quickly. “But the Council reserves the right to nominate further individuals whose behavior proves to be an obstacle to peace.”

For a moment there was silence. Then the murmuring began. No one shouted, no one drew their sword. What can you do against parchment when it's carried by enough men in chains?

The clerk rolled up the sheet of paper. "This proclamation will be posted throughout the city and at the gates," he said. "Anyone who spits at it longer than necessary will be asked to declare their loyalties."

Loyalties. Yet another lovely word they use when they want to know where to start casting the noose.

"Dismissed," the sergeant growled. His voice sounded as if he would have liked to nail someone to the wall himself. But not today, not here.

We scattered, as they say, although none of us were any lighter. Tam grabbed my arm, hard.

"Did you hear that?" he asked, as if I were deaf. "They're taking away his right to speak. As if that was the problem."

“They are not taking away his right to speak,” I said. “They are taking away their right to pretend they never had to listen to him.”

"And what do we do now?" Aidan asked. "What do we do if he calls us? If he tells us to stand somewhere where those in charge don't want to see?"

Fergus spat in the mud again. "Then we'll be stuck," he said. "Otherwise, we could have saved ourselves all this trouble from the start."

"Easy for you to say," a voice suddenly interjected. Murn. He was suddenly there, fallen from the crowd like a stone that someone had let go of too late. His face was pale, his eyes red, his lips tight.

"What are you trying to say?" I asked cautiously.

“I was just downstairs with the clerks,” he said. “I wanted to know if my name was on any of them. If they already had lists of who they considered to be... close to him.”

I exhaled slowly. "And?" asked the priest.

“Not yet,” Murn said. “But they said if I’m worried, I could help to clarify things. The clearer the structures, the fewer... mix-ups.”

“Mistakes,” Tam repeated. “Nice word. That way they can say later: ‘Oops, we mistook you for a traitor, our mistake. Head still off though.’”

Murn rubbed his face as if he wanted to peel it off. "I didn't say anything to them," he murmured. "I swear on everything I hold sacred. I didn't say anything. But..." He looked at his hands. "I listened to them."

"That's enough," said the shadow. "Ink just needs open ears."

I put a hand on his shoulder. "We're all in this mess," I said. "Anyone who doesn't shout 'yes' today will end up on the wrong list tomorrow anyway. The only thing we can still decide is how much truth we tell ourselves."

The sergeant later called us to the small circle around the fire. No official roll call, no big shouting, just who we were anyway: our bunch. The bastard wedge, as they called us when they thought we wouldn't hear.

"You heard the announcement," he said. "I'll spare you the summary. The important thing is: they will now search the city for anyone who still openly supports Wallace. In the taverns, in the alleys, at the tables. Questions will be asked. Friendly ones. Persistent ones. In ink."

"And with blades," Fergus added.

The sergeant nodded. "Sooner or later," he said. "First they write, then they edit. It's always been that way."

"What about us?" Aidan asked. "Are we part of this... cleansing?"

"Not yet," said the sergeant. "On the contrary. We have received an order."

I felt cold. "Which one?" I asked.

"Patrols in the city," he said. "Around the castle, through certain districts, past certain taverns. We are to ensure that there is no... unrest. No large gatherings, no loud speeches, no bards singing too boldly."

It was as if someone had placed one of those fine ropes directly around our ankles.

"They want us to get rid of the rats," said the priest. "Not the ones under the table – the ones in the alleys."

I looked at him. "And what are we then?" I asked.

"We are the cat decoys," said the shadow in my head. "They put us there to make it look like they're taking care of us while they continue eating downstairs."

"What do we do?" asked Tam.

The sergeant looked at each of us in turn. "We're leaving," he said. "We're doing what we have to do. But..." – he lowered his voice – "...we decide for ourselves where we look if someone says the wrong thing. I won't betray any of you. And I expect you to do the same."

"And what if they ask why we didn't see anything?" Murn asked.

The sergeant's mouth twisted. "Then we say: It was dark," he said. "And our eyes are old."

In the afternoon, we set off in a small group. Not in full armor, but armed. Officially for protection. Unofficially as a sign: Look, we've got everything under control. The city should know that the sword is no longer just pointing outwards.

The streets were narrow, the dirt high, the faces closed off. A few farmers, some traders, women with baskets, children with wide eyes. A few of the parchments that had been read aloud that morning already hung on the walls. "In the name of the council...", "William Wallace...", "provisional...", "mandate...". The words looked like parasites burrowing into the stone.

I lingered a moment longer in front of the "Crooked Crown." The wooden sign with the crooked crown creaked in the wind. I felt my hand move toward the knife, out of habit, not as a threat. My mind fell silent for a moment.

"Are we going inside?" Tam asked.

"We're going inside," I said.

Inside, it was more crowded than I'd expected. Not loud, but crowded. Many were silent. Others were talking, but in a way that only the person next to them could hear. The air was thick with smoke and the smell of damp fabric. Iona stood behind the counter, her shoulders tense, her eyes alert. When we entered, it became a touch quieter. Just a touch quieter. But I felt it.

"Well, there they are," she said as we approached. "Order in boots."

"We're just out for a stroll," I said. "The high-ranking gentlemen want the city to know how beautifully our shields gleam."

She looked at our shields, at the knife at my side, at the parchments on the wall. "The city knows," she said. "It also knows that shields can hold in two directions."

We sat down. Not at our usual table, that would have been too private. A little further forward. Visible enough that people knew why we were there. Inconspicuous enough that no one thought we'd strike immediately.

Iona placed jugs in front of us. Cheaper than usual. Perhaps she had decided that we should see more clearly.

"They were here today," she said quietly, leaning towards me briefly. "Two clerks. A servant in better clothes. They wanted to know who talks loudly. Who still refers to themselves by their real name. I told them I'll only stop if I get paid."

"And?" I asked.

"They haven't paid," she said. "Not yet."

I looked around. A few familiar faces nodded at us cautiously. Others pretended they'd never seen us. A bard in the corner strummed the strings of his lute, but he wasn't singing. His eyes kept glancing down at the parchments on the wall.

“They will start fishing for stories,” the priest said. “Who drank with whom. Who talked to whom. Who said whose name in their sleep.”

"And then?", Aidan asked.

“Then they turn them into rats,” said Iona. “They eat what falls off the table. And when there’s no more bread, they eat each other.”

The shadow beside me laughed dryly. "Welcome to the royal table," he said. "It's dripping from above. And you have to decide whether to open your mouth or withdraw."

I took a sip of the dirty whiskey and felt it scratch down my throat. It wasn't soothing. It was honest.

“I will not name names,” I said. Not aloud, only to Iona, the priest, the shadow.

“I know,” she said. “But be careful. Sometimes they give yours without asking you.”

Later, when we were back outside, the wind picked up. It whipped under the parchments on the wall, making them flutter as if they wanted to fly away. One was half torn off, hanging at an angle, the words "William Wallace" half visible, half ripped.

I stopped, reached out, and pressed the note firmly against the wall again. Not out of respect for what was written on it. Out of spite. So that it couldn't simply disappear without anyone seeing who had written it.

"That's stupid," said the shadow. "You're just helping them hang up their lies."

“I want to remember this,” I thought. “When the day comes that they say they never had anything against him.”

On the way back to camp, I saw Murn walking a little behind us. Not quite with us, not quite away. He didn't even glance at the parchments again. Perhaps because he already knew them by heart.

“If we are rats,” said the priest as the camp came back into view, “then we should at least decide whose bread we are eating.”

"I'm not interested in her bread," I said. "I want the table."

The shadow laughed. "You want to knock him down," he said. "And be buried when he falls."

“I’d rather die under the table because it collapses,” I thought, “than live under it while negotiations take place above my head.”

The camp was darker than usual. The fires were small, the voices deep. The morning's announcement had done more than they would admit. It had reminded us all that friend and foe no longer had fixed positions. That the noose was already being braided while they were still talking about "de-escalating signals."

I lay down, the knife at my side. It felt heavy, but not hostile. The beast's humming was far away tonight. Instead, the rats' scratching in my head was louder.

Rats under the royal table, I thought, just before sleep overtook me. Some run, some bite, some wait. And a select few decide they're no longer going to be a morsel falling from above.

If they wanted to make a Wallace film, for example, I knew they'd have to go through people like us first. Men who don't wear rings, but still know what dirt smells like. And who at some point have to decide whether they'll continue standing guard while they tie the ropes up above – or whether they'll finally stop making excuses about not seeing anything.

Sleep didn't come gently. But it came. And in the brief, crooked peace in between, I saw the table, the hands, the rats – and beneath them, our reflection.

Hunted like a mangy dog

When they hunt a king, they call it rebellion. When they hunt a dog, they call it hygiene. With Wallace, I wasn't sure which shelf they wanted to put him on. The tone of his writing sounded like something in between: like a mangy cur that had bitten their fingers one too many times while they were trying to feed it.

It didn't happen overnight. No bugle call, no official "Now he's being hunted" speech. As always, it began with more men appearing in clean coats. A few new banners at the edge of the camp. More scribes. More parchment that looked as if it tasted of blood.

Then came the first lists. Of course, they didn't call them that. "Lineups," "situation reports," "coordination papers." But you can tell when a name is written several times on a piece of animal hide. You can tell when the ink is applied more firmly in one spot.

Wallace's name was now everywhere. It was simultaneously diminished and magnified. In stories told around the fire, it slowly shrank, becoming once again "that guy from Elderslie" or "the lucky man in Stirling." In official documents, it grew: "dangerous," "high-handed," "unpredictable."

They moved him from the songs to the arrest warrants.

"There are new instructions," the sergeant said one morning, as steam rose from our stew like a bad premonition. "Certain squads are being assembled. Mobile units. No trench warfare, no shield wall. Hunting parties."

"Who are we hunting?" asked Tam, even though we all knew.

The sergeant looked at us. One after the other. Then he said: "You didn't say it out loud. But we know it."

Fergus gave a short laugh. "Finally," he said. "They've pretended long enough that they were only protecting him from himself."

"And what about us?" I asked. "Are we part of it?"

"Not yet," said the sergeant. "They take first those who are already in their bed. People from houses that have long since turned in their direction. Men who listen to money rather than conscience. Fast horses, light armor, clean papers."

"And what if that's not enough?" Aidan asked.

The sergeant's mouth twisted. "Then they'll come to us," he said.

In the camp, no one spoke openly of "hunting in the woods" or "collecting heads." But you heard it in the background. "They said they almost had him yesterday." – "He was supposedly seen in the north, with only a dozen men left." – "A monk who no longer preaches hid him."

The more often you hear one version, the less you believe another.

We were sent on our way through the city. Tours, checks, the usual charade. Except now they were paying closer attention to who was talking to whom. Bards suddenly became interesting. Priests even more so. Men who were good storytellers were now more dangerous than those who were good fighters.

A new parchment now hung in the "Crooked Crown." Not just the announcement. A letter bearing the seal of a Scottish lord who considered himself more important than his appearance suggested. "Information on the whereabouts of William Wallace," it read, "will be treated confidentially by the council."

There was no mention of a reward. But everyone knew that somewhere, in some tent, a bag was waiting.

"Confidential," I said to Iona as we stood under the sign again. "That means: They keep the name of the person who betrays them to themselves. So they don't have to be ashamed of them later. Or so they can use them later in peace."

She looked at the parchment as if it were a dirty sheet someone had thrown over a corpse. "Those who really want to sell him don't need a slip of paper," she said. "They've already talked to someone. But a piece of skin like this helps those who are undecided."

"The tired ones," I added.

"Yes," she said. "Those who count their children when they lie in bed at night, and the next day believe they only have the choice between betrayal and hunger."

The shadow in my head snorted. "If they make you choose long enough, you'll eventually become convinced that there never was another option," he said.

Inside the tavern itself, things had changed. The men no longer sat so close together. There were suddenly gaps between some tables, as if the air had taken up space. Conversations were cut short when someone with scribe's hands entered. Bards played old songs, harmless, without names. The kings they sang about were long dead. Safer that way.

Once, a man with a face that screamed "Envoy" came in, even though he tried hard to look like a simple traveler. He sat down at the bar, ordered neither the most expensive nor the cheapest drink, and didn't speak directly to anyone. But his eyes scanned the room as if casting a net.

"He's not here for the beer," Tam muttered.

"He's here because of the rats," I said.

I saw his gaze linger on me, then wander. He looked at the corner where they usually played, the door, the back room where the priest sometimes prayed or argued. And I saw him nod imperceptibly, as if he were taking things in. Paths. Faces. Escape routes.

"If they hunt him down," whispered the shadow, "they will start in minds. In theirs and in yours."

After a while, the first stories of real hunts began to emerge. No longer whispered, but spoken with that sick mixture of pride and fear with which men recount what others have done.

A troop in the hills, who had surrounded a small group of men. "His men," they said. No one knew for sure if he himself had been among them, but the story needed him in the background. A farmer who had supposedly blocked a troop of horsemen because he claimed there was no one there. A few days later, his barn had burned down. Coincidence, some said. A sign, others said.

A monk who, in his sermon, had said "freedom" too loudly without following it up with "order." Transferred, they said. To another monastery. Further away. Where his voice could no longer be heard.

They didn't even have to find him to hunt him. It was enough to tire everyone else out.

One evening, when the wind was so cold it cut through the smoke, we came to a village that looked as if it had just been patched up. Low huts, a few half-baked fences, the smell of cabbage and fear. We were there as a patrol, officially. Unofficially, we were a reminder that the brothers from the Council had eyes out here, too.

The village elder, a man with a face like a parched field, approached us. He held his hands out, as if they were weapons he didn't want to use.

"Are you looking for him?" he asked directly.

"Who?" asked the sergeant, because he had to play.

"The one they're hunting like a mangy dog now," said the old man. "I know the sound of someone no longer being a hero, but prey."

"We are seeking peace and quiet," said the sergeant. "So that no fire breaks out here that no one can extinguish."

The old man looked at us, one after the other. His eyes lingered on me longer. Perhaps he saw something. Perhaps he saw nothing at all.

"They were here," he said finally. "Three days ago. Different squads. Cleaner coats than yours. Better horses. They asked questions. Whether we saw any men who weren't from around here. Whether any of them were tall, with scars. Whether they spoke differently. Whether they asked more questions than they answered."

"And?", asked Tam.

"I told them we see many men," said the old man. "Those who take things from us. Those who tell us what we should die for. Those who look at our daughters as if their bodies were a gift. If you want to know if any of them were different, you have to look more closely."

"And did he?" I asked.

The old man looked towards the hill. "People come and go here," he said. "Some have faces I recognize when I close my eyes. Others are just shadows. I am old. My memory is bad."

"This will be dangerous," said one of the younger members of our group. "If the gentlemen hear that you suddenly can't see anything anymore."

"I've seen too much my whole life," said the old man. "Perhaps it's time to see less."

The priest nodded to him, quietly, respectfully. It was a moment when two men, who had nothing in common except their tiredness, understood each other.

We kept going. We didn't stop, we weren't really looking for anything. We pretended to be checking paths, inspecting fences, testing the quality of the mud. In reality, we were just counting: How many villages have already been boiled dry? How many will break under the next pressure?

"If you are hunted long enough," murmured the shadow, "whether you are king or cur, you begin to recognize yourself in the stories of others."

At night in the camp, Wallace was everywhere and nowhere. Some swore they had seen him a week ago, in a forest north of here. Others said he was long since across the border, in a hideout beyond the sea, waiting for a better opportunity. Still others thought he was dead, and all that remained were a few men who needed his name to fuel their own revenge plots.

I knew nothing. I only knew that the knife sometimes vibrated even when the beast wasn't nearby. And that the shadow often spoke of "ends" without adding "beginnings" afterward.

One evening, shortly after one of these patrols, we were sitting by the fire again. The announcements fluttered on walls somewhere out there, the parchments wavy in the damp wind. The sergeant stared into the fire, the priest turned a splinter of wood between his fingers as if trying to smooth it with a prayer.

"What do you think?" Tam asked suddenly. "If they get him – will we see?"

I thought about it. Images flashed through my mind: Wallace on a rope, Wallace on a bicycle, Wallace somewhere in a square where men were covering up their guilty conscience with "It had to be done".

"If they're smart," I said, "they won't let us be there. They don't want men like us to see them rip off a man like him. We'd remember too much."

"And what if they're not smart?" asked Fergus.

"Then," the priest said quietly, "Scotland will see more than it can bear. And they will make the mangy dog the dog that will be talked about in a hundred years."

The shadow in my head nodded. "Martyrs," it said. "That's what they fear most. Not because of the dead. Because of those who live and remember."

I placed my hand on the knife. It vibrated briefly, perhaps only because I wanted it to.

Hunted like a mangy dog, I thought. They're after him with lists, banners, and clean ink. He's running from them with scars, dirt, and a few men who haven't yet decided they'd rather be full than honest.

One of them will stumble eventually. The only question is: who first?

The hunt eventually ceases to be an event, becoming a sound. At first, it's individual hooves, individual calls, individual messages. Later, it's a constant tone that permeates everything. Even when you sleep, you hear it in your bones, like a dog that can't shake the whistling sound, even though no one is blowing it anymore.

They began to mark the paths. First with chalk symbols known only to the initiated: small crosses on trees, arrows on stones, displaced piles of stones. Later, with more significant markers: burned huts, empty fields, forests suddenly silent. Places where someone had said, "He was here."

"They act as if they are chasing an animal," said the priest as we passed a burned-out barn for the third time in a week. "But they are chasing their own shadow."

I looked at the charred beams that jutted into the sky like black ribs. The air still smelled of what had once been life: hay, wood, grease. There was something metallic in it that had nothing to do with iron.

"They are hunting the memory," I said. "Not just him."

It was our turn for patrol again. "Show presence," they'd said. "Reassure people." In times like these, reassuring means showing them they haven't been forgotten. Not in a good way.

Once we came across a troop of other "presence." Men with better coats, better horses, worse faces. They had a farmer standing in the middle of the road, half-kneeling, half-standing, his hands tied behind his back. His shirt was torn, his face swollen.

"What's going on?" asked the sergeant, more out of duty than interest.

The leader of the others, a man with a beard like a brush and eyes that had passed far too many discount-style judgments, shrugged. "This old guy claimed he didn't see anyone," he said. "But his daughter was nervous. Nervous daughters usually mean more than silent fathers."

I saw the daughter. She was standing a little further away, her hands clutching the cloth she had draped around her shoulders. Her gaze kept drifting towards the hedges, as if she were hoping they would part and spit out someone to end it all. Perhaps they had smuggled someone through there. Perhaps it was simply her last shred of hope, one she didn't want to betray.

"We just want to know which direction he went," said the man with the brush beard. "North? South? Into the forest or the hills? Whoever helps us will have less to fear later."

Later. That word. It was like a pawn ticket on your soul. "Later" meant: We'll decide sometime whether you stood up for what you believed in today. If you're lucky, you'll get your head back.

"Perhaps he really didn't see anyone," the priest interjected before I could open my mouth. "Not everyone who remains silent is hiding someone."

The man with the brush beard looked at him, briefly, appraisingly. "Priests often miss things," he said. "Especially when they think someone's still saving them a place in heaven."

"And you think you already have one?" asked the priest. "Because you obediently point in the right direction when someone holds out a sealed bone to you?"

It could have turned ugly. But the sergeant intervened, with the calm that only someone who has seen enough blood to know when it's worth it possesses.

"We have orders to move on," he said coldly. "If you think you need to deal with the old man here, then do what you deem necessary. But do it quickly. The air already stinks enough."

The man with the brush beard grimaced as if he had hoped for a larger audience. "It's going well," he said. "We'll make sure order is restored here."

Order. That word again. I saw my daughter briefly meet my gaze. It contained everything: fear, anger, pleading, hatred. The whole gamut you get when men with weapons trample through your life.

We continued walking. Our steps grew heavier, but no one said a word. Even Fergus, who usually had a quip for every little thing, kept quiet.

"You could have done something," the shadow said softly. "You could have intervened. You could have said, 'We'll take him into our care.' You could have lied better than he did."

"And then?" I thought. "Then they would have beaten him to death a mile down the road, without witnesses. Or us. Or both of us."

"Maybe," said the shadow. "But maybe not. You never know. That's the worst thing about this kind of hunt: it makes you a pro at calculating with 'maybe'."

That night I dreamt of dogs. Not Wallace. Real dogs. Thin, with matted fur, prowling between the tents, searching for bones, for anything edible. Men kicked at them without looking. One of the dogs looked at me. Its eyes weren't animalistic. Too clear. Too tired.

I woke up with the taste of old blood in my mouth.

A few days later, a messenger arrived at the camp who looked like bad news in boots. Thin, harried, his voice hoarse. He wasn't looking for the sergeant, not the officer. He was looking for the priest.

"They need you in the city," he said. "In the chapel by the lower gate."

"What for?" asked the priest.

The messenger swallowed. "Confession," he said. "And... last words."

We knew what that meant. If they sent you to the priest, it was rarely to bless your marriage.

The sergeant tried a more formal approach. "Do you need an escort?" he asked.

"He is to come alone," said the messenger. "That is the order."

The priest looked at us. For a moment I thought he was going to say "no". Then I realized that he was just as much a prisoner as we were. Only dressed differently.

"I'm leaving," he said. "If they start killing people who were too loud, I at least want to know what lies they tell each other at the very end."

He went with the messenger. It was a long time before he returned. Longer than would have been necessary for a brief ritual. When he reappeared, his face was older. Not in the wrinkles, those were already there. In his eyes. Someone had scratched away a layer of trust I hadn't seen until it was gone.

"And?" I asked, as he sat down by the fire and held his hands over the flames as if he wanted to burn them out.

"They hanged one," he said. "Not him. Not yet."

"Then who?" asked Tam.

"One of his," said the priest. "A man who was supposedly with him when he raided some English camp. He didn't deny it. Not really. He just said he did what was necessary. They wanted him to say it was a mistake. He didn't."

"So they hanged him for him," Fergus murmured.

The priest nodded. "They did it so it would be visible, but not so it would disturb the lords at their meals. Halfway up the castle stairs, where everyone with anything important has to pass. It hung there like a piece of meat over a tavern grill, and underneath it, the letter stating that he had endangered the peace with his unauthorized actions."

"And what did he say?" I asked. "Right at the very end."

The priest looked at me. For a long time. "He laughed," he said. "At first. Then he spat. Not at her, the wind was blowing the wrong way. On the ground. 'If you want peace,' he said, 'start with your mouths.' One of the scribes didn't write that down."

I would have liked to laugh. Instead, I only felt this pulling sensation in my chest.

"They forced me to bless him," the priest said quietly. "'To make sure everything was done properly,' they said. I whispered in his ear that I wasn't praying for their ropes. Only for his neck."

"And him?" asked Tam.

"He told me to save my breath," muttered the priest. "'I've had my life,' he said. 'If I die for him, it's better than if I'd gone to some fat lord's place in a field that didn't belong to him.' Then they kicked the stool away."

The shadow was still. For a moment, it was as if he himself were hanging from the rope.

"They'll show you the dogs they catch," he said then. "So you know what will happen to you if you keep listening to the wrong person."

The hunt intensified. We received more and more requests for assistance. Here a search party needed us to "secure an area." There a clerk wanted us to ask "a few questions" in the city.

Once we returned to camp and found a new notice. This time with numbers. "A reward will be offered for Wallace's head," it read, "and that of his leading accomplices." There were a lot of coins. Too many for someone who kept his hands empty in front of children.

"Now things are getting serious," said Fergus. "Now they're starting to exploit the poverty."

"They created the hunger themselves," said Tam. "First they deprive us of our benefits, then they offer to sell us for the money they previously took from us."

Naturally, it was the talk of the tavern, even though hardly anyone said it out loud. I knew Iona had seen it. But when I mentioned it to her, she just shrugged.

"There have always been rewards," she said. "First for wolves. Then for bandits. Now for men who have grown too big for their cage."

"So?" I asked. "Are any of those who are interested coming here? The hungry ones?"

She nodded. "They're coming," she said. "You can recognize them by the way they count. Not the coins in the bag—those aren't there yet. They count heads, eyes, sentences. They can hear who can still say their name without spitting. And they remember faces."

"And you?" I asked. "Do you remember hers?"

A brief smile flickered across her face, cold and proud. "I have nothing else," she said. "I can't tie ropes, but I can remember who likes them."

There were nights when I truly heard him. Not in the wind, not in the words, not in the songs that no one sang anymore. Inside me. In that corner where, since the depression, the humming has resided. It wasn't a clear sentence. More of a feeling: Someone who is still walking. Someone who is still standing somewhere among the trees, back against a root, sword in his lap, trying to find his own voice amidst all the others.

"If they were hunting me," the shadow said one of those nights, as I stood alone at the edge of the camp, "how would you run?"

"Not at all," I thought. "I'm built to stand still."

"Don't lie," he said. "You're constantly running. From sleep. From memories. From what you can't change. You just don't feel your legs anymore."

I thought of Wallace. Of his face in the hall, when they had talked about him without really looking at him. Of the men who were now hanging or burning in his name. Of the peasants who had silently seen nothing.

"If they hunt me down," I thought, "then they should know that I will not die quietly."

The shadow laughed. "You never do," he said.

Hunted like a mangy dog. The truth is: dogs are loyal, even if you treat them badly. They come back, even if you kick them. Eventually, they might learn to bite. But most just lie down and whine.

Wallace wasn't one of them. He was the dog who bit back. The one who'd rather rot in the woods than lie chained up in the yard. And us? We were the pack, unsure whether to follow him or return to the house that had beaten and fed us.

We lived between these two things. Between bones and breadcrumbs. Between promises and prize money. Between night and parchment.

The hunt continued. And we ran with it. Not at the front, not with our best horses. But close enough that we could hear the breath of those who were hunting – and sometimes the distant growl of the one they wanted.

He was still free. That was the only thing I clung to. Not out of hope. Out of defiance.

There comes a point in every hunt when you lose track of who's chasing whom. You run, you search, you sniff like a dog in the undergrowth, and at some point you realize that something else is sniffing above you. Bigger. More patient. With more teeth.

The orders became stricter. The routes more precise. No more "voluntary" patrols, but fixed routes, times, names. The camp now had so much writing in such a small space that one wondered how there was any room left for people. Notes were posted everywhere: who was assigned to which squad, who had to go where, who had to know whose face.

They began questioning the men about their memories. Not in large gatherings, not officially, but casually. An officer who sat down with you at the stew and "just out of curiosity" asked if you could remember who had been involved in which raid. A clerk who, "purely out of

interest," wanted to know which nights Wallace had slept in the camp and who had spoken to him.

"They're turning the tables," said the shadow. "They're not just hunting him in the forest. They're hunting him in your minds."

We were assigned to a squad that was supposed to be "mobile." No heavy shield wall, no long periods of standing still. Fast marches, short nights, watch fires that never grew large. "If he's around here anywhere, we'll pick up his trail," said the officer in charge, a thin man with a voice that sounded like nothing but was always on.

"And what if he's not here?" asked Fergus.

"Then at least we know where he isn't," said the officer. "That's information too."

We headed north. Hills that looked as if they'd already carried too many feet. Forests with trees that had seen more secrets than was good for them. Small villages that pretended they weren't there at all. You can tell by how quickly shutters close when you crest the hill.

For two days it was nothing but cold grass, wet boots, tired legs. Men cursing, not because they had to hunt, but because it seemed so pointless. You can't catch a ghost if it doesn't want to be hunted. And Wallace was by then more ghost than man, at least in the minds of those who didn't know him well.

On the third day, we entered a valley that looked as if someone had cut a furrow into the land with a knife. A stream, ankle-deep, meandered through the clay bed, a few stunted trees on either side, and beyond them hills like the backs of sleeping giants. A few houses clung to the bank, more huts than houses, made of gray stones that looked as if they wanted to sink right back into the ground.

"We'll ask questions and then proceed," the officer said. "No drama. No unnecessary pressure. If he was here, he's bound to have left his mark. Men like him can't be quiet."

"That's coming from someone who's never stood in front of a noose at night," growled the shadow.

The people didn't come out until the officer ordered them to. I saw them first as shadows behind crooked doors, then as shapes. Faces I could now paint in my sleep: sunken cheeks, red hands, eyes that darted faster and faster from helmet to helmet the longer you looked at them. An old man, two women, three children, a half-grown boy who acted as if he were man enough to stand upright before us.

"We are looking for a man," the officer began. "You know which one."

No one said Wallace's name. As if even out here he had become too heavy for ordinary tongues.

The younger woman pressed the cloth tighter around her shoulders. The old man looked down. The young man tried to keep his eyes on the officer, but his eyes trembled.

"We saw many men," the old man finally said. "Some with helmets. Some without. Some with hunger in their bellies, some with hunger in their hands. To whom should I give a face?"

The officer smiled thinly. "To the one who doesn't belong here," he said.

The older of the women took a step forward. "No one belongs here," she said. "Not them. Not him. We belong here. The rest is just a draft."

I felt like hugging and shaking her at the same time. The officer turned pale, which was quite an achievement for him.

"There are reports," he said. "That a group of men found shelter here two nights ago. With a leader. Tall. Scarred. Eyes that see too much. Some say he spoke of freedom. Others, that he only asked for bread. You understand what kind of man I mean."

The old man looked at the stream. The boy looked at his feet. The younger woman closed her eyes briefly, too quickly to be an accident.

"We had visitors," the old man finally said. "Three men, half-starved. No horses. No banners. They said they were from further south. That it was even worse there. They asked for fire, bread, and a dry place to stay. We gave them what we could. It wasn't much."

"And you didn't ask what their names were?" asked the officer.

"Names don't fill a belly," said the old man. "And they don't make a barn whole again."

The boy suddenly jerked his head up. "One of them had a scar above his eye," he blurted out. "And he..."

The younger one hissed his name, a sharp whisper that almost cut off his tongue.

"And he shared with us," the boy continued stubbornly, his voice faltering. "His bread. His blanket. He laughed, even though you could see he felt like crying. And he told us to..."

"Enough," the older woman interrupted him.

The officer had moved closer. "What did he say?" he asked. "To you? To the children?"

The boy looked at him. I saw the moment he realized that every word now came at a price.

"He said," he whispered, "that we must stay awake. In our minds. Even when we are tired. That we should remember who is letting us starve. And who is only trying not to starve themselves."

The officer pressed his lips together. "Which direction did he go in?" he asked.

The boy was silent. The old man was silent. Everyone was silent. Only the brook continued to make its stupid noise.

"You don't understand," the officer said finally, more quietly but more dangerously. "If you protect him, you become complicit. The Council has clearly stated: Those who support him are just as much enemies of peace as he is."

"Peace," said the older woman. "Is that what you call it when we silently die?"

The shadow clapped softly in my head. "She's figured it out," it murmured.

The officer looked around. His gaze lingered on me, as if he'd suddenly had an idea. "You," he said. "You also come from regions where it's best to keep your mouth shut when someone comes at you with a knife. You talk to them."

I stepped forward, slowly. The woman looked at me. Her eyes held that mixture of hope and defensiveness that I had come to recognize: Maybe you're different. But probably not.

"Listen," I said. "We're not here to take your last potatoes or your children. We're only here because people up there are afraid of a man who's been in the dirt more often than all of them combined. If you don't tell me where he went, I'd rather that than most of you here."

The officer cleared his throat sharply behind me. I ignored him.

"But," I continued, "they will come back. With others. With men who ask fewer questions and hit faster. And they won't ask three times before they set the barn on fire."

The younger woman was breathing rapidly. "What should we do?" she asked. "If we talk, we'll betray him. If we stay silent, we'll betray ourselves."

"That's how the game works," said the shadow. "They've learned their rules well."

I saw the stream, the hut, the boy's face, who looked as if he would remember that day for the rest of his life. I thought of the hanged man on the stairs. The farmer on the road. The dog in the dream.

"He's gone further into the hills," I said finally. "Northwest. That's the way I'd go. Away from the roads, away from the comfortable riders. It gets harder there. Colder. But those who hunt are lazy dogs. They don't like going uphill much."

The officer stared at me. "Did you say that?" he asked.

"No," I said. "But I saw it. Tracks. Further back, by the old stone with the crack. Three pairs. No horse. One is limping. Northwest."

I lied. That was the ironic part. For the first time that day, I really lied.

The officer hesitated. You could see him making mental mental sketches. Traces, clues, possibilities. In the end, what always prevails with such types won out: the hope of being able to write a report with the right direction.

"Okay," he said. "Then we'll follow the hills. If we don't find anything back there, we'll come back. And then we'll talk again."

He left the farmers, the women, the children standing there as if they were stones by the roadside. We moved on. Northwest. Away from the actual path I had glimpsed in the faint flicker in the boy's eyes: east, downstream, to a grove that was invisible from here.

"You're playing a dangerous game," said the shadow in my head as we trudged up the hill.

"I'm playing her game," I thought. "I've just rearranged the stones."

The day grew longer, the wind bit at the raw patches on our hands. We found nothing. No traces, except our own. No fresh fires, no broken branches that couldn't have come from any deer.

That evening the officer grumbled, but only in a low voice. "Perhaps we were too late," he muttered. "Perhaps they had horses. Perhaps..."

"Maybe you're blind," I thought. I didn't say it.

I lay awake that night, staring into the darkness above me. No tent, only the sky, lying like a dirty blanket over everything. The others snored, murmured, and groaned in their dreams. The shadow lay beside me, silent.

"If it wasn't his track," he said at one point, "then whose neck did you just save?"

"Myself," I thought. "Just a little bit."

I didn't know if he'd really been there, in that valley. Maybe it had just been a bunch of half-starved men, no big names, no big plan. Maybe I'd just been protecting someone who was going to be selling a girl in town tomorrow.

But I knew that once I hadn't done what they wanted. I hadn't kicked down. Not in the same direction as their dirty boots. On a grand scale, it didn't matter. On a small scale, it meant that later I could look in the mirror without immediately looking away.

The hunt continued. Days, nights, hills, streams, faces, parchments. We heard of battles we hadn't seen. Of dead men supposedly with him, even though they had already lain in the dirt last year. Of sightings in villages that had never existed. Every story made him bigger. Every lie tightened the ropes.

And we were running somewhere in between. Not in front, not in back. Somewhere on the side, where you can see well but can't act well.

There's a kind of tiredness that has nothing to do with sleep. It comes when you watch for too long as they talk something to death before they smash it to pieces. I felt it in my bones, in my hands, in the handle of the knife.

"In the end," said the shadow one evening, when we were back at camp and the wind was tearing at the tarpaulin, "they are not just hunting him. They are hunting the possibility that someone like him could ever come into existence again."

"They are hunting what still makes us believe that we are more than rats under the table," I thought.

Hunted like a mangy dog. Yes. But the longer it went on, the more I felt that the pack they were pursuing wasn't just him and his men. It was all of us who had thought "no" and said "yes" too often. The women in taverns who remembered names. The farmers who suddenly went blind. The priests who muttered blessings while cursing inwardly.

We were all in that hunt. Some as dog food. Some as dogs. Some as those who would eventually stop running and turn around.

I didn't yet know which category I would belong to. But I sensed that the day would come when they would stop hunting him—and begin hunting only stories. And on that day, I knew, the real betrayal would happen. Not in the woods. Not in battle. But somewhere by candlelight, with ink.

But that wasn't today. Today I fell asleep with the taste of cold wind in my mouth and the vague hope that somewhere out there was still a man who hadn't grasped how hopeless it all was – and who kept going precisely because of that.

The last refuge: A cold barn

The night we ended up in that barn smelled of damp wood, cold iron, and the end of something that didn't yet have a name. It was the kind of cold where even your breath isn't clearly visible, because even it's too tired to show itself. There were too few of us for a troop and too many for a conversation where everyone could be honest. And we were farther from Stirling, from the castle, from the rats under the table, than was good for men who had already grown accustomed to the stench.

It had started to get worse in the afternoon. First, just darker clouds over the hills, then wind that made the water run horizontally, so you couldn't tell whether you were getting wet from above, from the side, or from the inside. The officer had mumbled something about us holding out "until the next farm." Farm. The word sounded like a recommendation for an inn. In reality, it was a collection of stones, fences, and a roof hoping to survive another winter.

"We need a fire," Tam growled as the wind ripped his hood off again. "Otherwise, they can put us by the roadside tomorrow like ice sculptures. Saves them work hanging us."

"If we're lucky, we'll freeze to death beforehand," Fergus said. "It's a clean death. No scribe, no rope, no confessor pretending to believe what he says."

The sergeant said nothing. His steps only quickened. Ahead of us, a long, dark shadow appeared, rectangular, crooked, solitary: a barn, slightly separated from the rest of the farmyard, like an unwanted family member. A few trees crouched beside it, black against the sky, as if clinging to one another.

"There," grumbled the sergeant. "If we're smart, we ask politely. If we're not smart, we just break down the door."

I was tired enough to be up for either. A dog barked, somewhere near a low apartment building. Then a voice, thin and suspicious, slipped through the howling. "Who's there?"

“Men who don’t want to die in the mud,” the sergeant shouted back. “We just need a roof over our heads for the night. No supplies, no fire from you. We have our own misery.”

A pause. Then the low front door opened a crack, and a face appeared. A man, thin, with eyes so deep-set that the shadows in them seemed like a second cavern. He scrutinized us. Counted us. Probably counting at the same time everything he owned and didn't want to give us.

“The barn,” he said finally. “Not the house. The house is full.”

"Filled with what?" asked Fergus.

“Cold,” he said dryly. “And too many memories.” He nodded toward the barn. “There’s room there. If you don’t set fire to anything that burns, except yourselves.”

We trudged over, the dog growling after us as if he sensed we were bringing more than just wet boots. The barn door jammed; the sergeant had to push against it twice before it opened. The smell hit us: old hay, stable, animal, wood that had gotten wet too often. And something else. Something that smelled of men who had been there before us. Sweat, leather, that dull, iron scent that every weapon carries once you've used it enough.

"We're not the first," the priest muttered behind me. "I can smell it."

We entered, one after the other. The light from the entrance reached a few steps, then the darkness swallowed everything that didn't want to move. Dust danced in the corridor of our breath, as if it were glad to have some company. Somewhere straw rustled, as if something had decided to hide and realized too late that it was making noise.

"Not all in at once," said the sergeant. "We don't know what's already here."

"Rats. Always rats," said the shadow in my head. "Or worse: humans."

We took a few more steps, our eyes searching, tired, suspicious. Tam almost tripped over a sack, cursed, caught himself. Then we heard it: a soft click, like a finger impatiently tapping on metal.

"Not another step," said a voice from the darkness. Rough, tired, but clear. No panicked shrieks, no pompous officer rhetoric. More like someone who had stood under too many skies for too long.

We stopped. Reflex. Sword hilts, shields, shoulders. I felt my knife vibrate briefly at the side, as if it had detected the sound.

"We just want to dry up," said the sergeant. "No trouble. If you need space, we'll tell the rats."

A short, harsh laugh from the darkness. Then a rustling, footsteps in the straw. Someone stepped into the narrow light that filtered through the half-open door.

He was bigger than he'd been in my head. Not in the song, not in the stories—there he was always larger than life. But in my mind, I'd made him smaller, for self-protection. Now he stood there, right in the barn, covered in dirt, in worn armor, cloak over one shoulder, hair

longer, beard wilder than Stirling's. The scars on his face deeper, harder. His eyes like two burnt holes, still glowing.

Wallace.

For a second, it was as if everything inside me stood still. No shadow, no humming, no word. Only my heart, which briefly forgot whether it wanted to beat or not.

"They're already sending wet bastards to my refuge," he said. "They won't get any better."

I could have laughed. That was the worst part: I really could have laughed. Not because the joke was so good. But because it sounded like a real person. Not a hero. Not a poster boy. A man who was just as tired as we were, only with more imagination on his face.

"We're not here because of you," the sergeant said calmly. "We didn't even know you were here."

"That's the best thing I've heard in weeks," he said. "Finally, an honest coincidence."

A few more figures emerged from the darkness behind him. Four, five men, no more. They looked like us, only with less hope of a field kitchen. One was limping, one had his arm in a sling, one had a face that looked as if someone had tried to carve it from a stone and stopped halfway through.

"How many of you are there?" Wallace asked.

"Enough to make the space narrower," I said before the sergeant could reply.

Wallace looked at me. It was only a brief glance, but it was clear. He didn't really recognize me, why would he? To him, we were just bodies in a crowd that had covered the sinkhole at Stirling. But something in his face said: He knows that we are among those who didn't run away back then.

"We are not here to hand you over," the priest said. "If that's what you think."

"If you were here to hand me over," Wallace said dryly, "you would have made more of an effort to make your boots quieter."

Tam snorted. "We are not hunters," he said. "We are what's left when they've already sold the good ones."

A shadow flitted across Wallace's face. The kind you only see if you have shadows yourself. "I know that," he said. "Otherwise you wouldn't be here. Otherwise you'd be somewhere trudging through a village in clean coats, explaining to old men what 'peace' is."

We moved further in, finding spots among bales of straw, broken tools, and an old cart that looked like it had more stories than wheels. The cold crept in, refusing to be shut out. But at least the wind was out, and the rain was running against the wooden walls, no longer directly into our faces.

Someone lit a small lantern somewhere in the back. Just enough light so you wouldn't accidentally step on someone. Not enough to see from outside how many of us there were.

"The last refuge," the priest murmured, more to himself than to anyone else. "A cold barn at the end of the world."

"There are worse holy places," Wallace said. "I've slept in churches that were less honest than this roof."

We sat down. Straw beneath our bottoms, backs against wooden beams, weapons within reach. The air in the barn slowly grew thicker with breath, with the vapor from our bodies, with words yet unspoken.

"They're hunting you," I finally said in his direction, because it would have been ridiculous to pretend that this wasn't the reason we were all here.

"They're chasing a story," he corrected. "They still believe that if they find my throat, they'll have the end in their hands."

"Don't they?" Tam asked.

Wallace looked at his hands. Rough, scarred, dirty. Hands that had held more than swords. I wondered how many heads, children, hopes had been in them.

"They can catch me," he said. "They can hang me, quarter me, stuff me, hang me in pieces above their gates. The English king loves such pictures. They can write my name on every parchment as a warning. But they won't be able to undo all the damage I've caused."

"They are on it," the priest said quietly. "They are starting at the taverns and working their way up to the heads."

"I know," Wallace said. "I hear things. Even out here."

He laid his head against the beam behind him and closed his eyes briefly. In that moment, he looked old. Not his face—it was still hard, angular, vibrant. But there was something in his posture that I had only ever seen in men who had decided to expect nothing more.

"I'm tired," he said. "Not from fighting. I can do that. Tired of explaining. Of talking to men who pretend to speak for Scotland while they're rummaging through their pockets for bills."

"The rats under the table," I muttered.

He opened one eye. "You were there?" he asked. "In the hall?"

I nodded. "Third row by the side door," I said. "Sword in hand, mouth closed, eyes open."

A crooked smile flickered across his face. "The best seats," he said. "Where you can see everything and aren't allowed to say anything."

"You can," I said. "It's just not worth it. They'll write whatever they want anyway."

"I long believed you could force them to write down the truth," Wallace said. "You just had to be loud enough, brave enough, with enough dead on your back. Then I thought if we won enough battles, they'd at least have to respect us in retrospect. Now I realize: all they need is enough ink."

One of his men, the limping one, snorted. "Ink is cheaper than blood," he said. "They did the math."

"And now?" asked Tam. "What's the plan? They told us to play hunters. They're hunting you like a mangy dog. What does the dog do?"

Wallace looked at him as if weighing him up. "Some dogs run until their lungs burst," he said. "Some lie down and let themselves be kicked, thinking it'll be over faster. Some turn around and bite the throat out of whoever's holding the leash. I haven't decided which one I want to be."

"They've put a bounty on your head," I said. "And on a few others. It's posted around town. In taverns. On gates. In people's minds."

"I know that," he said. "That's why I'm here and not there." He looked around. "And you? Have you calculated how many coins one gets for a man like me?"

It wasn't an accusation. It was a serious question.

"I'm bad at math," said Tam. "Especially when I have to look at myself in the mirror while doing it."

Fergus grinned crookedly. "I did think about what it would be like," he admitted. "Not because I wanted to. Because I needed to know how deep the dirt goes. Answer: deeper than my boots."

The priest sighed. "I wish I were holier than I am," he said. "The truth is, some days I've thought it would be easier to betray you all than to look another dying man in the eye. Then I realized that one doesn't exclude the other."

Wallace nodded slowly. "Good," he said. "As long as you tell me you have the thoughts, I'm less worried. The most dangerous men are those who claim they've never been tempted."

The cold crept further into the cracks of the barn. Outside, the wind howled, somewhere a beam creaked as if complaining about the weight of the world. Someone pulled the blanket tighter around their shoulders, someone else used a belt buckle as a pillow. The farm dog eventually came over, stuck its snout under the door, sniffed, decided there were too many of us, and retreated again.

"How long are you staying?" I asked.

"Until it gets light," Wallace said. "Maybe until it gets dark again. We don't have a grand plan anymore, bastard. No edict, no manifesto, no marching routes with pretty names. We only have two or three safe routes left and a few people who haven't sold us out yet. And this." He knocked on the beam. "A last refuge. For tonight."

I laid my head against the wall as well. The beam was cold, but it was there. Not like the promises they were making at the table upstairs. The shadow inside me sat down beside me, quiet, as if it too wanted a break.

"Last refuge," he whispered. "For today. Not forever."

I thought of Iona, of the tavern, of the table where we had sat. Of her saying that some doors would only be open for a while. I wondered if she was awake tonight, if she suspected that a man whose name came up more often in their conversations than her own was sitting on old straw, trying to invent his next move, even though he was running out of breath.

"If they catch you," I said into the darkness, not knowing whether I was speaking to him, to myself, or to the shadow, "then I don't want to have to say that I caught you hiding and did nothing."

Wallace did not answer immediately. All that could be heard was the rustling of straw, the cracking of joints, the soft groans of a man trying and failing to find a more comfortable position.

"If they get me," he said at one point, with a calmness worse than any panic, "none of you will be able to pretend you didn't know. That's the price. You were too close. You'll have to decide where you stand when they set the barn on fire."

The words hung in the darkness like cold smoke. I felt them in my throat, in the handle of the knife, in the spot just below my breastbone that sometimes pulled when I had thought in one direction for too long.

A cold barn, I thought, the last refuge for the night. A bunch of men too tired to believe in heroism anymore, and too awake to feel like victims. Outside, the hunt; inside, the fleeting feeling that for a few hours we didn't have to run.

I closed my eyes. The wind tugged at the boards, water dripped into a puddle somewhere, always in the same rhythm. Beside me, the man whose head they had already hung on parchment before they had finished the ropes was breathing. It wasn't a good feeling. But it was real.

And sometimes, I thought, that's all a refuge can be: a cold, drafty room where at least for one night you know who you're sitting with in the dark.

Sleep didn't come like it used to, when I was a boy and you could just lay your head down and be gone, no matter who was snoring next to you. Sleep now came like a suspicious merchant. He lingers at the door, checks your bags, looks you in the eyes, and then decides whether to do business with you today or leave you lying in the dirt. That night in the barn, he hesitated for a long time.

The men gradually grew quiet. First the usual rustling, the endless search for a halfway comfortable spot in the sea of straw, the cracking of stiff knees and backs, a curse when a straw landed somewhere it didn't belong. Then they drifted away, into that half-sleep of soldiers, where you're never quite in, never quite out.

Wallace wasn't asleep. You could hear it. Men who are truly asleep eventually lose their rhythm. It becomes irregular, they mutter, they doze off. Wallace had this controlled stillness. He lay there, diagonally opposite, shoulders against the beam, leg stretched out, breathing as if he were rationing even that. I knew that type. People who think they have to tell sleep when and how.

I twisted and turned a few times and realized my back was tired of compromises. So I sat up again, drew my knees up, held my hands between them, and stared into the narrow circle of light from the lantern someone had hung on a hook. The flame was small but tenacious. The kind that would rather die than flicker if someone blew on it.

"Can't you sleep?" a voice asked softly.

I didn't have to look: the priest was two arm's lengths away from me, his back against a support post, his face half in shadow.

"When I sleep, I dream," I said. "And when I dream, the dead are there more often than I'd like. Today I already have enough living problems in the barn who want to complain."

The priest smiled briefly, wearily. "I always thought the dead sought out the calmer minds," he said. "But perhaps they're just bad listeners."

"Same here?" I asked.

He nodded. "I saw his eyes earlier," he said. "The man they hanged on the stairs. They're still there if I let them. Today they're quieter. As if they're finally accepting that I couldn't help them."

"Were you able to?" I asked.

The priest shrugged. "I could have bitten through the rope," he said. "With my teeth. With words. With prayers. It wouldn't have changed anything. I can help men who still want to decide. For the others, I'm just a backdrop."

"Just like us," I murmured, nodding towards Wallace. "Setting with a blade."

The priest looked at him for a moment. Wallace had his eyes closed, but I was sure that at least one of them was only pretending.

"I imagined him to be completely different before I was close to him," the priest said. "Taller. Purer. More determined."

"Well," I growled. "Heroes smell better in stories. In real life, they stink of the same shit as we do."

"That doesn't frighten me," the priest said. "What frightens me is how much he resembles us. Tired. Angry. Full of doubt. That means any one of us could be sitting there, with his face. And tomorrow hanging from his rope."

"I don't intend to die famous," I said. "I'm happy if no one even thinks of writing songs about me. They're all lying anyway."

"That's how they start," the shadow in my head chimed in. "'Don't write anything about me.' And then suddenly you're the one they say, 'He was just there.'"

I snorted softly to scare him away. He stayed.

There was a rustling sound, someone stood up, heavy footsteps in the straw, a short curse as someone almost slipped. Tam appeared next to me, rubbing his arms.

"I'm cold," he said. "And I think I'm too old to sleep on cow pee that passes for straw."

"You were already too old when I met you," I murmured.

He slumped down next to me and massaged his thighs. "What do the saints talk about?" he asked. "About God, guilt, and other people who believe more than they should?"

"We are only counting ropes," said the priest. "And considering how many necks they will pass through."

"More than there are heads," Tam grumbled. "They always make more than they need. For later."

For a few heartbeats, the three of us were silent. The lantern crackled, frost hung in the air even though we were indoors. You could breathe the cold, like an added ingredient in the air.

"Do you believe him?" Tam asked suddenly, quietly enough that it didn't creep all over the barn.

"To whom?" I asked, even though I already knew.

"Him," he said, nodding towards Wallace. "That he still has a plan. Or at least doesn't give a damn about what's happening up there at the table."

I glanced over at Wallace. He wasn't lying so rigidly anymore. One arm had slipped across his stomach, his fingers occasionally drumming unconsciously on the buckle. Not a man adrift in nothingness. One whose mind was running further than his feet.

"I think," I said slowly, "that he has less of a plan than he'd admit. And more defiance than is good for him. That makes him dangerous. For her. And for anyone who gets too close."

"For us," said the priest.

"For us," I confirmed.

Tam scratched his beard. "I always thought that if I ever came face to face with him, I'd know immediately what I was," he said. "Either I stand behind him, shout 'Freedom,' and run into the nearest pile of spears. Or I realize I'm a coward and go back to the nearest kitchen. Instead, I sit here and all I know is that my ass hurts, and I don't know whether tomorrow I'd rather protect him or myself."

The priest laughed without joy. "Welcome to the circle of those who think," he said. "This is the bunch nobody wants when things get serious."

Before I could answer, a rough voice sounded from the darkness. "You are not as quiet as you think."

Wallace's eyes had been opened. Not with anger, more with amusement. As amused as a man can be who knows that time is gnawing at his bones.

"Then go to sleep," I said. "If you don't even want to participate in our conversation."

He straightened up a bit, leaning his back more firmly against the beam. The lantern cast shadows on his face, almost turning him into a drawing. A rough, angular thing, with lines drawn with too much pressure.

"I heard you talking," he said. "About plans, ropes, rats, dogs. You are better thinkers than most who consider themselves important."

"That won't buy us anything," said Tam. "Maybe six more months of nightmares."

Wallace briefly twisted his mouth into a crooked grin. "You want to know if there's any point to this anymore?" he asked. "Whether it's worth continuing? Whether I'll just end up taking you all down with me?"

"Since you put it that way, yes," I said. "I don't want to end up as a footnote in a treason report just because I was in the wrong barn at the wrong time."

He nodded, as if he had expected exactly that. "Good," he said. "Men who talk like that are better than those who shout 'for Scotland' as soon as someone waves a piece of cloth around."

He let his gaze wander around the barn. Many were asleep, but I knew that more ears were open than eyes closed.

"Let me tell you something," he began. "When I set off, I wasn't thinking about you. Not about any of you. I was thinking about my father. About my village. About the face of a little English warden, whose teeth I would have loved to pry out one by one. I was young enough to believe that revenge was already a political concept."

The priest grimaced, but said nothing.

"Then the others joined us," Wallace continued. "Peasants, thieves, men with broken hands that no one wanted to give work to anymore. A few young guys who wanted to prove something. A few old guys who had nothing left to lose. We fought because no one else was willing to get their hands dirty. The ones with the rings always wanted clean battles. Clean wars. Clean terms. I showed them what dirt looks like."

"They know that by now," I murmured.

"They used it," Wallace said. "As long as it suited them. Stirling wasn't a victory for me alone. It was our victory. Yours. The bastards, the lost, the ones who weren't on the lists. But up top, they made a story out of it in which I was useful until I became an embarrassment. And now they're hunting me down as if I were their own misstep."

"Isn't that you?" Tam asked quietly. "Your fault?"

Wallace thought for a moment. "Perhaps," he said. "Perhaps their biggest mistake, though, was seeing you. Needing you. Showing you that you don't have to be a nobleman to hold a battle line."

"We already knew that," I said. "It's just that nobody had paid for it."

"Now we all pay," he said. "I recently realized that I might not be the one left standing at the end of the song. Maybe the spot is already reserved for one of those with the clean coats. But you know what I can tell you?"

He leaned forward a little more, as far as his back would allow. The barn was small, but at that moment we felt as if the room were revolving around him. Not like a god. More like a man about to deliver the worst and, at the same time, most honest punchline.

"They are afraid," he said. "Not just of me. Of you. Of the idea that one day you will no longer ask whom you should serve, but why. That one day you will no longer say: 'My Lord,' but: 'My country,' or – even worse – 'my damned life.'"

"And what good does this fear do us?" asked the priest. "Besides ropes, rewards, and burned barns?"

"It gives you a choice," Wallace said. "Not today, not here, in this cold barn. But soon. The moment will come when someone stands before you and says, 'Help us get him. Hold this door. Secure this route. It's about order, peace, your families.' And then you'll know it's no longer about me. It's about whether you help them clean up their own mess."

The shadow slapped very slowly in my head. "There it is," he said. "The dot."

"You're talking as if everything's already decided," I said. "As if you were already half dead."

Wallace shrugged. "I know what they're planning," he said. "I have men in their circles. A few who pretend to have their backs on me while listening. I know they want me. And I know they'll succeed eventually. No man runs forever. And no dog bites an infinite number of times without getting its head bashed in."

"Nice prospects," Tam grumbled.

"But I also know," he continued, "that there's one thing they can't take from me: the moment when I decide how I fall. Standing or crawling. With a curse on my lips or with their words in my mouth. And I don't want you to one day stand before a rope I'm hanging from and have to say, 'I helped tie the knot.'"

Afterwards, it was quiet. So quiet that you could hear the mice in the wall gnawing on something that was probably already rotting away before we arrived.

"What do you want from us?" I finally asked. "Let's be clear. If you already know they're going to get you – what are bastards like us supposed to do? Except watch as you're led up the stairs?"

He looked at me. For a long time. Without that "I'm the big man" attitude. More like someone considering whether to confide his deepest secret to a stranger or take it to his grave.

"I don't want you to die because you were stupid," he said. "If you die, it will be because you made a choice. Not because they made you my hunters with soft words and petty orders. When they come and say, 'For Scotland,' listen to see if they don't really mean 'for our peace.'"

"And what if we do nothing at all?" asked the priest. "Neither for you nor for her?"

"Then you are still better than those holding the noose," he said. "But you must live with the fact that you watched."

The shadow in my head sighed. "He's not selling a simple ticket," it said. "Not 'Freedom or Death.' More like: 'Vote your own filth.'"

"I can't promise you anything," said Wallace. "No free Scotland, no eternal honor, no clean history. I'm not God. I'm just a man who's said 'no' too often. If you need anything from me, it's this: that I show them that someone like me can be dangerous. So that the next one who comes along doesn't have to start from scratch."

Tam laughed softly, bitterly. "You want to recycle your own failure," he said. "So that others can benefit from it."

Wallace grinned crookedly. "Call it what you like," he said. "I'm happy if, in a few years, one of you still remembers that there was once someone who refused to kneel properly."

The lantern flickered briefly, then recovered. Outside, the rain lashed against the boards as if someone were giving applause, belated and inappropriate.

We slowly lay down again. Each in our own spot, back against the wood, straw in our noses. Wallace let his head drop and closed his eyes. Whether he was asleep or pretending, I didn't know. Perhaps he didn't even know himself.

I turned onto my side and looked up at the dark ceiling of the barn. The shadow fell beside me, as always.

"Well?" he asked. "Plan?"

"No plan," I thought. "But I now know what not to do."

"And what is that?" he asked.

"I will not hold the door," I thought, "through which they lead him to the noose."

"Big words," said the shadow. "But when they come, they bring more than just words."

"Let them," I thought.

The barn was cold, drafty, uncomfortable. But for the first time in a long time, I felt like I at least knew where I was sitting. Not on a reward, not on an order, not under a table. But next to a man they were hunting—and next to my own damned limitations.

Sleep eventually came. Not a pleasant one, not a deep one. But it came. And in it I saw no beast, no rats, no stairs. I saw only a barn, a cold one, somewhere in the middle of nowhere, where a group of men had decided for one night not to sell themselves.

It wasn't much. But in those days, it was more than one could have expected.

Morning didn't arrive like a new day, more like a warning. No sunrise, no heroic gold over the hills—those would be tales for bards. We were greeted by a dirty gray light, seeping through the cracks in the boards, the color of old porridge. Cold crept into our bones before we even realized we were still alive.

I woke up because my leg had fallen asleep and my back had decided to complain. The knife was where it belonged, at my side, cold but comforting. The shadow was already awake, of course. It never really sleeps. It was sitting somewhere behind my forehead, mentally lighting a cigarette.

The barn sounded different than it had at night. Less breathing, more noise from outside. Wind, voices, something rattling like a wooden barrel. The men around me slowly came to—the eternal orchestra: coughing, cursing, cracking bones, brushing hay from hair, searching for belts. The priest muttered a few words that sounded more like a soliloquy than a prayer.

Wallace was already awake. Of course he was. A man with a reward on his head doesn't sleep soundly. He sat a little further back, his legs bent, his arms on his knees, his eyes open. He didn't look like a king, not like a leader, more like someone who had made it through the night without knowing why. There was nothing grand about the sight of him at all, and that was precisely what made him dangerous: he looked ordinary. So ordinary that you could believe you might have become the same way if you'd been in his shoes.

"Well, there you go, hero," murmured the shadow. "You don't look like you do on the parchments."

The barn door opened a crack, letting in a breath of cold air. The farmer from the house stood there, his face as if he'd been arguing with himself all night. His eyes scanned the room, counting us, counting more than yesterday, at least judging by his face.

"There are people on the move," he said without greeting. "Soldiers. Two squads. From above, from the direction of the road. I haven't seen them here yet, but the dog started barking before they even entered the yard. He doesn't like the smell of metal."

The sergeant stood up before anyone else could react. "How many?" he asked.

"Eight, ten," said the farmer. "With horses. And one of those with a soft coat. He smells like a clerk or an officer. First they go to the houses. Then they like to look at the barns. Always in that order."

The barn grew quieter. A special kind of stillness, not empty, but pregnant with possibilities. I noticed my fingers automatically seeking the knife handle.

"They didn't send us here," the sergeant told Wallace. "We're officially on patrol heading north. When they see us here, they ask questions that none of us have answers they'll like."

“Then it’s a good day to be somewhere else,” Wallace said. No panic, no drama. Just the matter-of-fact observation of a man used to people constantly closing in on him. “How far is your assignment from this farm?”

The sergeant grimaced. "Let's put it this way," he muttered. "They're not expecting us here. They're not expecting us dead either. But if I have to choose between an angry officer and an English cutthroat, I'll take the officer for a change."

“So you go,” Wallace said. No accusation. Just this weighing of options again.

“We’re leaving,” said the sergeant. “And you should leave too, if you’re smart. This barn has been our refuge for tonight. Tomorrow it will just be a pile of boards for them to search.”

The farmer took a step inside. "There's a second exit at the back," he said. "Behind the bales. An old door, hardly ever used. Nobody notices it if they only look at the front. Behind it is a narrow ditch, then the slope, beyond which the path runs through the undergrowth. If you keep them busy while they're here, he can get through."

"He," I said. "Only him?"

The farmer looked at Wallace. "There are many of you," he said. "One, two get through. A whole bunch of men leave tracks. I don't want to lose my family to your boots."

I couldn't even blame him.

“He won’t go alone,” one of Wallace’s men interjected – the limping one. “We’re not going to let him run out of the fold like a lost sheep.”

"Those who go with him must be able to walk," the farmer said dryly, pointing at his leg. "You limp as if you've been fighting a tree and lost."

The limping man growled but said nothing. Pride won't get you across a ditch when they're breathing down your neck.

A distinct noise now drifted in from outside. Metal against metal, horses' hooves on wet ground, a voice barking orders and clearly enjoying the sound of its own voice. The dog barked again, more furiously.

"We don't have much time," hissed the sergeant. "We'll go out the front, pretend we're here to check the yard. If they see us, they'll be busy. One of us will stay back and show you the door. The rest of us will make sure they have no reason to turn the barn over until you're gone."

"This is a betrayal of their orders," the priest remarked.

"This is the first sensible application of my orders in months," said the sergeant. "If I'm not allowed to reveal this, what was the point of me becoming a soldier at all?"

The shadow in my head chuckled softly. "There you go," it murmured. "The old dog can still bite—in the right direction."

"Who's staying in the back?" asked Tam.

The sergeant looked at us. His gaze lingered on me, longer than on the others. He didn't need a clerk to make a decision.

"You," he said. "You know about holes."

"And you don't like me enough to let me shine in the front lines," I grumbled. But I knew he was doing us both a favor. Talking in front of people, negotiating, lying—that wasn't my forte anymore. Showing doors in the back, giving directions, keeping a knife ready—that was more my thing.

We moved. It was quick, automatic. The sergeant, Tam, Fergus, Aidan, and a few others buckled straps, pulled their coats tighter, and put strength into their legs, as if they had to convincingly pretend they were there by chance. The priest staggered behind them—as a clergyman, he was officially always useful in such a spectacle.

"Don't do anything stupid," he muttered past me. "And if you do, do it quickly."

The front line trudged to the door, the farmer in front, so that it looked as if he had just let us in by chance. Shouts were already coming from outside.

"On behalf of the council – all residents of this courtyard step forward!"

The farmer grimaced. "In the name of my land," he grunted softly. "I'll open the door. The rest is up to you."

They walked out the front. The door closed, the light dimmed again. For a moment, the barn was nothing but breath and heartbeat. Then I turned to Wallace and his men.

"Come on," I said. "No heroism now. There'll be time for that later, when you're dancing on a rope."

"You really know how to give courage," said the limping man.

"I don't offer encouragement," I said. "I create paths. Courage is up to you."

We squeezed our way between the bales, past an old wagon wheel that looked as if it had wanted to be used one last time before being forgotten. Behind a stack of crumbling wooden planks, there was indeed a second door – lower, narrower, as if someone had built it only for particularly lean years.

I carefully pushed the bolt up. The wood creaked, but not loudly enough to be heard over the noise from the front. Voices penetrated the barn planks: our sergeant explaining to an officer that we had only "secured as a precaution," the officer asking questions in that tone that spoke louder than words. Horses snorted, metal clanged. The smell of bad perfume and self-righteous order wafted all the way here.

"Who is going with him?" I asked.

"I do," the limping man said immediately.

"You're staying," Wallace said. "If I take you with me, you'll be in our way in the first trench. I need men who can run, not those who want to prove they still can."

The words hurt; you could hear it in the air. But the limping man knew it was true. He grimaced as if someone had rubbed salt into his wound and sank back.

Two others stepped forward. Younger men, with more anger than reason in their eyes. One with a narrow face and nervous hands, the other with shoulders like a small ox. Wallace nodded.

"You two," he said. "Only speak when I tell you to. Only run when you smell fire or when I start cursing. In between: see, notice, keep your mouth shut."

They nodded, without much fuss. Good dogs.

Wallace glanced into the barn once more. His gaze lingered briefly on me, then on Tam, who was at the front and whom he couldn't see. On the limping man, the priest's place, the straw, the lantern. I wondered if he was memorizing all of it, as if it were the last roof over his head.

"If they ask," he said, "you haven't seen me. Not today, not yesterday, not a year ago."

"And what if we have to lie?" I asked.

He grinned crookedly. "Then lie well," he said. "So well that you almost believe it yourselves."

I opened the door a crack. Cold bit our faces immediately, a wet gust of wind greeting us as if we were prodigal sons. Outside was a narrow, deep ditch, filled with half-frozen water, and beyond it a low slope overgrown with scraggly scrub that looked as if it had been offended for years.

"That way," I whispered. "Stay in the shadow of the slope, don't go over the top. If they see you from the road, all this will have been for nothing."

"When has anything ever not been free?" murmured the shadow.

Wallace was the first to put his foot in the ditch. The water splashed around his leg, and he winced briefly. No cursing, no complaining. Just that one twitch that says: Yes, I'm still made of flesh. The two men followed. One almost tripped, caught himself on a stump of roots. Then they were in the shadow of the slope, three dark silhouettes against an even darker background.

I watched them move away from the barn. No heroic escape, no dramatic dash. Just hunched, quick steps, trying to make less noise than the wind. Every now and then they paused briefly, kept their heads down, listened, then continued on.

Up front, on the other side, the officer's voice became sharper. "We have evidence that he was in this area," he said. "The council expects results. Not tomorrow. Today."

The sergeant responded with that mixture of obsequiousness and reluctance he had perfected. "We've only seen our own men so far," he said. "If the bastard were here, we would have noticed him. My men know the smell of dirt that means something."

"I know yours," the officer snarled. "Open the barns. All of them. And if you find a farmer who too quickly says 'didn't see anything,' bring him along."

I quietly closed the back door. The limping man and the others in the barn sat there as if their bones had been pulled out.

"What now?" one of them asked.

"Now we're sitting here," I said. "And pretending we're just tired soldiers who hate rain. If someone comes in and asks what we're doing here, we say, 'Freezing.' Anything else is too much truth."

The limping man gave a short, rough laugh. "I can handle the cold," he said. "I'm good at it."

The next few minutes—or was it hours?—dragged on endlessly. Sounds from the front, footsteps in the yard, doors being flung open, voices growing sharper, then muffled again. At some point, I heard boots outside our door, boots we had been using. A shadow fell through the crack below.

The door opened. The officer stood there, the one in the soft coat with the face that looked as if he'd never set foot in a barn without hiding behind a cloth. Behind him were two soldiers with unreadable expressions – these were the ones who had gotten into the habit of thinking nothing at all, because thinking only brought trouble.

"What are you doing here?" he asked.

I looked at him, not bothering to get up. "We're trying not to turn into an ice sculpture," I said. "Our bones are too old for open fields."

He wrinkled his nose. "You were ordered to secure the area, not to heat farmers' barns," he said. "Is there anything here I should know?"

"A pile of straw that will light up at the next spark," I said. "A few old wagon wheels. And the smell of cow dung. If you like, I'll take you by the hand and show you every corner."

The soldiers behind him suppressed grins. He didn't.

"Watch your tongue," he said. "Men have ended up on the gallows for less."

"I only have one," I said. "If you want that one too, you'll have to offer me something better than your speeches."

The shadow in my head held its breath. The officer studied me for another moment, then let his gaze wander around the barn. He saw sleepy faces, tired eyes, straw, junk, a limping man who looked as innocent as his scars allowed. Nothing heroic, nothing radiant. Just men who looked as if their main goal for the day was not to fall asleep standing up.

"If I find out that you have concealed something," the officer finally said, "you are not just bastards, but dead bastards."

"Then you'll have to live long enough to find out," the shadow murmured. I only thought it. Aloud I said, "At least we found out together."

He snorted, turned around, and disappeared back into the gray light. The door remained open. Cold air streamed in, as if congratulating us on still being there.

We waited until the sounds outside faded away. Horses starting to move, commands growing shorter, the dog's barking slowly subsiding. Eventually, only the wind remained.

"Do you think they saw him?" asked the limping man.

I shook my head. "If they had seen him," I said, "we would have heard it. And much louder."

The shadow nodded. "He's still a dog that runs," he whispered. "The leash is just hanging there ready."

Later, as we left the farmyard and marched back towards the official route, the sky was still gray. The farmer stood by his door, his hands tucked into his sleeves, his face hard. We didn't exchange a greeting. He knew what he had done. We knew what we hadn't done. That was enough.

As we took our first steps away from the barn, I thought of Wallace, of the two men at his side, somewhere out there in the undergrowth, still on the run, still being chased like a mangy dog that had bitten in the wrong direction too many times.

A cold barn, I thought, a last refuge for the night. It was nothing more than that. But it was nothing less either. On a day when ropes were braided and parchments dried, we had shown, for a few hours, a door that didn't lead to the gallows. Perhaps that wasn't enough to change the ending. But it changed who we were as we marched on.

"Remember," the shadow murmured as the knife at my side vibrated briefly. "That's it, bastard. Next time, you won't just be showing doors. Next time, they'll be asking you which side you're on."

I knew he was right. The barn was his last refuge—and perhaps the last halfway clean one for us. Everything that came after would be brighter. With candles. With questions. With betrayal no longer hidden in the straw, but in faces.

The wind whipped against my face as if trying to keep me awake. I let it. I didn't want to sleep. Not anymore. Not until I'd seen how far they were willing to go to get a man like him on a leash, like a dog.

We continued walking. Behind us lay a farmyard, a barn, a farmer with too many memories. Ahead of us waited lights, rooms, candles – and hands too clean for what they wanted to do next.

The Betrayal by Candlelight

Candlelight is betrayal's best friend. In sunlight, you see every stain on a robe, every crack in a face, every nervous ache in the hands. But in candlelight, all the ugly edges soften. The shadows do the dirty work for you. A man who by day looks like a greedy sack of fear suddenly becomes, under the flickering candlelight, someone you could almost listen to without wanting to vomit. Almost.

We were back in Stirling, closer to the castle again, closer to the rats under the table. The days after the barn had been a gray soup of marches and orders, of half-hearted checks and the feeling that something had gone too far. It was as if not only Wallace had briefly sat in that cold barn, but also the last vestige of honesty in the war they called "Defending Scotland".

When we returned to the city, the smell was different. Less of mud and burnt fat, more of malt, wet stone, and heated air. The alleyways had narrowed, or perhaps only people's thoughts had narrowed. Parchments hung everywhere now. Not just the announcement about Wallace, not just the rewards. New things: promises, oaths, "affirmations of loyalty." From whom to whom, it was always the same direction.

The sergeant stopped us before we got near the castle. "They need guards tonight," he said. "Not outside, inside. At doors. In the corridors. There's a meeting."

"Again," Tam muttered. "What are they negotiating this time? How far you can pull a neck before it breaks?"

"They call it a council meeting," said the sergeant. "With envoys. Candles, seals, the whole shebang. And they want people who keep their mouths shut and their eyes open when they're talking inside. It's our turn."

I knew immediately what that meant. Candlelight. Confined spaces. Voices that grew fainter the closer you got. And us, like pieces of furniture wielding swords. Nothing is as dangerous as a night when you're supposed to just stand still.

The castle had changed. More guards at the gate, more clerks in rooms that had once been mere storerooms. The corridors reeked of reheated promises. Carpets hung on the walls, pretending to bring warmth but only collecting dust. Candlesticks stood in the niches, heavy metal things that looked as if they had seen more blood than half the officers.

We were ushered into a corridor leading to a large room they called the "Council Chamber." Two of us by the door, two by the stairs, two by the passage to the side corridor. I got the spot right by the chamber. Door on the right, wall at my back, facing the entrance. The perfect spot to see everything you're not allowed to change.

While they prepared the room, I managed to peek inside. A heavy table stood in the center, round this time, as if to make everyone look the same. On it were already the first candles, in rows, like little prisoners waiting to be burned down. A few scribes scurried about, arranging parchments, ink, quills, and seals. On the walls, stories: coats of arms, swords, old shields, telling of battles of the past, when treason didn't require ink.

One by one they arrived. The lords, in their heavy coats, with rings worth more than anything we wore. A few clergymen, in dark robes so clean you knew they'd left the dirt to others. And then the English: soft fabrics, smooth faces, the smell of oil, and somehow always a hint of arrogance that didn't come from perfume.

I stood there and counted. Faces, rings, glances. I missed one in particular: Tam's brother. Calum. The man who had chosen the side of those who ordered the ropes instead of those around whom they were tied. He didn't keep me waiting. He arrived later, not too late, but in such a way that he couldn't be missed. His coat was clean, his posture upright, his gaze as shrewd as a knife with a blade that was too smooth.

As he passed us, his gaze met mine. Just a moment, a quick assessment. He recognized me, I could see it. He knew: the bastard of the third wedge, who doesn't know if he'll still be fighting for the same master tomorrow. There was nothing in his eyes. No hatred, no remorse. Only calculation. Like a man wondering how many more pieces he can move to his side of the board before the game turns against him.

Then the doors closed. The candles burned, the voices were muffled. We stood outside, two living wooden posts, and did what we did best: we listened without listening.

Candlelight has this quality of making walls seem thinner. Maybe it's just your head. You know, in there they're talking about life and death, and you hear more through every crack than is good for you. Fragments came through the door, little scraps of sentences that pieced together in my head like a bad mosaic.

"...stability of the country..."

"...England's willingness to be generous when..."

"...Example..."

"...no martyr, we must not create a martyr..."

"...ensure local support..."

"...neutral forces... not directly royal..."

I leaned my back against the wall, feeling the cold stone through the fabric. Murn stood beside me. He had grown paler in recent days, his eyes held that flickering quality that says: There's a second theater going on in there. One in which he himself didn't know whether he was a spectator or an extra.

"Do you hear that?" he whispered.

"I'm not deaf," I said. "I've just learned to pretend to be."

"They're talking about him," Murn murmured. "Again. Always. I'm starting to recognize the words, even though they use new ones."

"They'll need new ones," I said. "'Traitor' is premature. They're working their way up."

At the end of the corridor, near the stairs, stood the priest, as if he were there by chance. In reality, he was there just as voluntarily as we were. He looked as if he were contemplating the pattern of the joints in the floor. I knew he heard just as we did.

The door opened briefly, a servant scurried in, bringing more candles. At that moment I saw the table: candles in the center, heads around them, shadows on the walls. The English envoy spoke, barely moving his hands—a man who knew his words carried weight. Beside him stood the gray-bearded lord who had once calmly explained to us the importance of order. Two other lords, whose names I didn't know but whose faces I remembered from discussions about rationing food, punishments, and "structures."

As the door closed again, a sentence lingered like smoke in the crack. "...he must be brought in by our own people. Scottish hands. Scottish responsibility."

My stomach clenched. The shadow in my head laughed bitterly. "There you have it," he said. "Betrayal needs local color."

The voices became muffled again. I heard table tapping, the rubbing of fabrics when someone bent forward.

"We cannot allow," a familiar voice – the Grey Lord – to continue to have his name on the lips of the common people. He is dangerous. Not only with his sword. With his words."

"You can take that away from him," said another voice. I didn't recognize it, but it was both soft and cold. "If he's in a place where his tongue no longer has any power."

A faint laugh, as dry as dust. "You know how it's done," said the Englishman. "You have your own dungeons. Your own methods. We don't demand an English show. We only demand the result."

"They want to keep their hands clean," the priest muttered at the end of the aisle. "They make us do the dirty work and then say we did it voluntarily."

The door opened again. This time, not a servant, but a clerk came out. Young, with a face that didn't yet know how many lies it could conceal. He glanced at us briefly, then at Murn. His eyes lingered there a heartbeat too long.

"The council needs," he said, "a list of men capable of handling delicate tasks. Loyal, battle-tested, not too... conspicuous. Your unit has been nominated."

I felt the knife growing heavier at my side. "Delicate tasks," I repeated. "What does that mean? Slaughtering pigs? Hanging parchments?"

The clerk raised an eyebrow. "If you don't have names," he said, "the council will obtain them elsewhere. However, it would be... to your advantage if you had a say in who is sent where."

"To our advantage," the shadow said softly. "Whenever they promise you that, one of them pulls their leg out from under you."

The sergeant stepped forward, emerging from the stairwell. He must have heard it—or sensed it, like a dog senses rain. “I’m compiling the list,” he said. “My men are chosen by me, not by feathers.”

The clerk nodded, as if he had been waiting for just that. “See you tomorrow morning,” he said. “The council will continue its deliberations then. Decisions are to be prepared.”

He disappeared back into the room. The door closed, the candles flickered in the draft and then died down. Inside, the story continued.

“Delicate tasks,” Tam repeated as he briefly changed guard positions and walked past me. “I’m telling you, that doesn’t mean winding a clock.”

I looked at Murn. He didn’t look at me. His gaze was fixed on the door, which had fallen silent again. I recognized the expression. The look of a man who already had one hand on the edge of a precipice, wondering whether he’d rather jump himself than be pushed.

The hours crawled by. Changing of the guard, quiet commands, tired feet. Behind the door, words grew heavier. I heard snatches, enough to see the pattern.

“...an official absolution for the gentlemen who agree to cooperate...”

“...it is considered an act of state interest, not treason...”

“...no one will question her honor...”

“...the people will have to understand...”

“...and for the execution – selected teams that are trusted...”

Betrayal was given cushions. Soft words, silk pillows, so it could lie down comfortably. The candles continued to burn down. Drops of wax ran like small, white fingers over metal, solidifying as the words continued to flow.

Eventually, the doors opened completely. The air that came out was heavier than before. Faces, slightly glistening, eyes that either looked too much or too little. The English ambassador looked content, not triumphant, just like someone who had just made a good investment. The grey lord seemed serious, deliberately so, like someone who had decided his name would be on the right side of history. Calum, Tam’s brother, had that rested look that only men have who have just agreed to do something that will open more doors for them.

As he passed us, he paused briefly. Just a moment, just a small act of rudeness in a sea of polite gestures. His gaze slid from me to Murn, from Murn to Tam, who stood at the end of the corridor, his shoulders hunched in a threatening no.

“We’ll soon need squads,” he said quietly, so that only the three of us could hear. “For tasks that not everyone can handle. If you’re smart, you won’t sign up too late.”

“What happens to those who don’t get in touch at all?” I asked.

His lips twitched. Not a smile, more the twitch of a man who remembers that he, too, had once been afraid. "Then others will decide their loyalty," he said. "In candlelight, you can clearly see who hesitates."

Then he left. Just like that. As if he hadn't just told us that we were on a list that nobody wanted to see.

The gentlemen disappeared. The scribes carried out parchments, seals, and empty jugs. The candles continued to burn, even though no one was left in the room. Candles don't know when the betrayal ends. They burn until they are extinguished.

"The betrayal by candlelight," the priest said softly, as we were finally allowed to leave and walked through the now almost empty corridor. "They wrapped it up neatly. With seals, with composure, with phrases that sound good in chronicles."

"And us?" Tam asked. "Where do we fit into this story? As a footnote? 'A few bastards stood in the doorway while their masters sold their souls.'"

I felt the knife against my side, felt the metal pressing against my hip. The shadow was very close.

"We are the ones who have to decide," I said. "Whether we let ourselves be written into this candlelight story – or whether we blow out the light inside before they have finished the rope."

"Candles can be extinguished," said the shadow. "But the ink remains."

I didn't sleep that night. Not properly. Again and again I saw those candles before me, on the table, with their small flames that seemed so harmless. And above them, the hands that had decided that a man who sleeps in cold barns should be taken away by those who once had the same dirt on their faces as he did.

Betrayal, I thought, isn't the grand, underhand prank. It's that slow, sticky understanding by candlelight. A few strokes of the pen. A few nodding heads. A few guards at the door, hearing everything and yet doing nothing.

They hadn't named anyone yet. No mission had been defined, no squad selected, no route sketched on a map. But I sensed that what had happened tonight was worse than any smashed skull in the mud. Today they had decided how they were going to get him.

And I knew: by the next candlelight, they would read out our names. Not aloud, not in the marketplace. In a room like this. With wax, ink, and enough shadows so that no one had to see too clearly how deep they were already in.

The only question was: Would I still be standing at the door – or already on the wrong side?

The morning after the meeting, Stirling looked as if nothing had happened. That's the insidious thing about betrayal: it doesn't hang in the air like smoke, it leaves behind no burned barn, no pile of corpses in a field. It sits quietly in papers, in glances, in the moment when someone says "yes" and pretends there's no alternative. The town awoke as if it were merely

tired, not sold out. Merchants shouted half-heartedly, women hauled water, children ran after one another, pretending that war was just a word for grown-ups, one they didn't understand.

We sat huddled in the camp, doing the same old thing: checking equipment, scraping bowls, making jokes that no one found funny. But hanging over everything was that "See you tomorrow morning" the clerk had said, as if we were some kind of cattle being weighed beforehand. The sergeant had retreated to his tent with a mug he didn't call a confessional, but treated as such. His job was to make the list. To find names for "tricky jobs." To pick men good enough to get their hands dirty and expendable enough to be sacrificed if things went wrong later.

No one said it like that. But we all knew it.

Murn sat on an overturned bucket, staring into space as if writing a reply. Tam sharpened his knife, even though the blade was already clean and smooth. Fergus lay on his back, hands behind his neck, whistling a tune no one knew, probably not even he himself. The priest paced in small circles, as if trying to find a prayer that hadn't been worn out.

"He'll take us," Tam said at one point, without looking up. "Not all of us. Not the stupid ones. But us. We know too much and talk too little. We're the best candidates for dirty tricks."

"Don't flatter yourself," Fergus growled. "Maybe you're just the one they send ahead so the arrows don't hit the ones who matter."

Murn looked at him. "And who is important?" he asked.

Fergus shrugged. "Those who hold the parchments," he said. "Those with the rings. Those with brothers at the tables. Those who already know where they want to stand in the stories later on. Not us. We are the ones whose names they will forget before the noose gets cold."

The priest stopped. "Perhaps you're underestimating yourselves," he said. "Perhaps your names will be on it later. Just in the wrong column."

I felt the knife at my side vibrate, slightly, as if it had already decided that today was not a day for rest. The shadow in my head sat on an imaginary chair and tapped its foot.

"He's coming," he said. "The sergeant. With the ink."

He was right. The canvas of the sergeant's tent lifted, and the man stepped out as if he had wrestled with an invisible enemy. His face was harder than usual, but not blank. There was still something there that looked like resistance, only smaller.

"Fall in," he said. No shouting, no show. Just this "Come here, I've got dirt in my hand and I don't know what to do with it."

We formed a semicircle. Not at full strength – a few of us had been seconded to maintain the image of control in the city. The limping man was there, Aidan, Murn, Tam, Fergus, me, and two others whose names I knew, but who were increasingly becoming faces without a future in my mind.

The sergeant held a piece of parchment in his hand. It was still unsealed, but the ink shone brightly, as if still deciding whether to stay or flow again.

"They want a list," he said. "Of men they can use for... specific tasks. Officially, it's called security, reconnaissance, making contact in difficult areas. Unofficially, we all know what it means."

"Get Wallace," Tam said.

The sergeant looked at him. "Eventually, yes," he said. "Or those close to him. Or those they believe to be close to him. It doesn't matter what they call it. The bottom line is, they want groups that are compliant, resilient, and sustainable."

"Durable," the priest repeated. "Like barrels."

"Why are you here?" Fergus asked him. "Do they have priests on the list too? To bless someone dancing on a rope?"

The priest shrugged. "If someone falls, I'm always automatically there," he said. "I thought I'd get used to the sight."

The sergeant took a deep breath. "I wrote down names," he said. "Because otherwise someone else will. And I don't want some clerk who's never had blood on his hands deciding who gets to leave and who doesn't."

"You're acting as if this is a good thing," murmured the shadow. "It isn't. It's just a more elegant form of grace."

"Who's into that?" Murn asked. His voice was too calm.

The sergeant looked at the parchment, not at our faces. "They wanted ten," he said. "I gave them six."

"Six?" Tam repeated. "And that's your kind of resistance?"

"If they want more, they can get it themselves," the sergeant growled. "I can't teach them to be brave."

He read the names aloud. Aidan. Fergus. Two of the others. None of them were surprised. They'd gotten the crappy assignments before. Reliable, tough, quiet. Then Murn came up. Then my name was called.

It made no sound. No thunder, no crack in the air. Only my heart, which briefly stumbled, then carried on as if nothing had happened.

"Of course," said the shadow. "Who else? You can read holes. You know Wallace's scent. You were in the barn. You stood at the door when they sealed the betrayal. You are their perfect bastard."

"Why me?" I asked aloud before I could stop myself.

The sergeant finally looked up. His eyes were tired, but not cold. "Because they know your name," he said. "And because I prefer to decide for myself which list you're on."

"You could have left me out," I said. "You could have pretended I was..."

"...meaningless?" he interrupted. "You're not anymore. Not after everything. They asked me in the corridor if you were still in my unit. Don't think you're invisible."

A bitter taste rose in my mouth. "And you said 'yes'," I said.

"I could have said 'no'," he said. "Then they would have put you in another unit. One that has no scruples. One that puts you at the front and says, 'Bring him to us.' With me, you still have a chance not to do what they want."

"What a comfort," snarled the shadow.

"And me?" asked Murn. "Why me?"

The sergeant hesitated longer. "Because you're caught in the middle," he finally said. "With the clerks, with us, with them. If they don't have you in sight, they'll look for you. And if they look for you, they'll drag everyone you know into it. That way, you can still decide when to keep quiet."

Murn closed his eyes briefly. A muscle twitched in his jaw. "So it's protection," he said. "A kind of preservation."

"Call it what you like," said the sergeant. "I call it: at least I'll keep you all together when they start pulling the net."

Tam stepped forward. "And me?" he asked. "Am I too stupid for betrayal, or what?"

A few almost laughed, but no one dared. The sergeant studied him for a long time. "You would have been the first," he finally said. "But if you're into that sort of thing, I know how you'll react when they tell you to get it."

"How?" asked Tam.

"You would try to warn him," the sergeant said. "And die in the process. Then they would have you as an example, and he'd still have you. I need you here."

For a moment, no one said anything. Tam was breathing heavily, as if someone had punched him in the ribs. "So you're sending the ones who can lie even better than me," he muttered.

"No," said the sergeant. "I send those who I believe know when to stop obeying."

The knife vibrated briefly, as if nodding. The shadow applauded slowly.

"And what if we disappoint you?" I asked.

"Then you'll just die on the wrong side," said the sergeant. "Like so many before you. I can't give you any guarantees. Only the opportunity to mess it up yourselves."

We dispersed, each taking their name with them. Murn made the mistake of sitting down where he'd been standing. He sank down onto the bucket he'd just been sitting on, as if he'd never gotten up. His hands were trembling slightly.

I sat down next to him. "You can still say no," I said.

"To whom?" he asked bitterly. "To him? To them? To myself?"

"To everyone," said the shadow. "But that's just what people say. In reality, there's always some 'yes' you can't get rid of."

"If you weren't here," Murn murmured, "I would think they had chosen me because I'm the weakest. This way I know: they don't just want victims. They want witnesses."

"Witnesses of what?" I asked.

"From the fact that it was us," he said. "The doormen. The escorts. Those who knew the ways."

The priest approached, squatted down, his knees cracking. "You still have more freedom than those inside by candlelight," he said. "They've already made their decision. You haven't."

"They've decided they don't want to get dirty themselves anymore," I said. "We decide how dirty we let ourselves get."

"That's the only difference there is," said the shadow. "It's small. But it belongs to you."

That evening I went to the tavern. Not out of thirst. Out of necessity. When you're told you're going to be part of a "delicate assignment," you want to see someone beforehand who isn't acting like it's normal.

The "Crooked Crown" was more crowded than usual. Perhaps because people sensed something was afoot. The voices were quieter, but closer together. That was the difference: less shouting, more whispering. Better for traitors. Worse for those who still wanted to listen.

Iona stood behind the counter, her hair tied back, sleeves rolled up, eyes sharp. She poured mugs, took money, wiped surfaces, listened. Always. She always listened.

When she saw me, she paused briefly. "You look like someone who's thought about his worth," she said. "Bad idea in this city."

"You have a list," I said. "I'm on it."

"Reward or assignment?" she asked.

"Mission," I said. "The reward is for others."

She nodded, as if she had expected it. "Candlelight yesterday?" she asked.

"You know about this?" I asked.

She grinned narrowly. "I have guests who don't drink enough before they start bragging," she said. "'We do what's necessary,' they say. That's the new 'For God and the King.'"

"They want us to be part of it," I said. "They want us to get him. Or help the person who gets him. They're not saying it like that yet. They're still talking about 'security'."

"They are cowards," she said. "They need you. They need men who have seen what he is. Who can later say, 'He was only human.' That makes hanging easier."

I took the jug she placed in front of me. The contents burned before they even reached my mouth. Good. I wanted to feel something.

"What would you do?" I asked.

She leaned forward, resting her hands on the counter. Her fingers were rough, but steady. "I'm a landlady," she said. "I don't betray anyone. I sell drinks and collect stories. If someone gets betrayed here, it's because someone else brings it in. Not because I open my mouth."

"You speak well," said the shadow. "And honestly. Rarely."

"But what if you were me?" I persisted. "With a sword, a command, and a name in mind that they want."

She thought for a moment. Her eyes scanned the room, examining faces as if searching in each one for an answer she didn't want to hear.

"I would remember who gave the order," she said. "Not just who carried it out. If you can't protect him, at least make sure you know who sold him out later. So you don't mistake their lies for your own."

"That won't save him," I said.

"Maybe not," she said. "But it saves you from standing there one day and saying, 'I didn't know.' And that's the ugliest thing a person can say."

The shadow nodded in agreement. I drank. Not to forget. To nail the words down.

A group of soldiers sat at the far end of the tavern. Not ours. Their coats were cleaner, their boots better. One of them spoke louder. "When all this is over," he said, "we will be in the chronicles. The men who brought peace. The ones who captured the rebel."

His friends nodded. One made a gesture as if pulling a rope, then laughed. I looked at Iona. She looked away, but her jaw was grinding.

"There they are," said the shadow. "The volunteers. Those who already see themselves in the stories."

I thought of Wallace in the barn. Of the limping man. Of the farmer with the back door. Of the rope on the stairs. Of the candles on the table.

"Betrayal by candlelight is clean," I thought. "But on the way there stands a bunch of men with dirty boots."

When I returned to camp, the sky had cleared. Cold stars, unaware of our lists. I lay down, the knife at my side, knowing they would meet again tomorrow morning. Again candles, again shadows, again words growing heavier.

And somewhere between those candles, our names would lie. Not as heroes. Not as traitors. Not yet. As tools.

The only question was whether we would let ourselves be used until there was nothing left of us – or whether we would decide to become dull before they had worn us down completely.

The shadow lay down beside me. "It's coming," he said. "The day they say, 'Now.'"

"I know," I thought. "I know."

And I fell asleep with the taste of cheap whiskey, wax, and the dull knowledge that the next candlelight would shine on me brighter than I would have liked.

The day they carried the betrayal from the candlelight out into the cold air seemed harmless. Thin clouds, a bit of wind, Stirling with that "we've seen worse" look on his face. At first glance, it was just another day in a war that had long since become a creature of bad habit. But you notice it in the little things: who goes where, who lowers their voice, who suddenly has time to stroke their beard.

They got Murn first.

Not officially, not with fanfare. A messenger arrived, clean, without a trace of dirt on his coat, with that kind of attitude that says, "I don't bring good news, but I'm being paid for it." He found Murn fetching water, by the barrel. Two sentences, then that look: "Come with me." Murn put the bucket down, barely flinching, and I knew: He'd been waiting for exactly this.

"The council wants to see you," said the messenger. "Questions about the situation. You have experience with the clerks."

"They have experience with me," Murn murmured, but so quietly that only I heard it.

I reached for his arm. Not firmly, just enough for him to feel it. "You don't have to..."

"Yes," he said. "If I don't leave, they'll come. And then they won't ask questions anymore, they'll tell stories."

The shadow in my head nodded slowly. "There goes the first one," he said. "Voluntarily to the table."

I watched the messenger lead Murn toward the castle. Something stirred within me. Not heroism, not glorious camaraderie. More that dull feeling you get when you know someone you know is about to enter a room filled with candles, and you know they won't come out the same. If at all.

They left us to cook for the rest of the day. No new orders, just the usual "be ready," "don't leave," "wait for further instructions." It's torture for men who overthink things. You start dissecting your own thoughts until you no longer know if you really want anything or if you just want to avoid being the next one called.

Tam eventually trudged over to me and sat down next to me like a sack of potatoes. "He won't be back for a long time," he said.

"Maybe they gave him something to eat," I said.

"Not with that face," Tam grumbled. "That face makes them want to confess."

The priest stood nearby, as if he had accidentally forgotten to leave. "They won't hit him," he said. "Not yet. Today they work with voices. Hitting leaves too obvious marks. Today they want something that can later be described as 'voluntary.'"

"Betrayal with gloves," murmured the shadow.

It got later. The sun half-heartedly continued its course, pretending to illuminate something. Food was being distributed in the camp, meager as always. Murn still hadn't returned. I ate two spoonfuls and realized they were stuck in my throat.

"Are you going to look?" asked the shadow. "Or are you waiting patiently?"

I didn't wait patiently. But I pretended to.

As dusk fell, he arrived. No fanfare, no guard. Murn simply appeared between two tents, as if he'd been spat out of them. His gait was the same. His shoulders weren't. They drooped. His eyes were dry—that was the worst part. No redness, no tears. Just that dull, glazed look you get when someone's been exposed to too much light and too little air at once.

I walked towards him. "And?" I asked.

He stopped, looked past me, as if there was something behind me that interested him more. Perhaps there really was something there. The castle. The candles.

"They wanted to know where he was," he said. "Where he is. Where he might be. You know the questions. 'Who was there? Who spoke to him? Who was close? Who might still be in contact with him?'"

"And you?" I asked. "What did you say?"

He laughed briefly, dryly, without joy. "Nothing they didn't already know," he muttered. "Names they told us. Places mentioned in their reports. They didn't want any new answers from me, just confirmation."

"And?" asked the shadow. "Did you give them to them?"

I looked into Murn's eyes. "Have you confirmed?" I asked.

He exhaled. "I kept silent as long as I could," he said. "They raised the candles, as if that would help. They talked about 'responsibility,' about 'duty to Scotland,' about 'your own safety.' One of them called me Father. Another Brother. I didn't know whether to spit in their faces or down their throats."

"And?" asked Tam, who had joined us, quietly, as if the conversation were through a thin glass.

"I did one," Murn said. "I didn't tell them where he was. And I didn't tell them where he wasn't. I just nodded when they mentioned places I'd never been to. And I stayed silent when they mentioned places I knew."

The priest came closer. "That's a kind of lie," he said. "I like that."

"They believed you?" I asked.

"They wanted to believe," Murn replied. "That's even more dangerous. One of them—the one with the dry hands—said I was 'sensible.' That I was a man who 'understood what was at stake.'"

"And what's at stake?" asked the shadow.

"The peace and quiet by candlelight," Murn said softly. "And our necks outside."

I wanted to pat him on the shoulder, to do something. My hand hung in the air. It felt wrong to comfort him without knowing whether he had moved us closer to them or further away from him.

I was woken up in the night. Not by a kick, but by a shadow in the tent.

"Stand up," whispered the sergeant. "You, Aidan, Fergus, Murn. Equipment, but not everything. Quiet."

That was the moment. The one the shadow had foreshadowed. "Now," he said. "Candlelight was the prologue. Now comes the part where they use you."

I dressed, the movements heavy but sure. Knife at my side, sword, cloak. Outside it was dark, just a hint of moonlight behind ragged clouds. The castle stood there as always, a dark block, its windows glowing like small, watchful eyes.

The four of us followed the sergeant out of the camp, up a side ramp, along a little-used path that led past the main gate. No drums, no torches — just a few lanterns that gave enough light not to break our necks, but not enough to count us.

"Where are we going?" asked Fergus.

"Into the castle," said the sergeant. "Side entrance. Side passage. Small room. Candles."

Candles, of course.

The entrance was narrow, a door in a wall that looked as if it had been forced in later. A guard stood there, expressionless, nodded, and let us through. He knew. That made him dangerous.

Inside it was warm, too warm after the night air. The corridor smelled of wax, stone, and iron. The sergeant led us into a small room, not far from the council chamber. Not a grand hall, not a courtroom, more like a workshop for decisions that one didn't want to be so grandly immortalized in stone.

In the center stood a table. Not a large one, just a rough plank on trestles. On it lay a map, parchments, a few weights to hold the edges down. Candles all around, low, high, dripping. Three men stood by the map. The grey lord. Calum. And the narrow-faced scribe with the soft hands, who had come from the council chamber last night.

Calum looked at us as if we were goods he had ordered. The grey lord seemed tired but lucid. The clerk looked nervous, as if he had miscalculated and hoped no one would double-check.

"These are them," said the sergeant. "My men for delicate tasks."

"Delicate tasks," the shadow repeated. "There you have it."

The grey lord nodded. "You are no fools," he said. "I know that. And I hope you are no fanatics either. We need men who do what is necessary, not what they sing about in taverns."

"You need men who don't write it down afterwards," I thought. I didn't say it.

Calum stepped closer to the table. His finger traced the map, stopping at a point. A valley, hills, a river, a few lines that could be a village or just the cartographer's bad mood.

"He was seen here," said Calum. "At least, that's what we believe. Reports from farmers, hunters, a monk who drinks too much. No proof. But enough to take action."

"And what's the plan?" Fergus asked. Directly. Good.

Calum looked at the grey lord. The lord took a breath, as if reassuring himself. "We don't want to confront him in the open," he said. "No more battlefield, no more pile of dead to mourn later. We want to... talk to him. Make him understand that his path has ended. That he will serve Scotland better if he doesn't escalate further."

The priest would have laughed if he'd been there. I only laughed to myself. "Speaking," I thought. "With a rope in the background."

"He won't come if he sees English banners," the lord continued. "He won't come if he knows the king is standing right behind them. But he might come if he thinks he's talking to his own people. To men who stood in the same filth as him."

"That's where we come in," said the shadow. "Of course."

"You want us to lure him in," I said. "Under false pretenses."

The writer flinched, as if I had said the word "wrong" louder than I actually had.

"You are soldiers," Calum said calmly. "You carried out orders you didn't like. You know what it's like when the whole is more important than the individual man."

"Which whole?" Tam asked. "The council? The king? Your clear conscience?"

Calum looked at his brother, briefly, sharply. "Scotland," he said. "It's about Scotland."

I looked at the grey lord. "And who decides what 'Scotland' is?" I asked. "Those who sit at the table? Or those who sleep in cold barns?"

A shadow flitted across his face. He wasn't blind. He just liked his wallpaper made of words.

"It's not about whether you love him or hate him," he said. "It's about the fact that we have to end this war before there's nothing left. It's a symbol. But symbols can also become dangerous when they get too big. We want to prevent it from becoming something that no one can control."

"So we have to control him," said the writer.

"Or remove it," added Calum. "If there's no other way."

The candles flickered. Wax dripped down the stand like white tears. I felt the knife at my side. It vibrated. The shadow in my head sat on the table, its legs dangling.

"And what exactly are you expecting us to do?" Aidan asked. "Do you want us to arrest him? Kill him? Persuade him?"

"You are to meet him," said Calum. "As messengers. As men who know him, at least from afar. You are to tell him that negotiations are taking place. That the council is prepared to clarify his position. That he is being given one last chance to be part of a solution, not a problem."

"A lie with a bow," murmured the shadow.

"And what if he doesn't come?" I asked.

"Then we tried," said the grey lord. "And no one can later accuse us of not wanting to talk."

"And what if he comes?" I asked.

Calum met my gaze. "Then you take him to a specific place," he said. "Without restraining him. Without violence, if possible. He should believe that we want to hear from him. And there... we'll take care of the rest."

"An ambush," said Fergus. "Just say so."

"One raid," the writer corrected. "Orderly. Controlled. Without unnecessary bloodshed."

"Your vocabulary is worse than any butcher's," said the shadow.

The sergeant, who had remained silent until now, cleared his throat. "And if my men say no?" he asked. "Then what?"

The grey lord looked at him, long, wearily. "Then others will do it," he said. "Men I trust less. And you will still have to live with the consequences. And perhaps with the suspicion that you could have warned him beforehand."

That was the point. They had laid it out cleanly, like a knife on a cloth. It wasn't just an order. It was an exchange: obedience for the illusion of still having influence. Betrayal for the feeling of at least doing it "right."

I felt Tam's gaze on the back of my neck, even though he wasn't in the room. I felt Iona standing behind a counter somewhere in the city, collecting names. I saw Wallace in the barn, shoulders against the beam, eyes open, voice calm: "I don't want you to have to say later that you were complicit in this."

"So?" asked the shadow. "What do you say, bastard?"

I looked at the map. At the small, innocent valley where there was nothing but lines and a line for a stream. I saw the candles, the wax, the hands on the table.

"I won't lie about what this is," I said. "This isn't a conversation. This is bait."

The clerk inhaled sharply. "You are soldiers," he said. "You have orders."

"I'm a bastard," I said. "I've learned to choose my own names."

The grey lord did not back down. "Will you do it or not?" he asked.

The sergeant looked at us. One after the other. Murn, Aidan, Fergus, me. In his eyes there was nothing of "honor," nothing of "duty." Only: "Decide. But decide consciously."

Murn spoke first. His voice was hoarse. "I'm leaving," he said. "Not because I want to. Because I want to see how far they'll go. And because I don't want any of those who never saw him to tell the story alone."

Fergus grumbled. "If I say no, they'll send three other complete idiots," he said. "They might actually kill him in his sleep. I'll go with him. At least then I can still decide where I look."

Aidan nodded. "I'm already on my last legs," he said. "If I'm going to die, then maybe it should be somewhere where it still means something."

Then they looked at me. The shadow held its breath. The knife vibrated.

"I'm going to leave," I said slowly. "But not to hand him over to them. I'm going to see if he was right."

"With what?" asked Calum.

"So that," I said, "the real betrayal doesn't happen out there in the woods, but here. In rooms like this. Under candles, where no one can see whose shadow belongs to whom."

The scribe looked as if he wanted to protest. The grey lord said nothing. His face showed a mixture of relief and shame. Calum merely nodded, briefly and curtly.

"Good," he said. "Then you've heard the order. You will be prepared. You'll receive details tomorrow. The council expects results."

He said: The rope is waiting for a neck.

As we left the room, my eyes lingered for a moment on the candles. Some were almost burned down, others freshly lit. The flames flickered as we passed, as if pleased that they weren't the only ones who found the air unpleasant.

Outside it was dark again, as always. But after the candlelight, the night seemed more honest. The cold doesn't slap you in the face to persuade you. It's simply there.

Tam was waiting for us when we returned to camp. He saw our faces and didn't need to say a word.

"They've come for you," he said.

"They used us," I corrected. "We got ourselves."

The shadow chuckled softly. "Betrayal by candlelight," he said. "Congratulations. Now one of them burns inside you."

I lay down, the knife on my stomach, not at my side. As if I wanted it closer to me, in case something in the night decided to stab me in the ribs. Above me, the sky; somewhere in between, the castle with its candles.

It was decided. We would go to him. We would tell him that we wanted to talk to him. And somewhere behind us, ropes were drying, carts oiling, and parchments being prepared.

The betrayal had left the candlelight. Now it walked in our boots.

Chains of iron, thoughts of fire

They gave us the shackles not by candlelight, but at dawn. That was almost kind of them. Iron looks different in the dark than in daylight. At night it's just an idea, a sound, a weight in your hand. In the morning it's suddenly clear, cold, heavy, more honest than the faces of the men who give it to you.

They acted as if it were just material. "Just in case," said the clerk who waited for us at the edge of the camp. He wore thin leather gloves, as if afraid of catching our mission. The irons lay neatly tied in a cloth. Chains, rings, shackles. No pomp, no ornamentation. Just function.

"If he turns himself in," the writer said, "if he realizes that his journey has come to an end, you will need something to... secure the situation."

The word "secure" hung in the air like a rotten apple.

The shadow in my head chuckled briefly. "There you have your iron shackles," it said. "All that's missing is the fire in your mind."

I took the bundle because someone had to. The iron was colder than the air, heavier than it looked. It had this dull weight that tells you: This isn't about symbolism. This is about someone not running away in the end.

"And what if he doesn't turn himself in?" asked Fergus.

The scribe shrugged. "Then it won't come to that," he said. "Then it's a fight. And in a fight..." He made a vague gesture. "...the sword decides."

"It's nice how they always manage to only mention themselves in half the sentences," murmured the shadow.

We received another map, finer lines, a few markings, waypoints. They had put in the effort. Betrayal requires good preparation. The Grey Lord didn't show up. Neither did Calum. They were now a level higher, handling tasks that no longer required getting their hands dirty, only their consciences.

The sergeant looked at the bundle of iron, then at us. "None of you are going to visibly hang that on your belt," he said. "We're messengers, not dogcatchers. If he sees the chains before we even talk, all this will have been for nothing."

"For their money," said the shadow.

We distributed the stuff as best we could. Some in the provisions bag, some in the sergeant's coat, a ring in my pocket that immediately seared itself into my memory like an extra organ. I could feel it, even when it was lying still. Iron has this habit, as if it were breathing.

There were six of us. The sergeant, Fergus, Aidan, Murn, me, and one of the others—Ewan, a quiet guy who listened more than he spoke, which made him dangerous in those moments. The priest was officially allowed to come along, "to build trust." When I heard that, I almost laughed. If anyone was destroying trust, it was those guys who thought you'd believe them just because they put a man in a black robe next to their lies.

Tam stayed at the camp. He pretended he was only concerned with his belt when we left, but I saw his hands. They were too tight.

"When you come back," he said, "I want you to still be able to walk."

"When I come back," I said, "I want you to be able to punch me in the face again if you think I've done anything wrong."

He grinned crookedly. "You can count on that," he said.

We left Stirling behind, the castle, the tavern where candlelight fell on bad whiskey. The road led first through the usual gray fringes of the town—shacks, suspicious glances, children who had grown up too fast, dogs looking at us with a mixture of fear and resignation. Then came

hills, fields, more hills. The path to the marked valley wasn't one you took without a reason. I liked that. Betrayal that requires effort is preferable to the easy kind. At least they break a sweat before they put the noose around your neck.

The sergeant walked in front, shoulders hard, step steady. He didn't say much. Murn walked beside him, his eyes scanning the hills, the horizon, the ground. Aidan and Ewan formed the middle, Fergus held the side, and I walked at the back. That had become the norm. The bastard as the last dog, watching out for anyone approaching from behind or for one of our own pack deciding to turn back.

"So?" asked the shadow. "Plan?"

I thought for a moment. "There's no plan that will make the noose disappear," I thought. "Only plans where we decide who looks at it first."

"You want to warn him," he said. "You want to see him, tell him what they are planning, and hope that he is smarter than their cards."

"Yes," I thought. "And no. I also want to see if he's still the person we think he is. Or if he's just a tired dog for whom it doesn't matter anymore anyway."

The day dragged on. The sky remained gray, but dry. Good for marches, bad for stories. We stopped briefly by a stream, drank, and ate a few chunks of hard bread that were more suitable as weapons. The priest sat down on a stone that looked as if it might fall apart in a huff and stared into the water.

"We're bringing chains," he finally said. "I wonder who's wearing more of them: him or us."

"We can still throw ours away," said Fergus. "His might already be in the minds of too many people."

"Thoughts of fire," the shadow reported. "There's your second part of the chapter."

"What will you tell him?" Murn asked me without looking at me. He continued to gaze into the water, as if it were answering back.

"The truth," I said. "In parts. So that he knows what he's getting into. And so that he has the choice to say no."

"Do you really think he'll say no?" Murn asked.

I thought of the barn, of his eyes, of the weariness that wasn't a surrender. "I think," I said, "he'll look at us, draw his knees up, press his shoulders against the beam—and then do something none of us planned."

The priest gave a short laugh. "That's the problem with people like him," he said. "They don't stick to the script. That's why they want to get rid of him."

We continued on. The valley, which had been an innocent circle on the map, eventually appeared before us. Nothing dramatic about it. A hollow between hills, a narrow stream, a few stunted trees that looked as if they were clinging to each other to avoid being blown away. A

good place for a conversation, if you didn't know that men with bows and chains would eventually stand on those hills.

"Here," said the sergeant. "This is the spot. According to the map. According to them."

"According to those who pull the strings," said the shadow.

We looked around. No camp, no fresh tracks. Just old hoofprints in the damp ground, meaning anything or nothing. A few ash remnants, half-eaten by the rain. This could have been a hiker, a hunter, another group. Or him.

"He already knows we're coming," said the priest.

"Why?" asked Aidan.

"Because he can no longer live without some farmer, a dog, or a drunkard noticing that he has changed direction," the priest said. "If he wants to come here, he's already on his way. If not, we were just out for a walk."

The sergeant left us the lower part of the hollow and walked a little way up the slope. He pretended to be checking out the area, but I saw his gaze scanning the lines where archers could later be positioned. Perhaps they had told him when, or even if, they intended to close the deal. Perhaps he knew as little as we did whether this was really just a preliminary discussion or already the first attempt to capture him.

"What if they capture us?" Ewan asked quietly. It was the first time he had spoken that day.

"Then they're in luck," said Fergus. "Then they won't have to send their own men to collect our bodies."

The shadow snorted. "Optimists everywhere," he said.

We waited. Waiting is a form of torture in itself. You have nothing to do, so you drive yourself crazy with worry. The iron in the pocket grew heavier. I felt it with every breath, as if I'd had a second heartbeat made of metal implanted in my hip.

Murn paced restlessly along the stream, as if trying to memorize an escape route, even though, for him, no real escape route existed. Aidan sat in the grass, carving a piece of wood, unsure of what it would become. The priest had chosen a spot from which he could see both us and the hillside, as if he wanted to know in time from which direction the next betrayal would come.

It took forever. Or an hour. Or ten heartbeats. Time loses its flavor when you're waiting for someone to enter your life who could be your end.

Then we heard it. No horn, no drum, no cavalry column. Just footsteps. Three. Maybe four. Heavy enough to be men, light enough not to carry heavy infantry. The rustle of cloth, the crackle of small twigs too dry to be of any use to anyone.

"From the west," murmured Ewan.

We turned slowly, not too hastily. If you meet someone you don't want to scare, you move like someone who has nothing to hide. It gets more difficult if you do have something. For example, a bundle of chains.

He came down the slope like a man who had walked it before. No feeling his way, no hesitation. His coat hung heavy, his beard had grown longer, his eyes no smaller. Two men were with him. Not the same ones as in the barn. Different ones. But with the same look: We've been with him too long to still believe in coincidences.

Wallace didn't stop halfway down to look dramatically downwards. He came all the way down, stepped into the hollow as if entering a pub. His hand wasn't on his sword, but close enough.

"So," he said. "Here we are. The man they are hunting, and the men they are sending to tell him that they don't actually want to."

None of us answered immediately. It was as if the hollow had briefly held its breath. The shadow leaned forward in my mind.

"You wanted to tell the truth," he reminded me. "Now would be a good opportunity."

The sergeant took a step forward. "William Wallace," he said, formally, as if reading aloud a contract. "We are here to talk."

"I know," said Wallace. "If you were here to fight, there would be more of you—and you would be worse dressed."

He looked at us, one after the other. His gaze lingered on Murn a fraction longer, as if he'd seen the imprint of a candle in his eyes. It lingered on me until it became almost uncomfortable.

"We know each other from the hollow," he said. "And from the barn. And from a room you guarded from the outside while they fought with words inside. Bastard, third wedge, mouth mostly closed, eyes always open."

That he remembered that surprised me more than anything else. I nodded. "I'm not here to lie to you," I said.

"Good," he said. "Then start."

The iron shackles lay like an additional shadow in my pocket. The thoughts in my head burned, without me knowing whether they would ignite something or merely blacken me from within.

"They want to speak with you," I said. "Officially. In Stirling. With counsel, with candles, with everything."

"And unofficially?" he asked.

"Unofficially," I said, "they have already braided ropes and only want to call the knot that so they can sleep at night because of it."

It was out there. No clever preparation, no soft packaging. Just what it was.

Wallace didn't look surprised. Rather, as if he had expected exactly that.

"And you?" he asked. "Are you merely the tongue of their invitation? Or are you the hand that will put the irons on me if I'm foolish enough to believe that one can talk to men who prefer to kill with ink?"

The shadow held its breath. The air in the valley grew heavier.

Iron shackles, I thought. Thoughts of fire. We stood between these two things, with muddy boots, tired eyes, and a decision neither of us wanted to call what it was: betrayal or rebellion. There isn't much in between.

And we had right in front of us the man who would be the first to know which path we should take.

He left the question hanging, as if he'd posed it to the air, not to us. But air doesn't answer. Men do. If they have the courage. Or are foolish enough.

I felt everyone briefly turn towards me without turning their heads. That "Come on, bastard, you said you'd be honest" silence. The iron in my pocket lay there like a bad secret, feeling heavier than any sword.

"We are both," I said. "Tongue and hand. That's what they want. They send us ahead – with words. And behind us they already have men with bows and better chains."

A twitch ran through his facial muscles. Not a real smile. More like someone had tried to carve an expression in stone and stopped halfway through.

"And you?" he asked. "Are you more tongue or more hand?"

The shadow in my head laughed. "Now it's getting personal," it said.

I reached into my pocket, felt for the cold iron ring, and gave it a brief clink, just enough for us to hear it, but not the hills. I held it up. The thing gleamed dully in the gray light, a closed circle that looked as if it had never done anything but devour joints.

"That's what they want," I said. "For us to build this. For you. If you come with us. 'For protection,' they say. So that no one gets any stupid ideas. So that you don't suddenly decide to be the man again who turned mud into graves in Stirling."

His companions tensed, their hands moving closer to their weapons. One of them, a broad-shouldered guy with a broken nose, took a half step forward. "Don't come any closer with that shit," he growled.

"Calm down," Wallace said without looking. He was only looking at the iron. "The bastard is just showing us what they're working with. It's always good to know the tool they'll use to turn you into an animal."

He approached me. Slowly. Not threateningly, just with the calm of a man who has learned to count every step. I could have dodged him. I didn't. When you're facing someone like him, you can't be half-truthful.

He stood so close I could smell his breath. Bad, sour, tired. Human. His hand came up. Rough, scarred, his knuckles swollen. He took the ring from my fingers, twisting it between his thumb and forefinger as if it were a piece of jewelry, not a tool.

"Beautifully crafted," he said. "No unnecessary ornamentation. No coat of arms. Just function. That's how you like your iron."

"It's not our iron," said the sergeant behind me. "It belongs to those who sent us."

"Us," Wallace repeated quietly. "You say 'us' as if you were a herd. You are men, Sergeant. Each of you has your own 'I'. The chains are just an attempt to beat that out of you."

He turned the ring around his own wrist, testing the size. The ring fit. Of course it fit. These things aren't made by chance.

"If you do it," he said, "if you put this on me—do you think it makes a difference whether it was an English or a Scottish hand? In the song later, I mean. In people's minds. Do you think people will say, 'Oh, it was our own who took him away, so it's not so bad'?"

"Those inside are hoping for it," murmured the priest.

Wallace dropped the ring back into my hand. The iron was warmer now. His body had briefly breathed life into it. That made it even more unpleasant.

"That's how they sell it," he said. "'Scottish responsibility.' 'We keep our own house clean.' 'We don't let others tell us who to hang.' That's how men who are afraid of one day hanging from a beam themselves talk."

"So?" I asked. "What do you want?"

He looked up the slope, then in the other direction. The wind tugged at his coat, at our hair, at everything that was loose.

"I want you to stop pretending there's a clean solution here," he said. "They want you to tell me, 'Come with me, William. Talk to them. There's a chance for peace, for mercy, for a decent end.' And if I go with them, they call it my free will. And if I don't go with them, they call me stubborn, unreasonable, a danger to the people. Either way, in the end, my body will be hanging somewhere so the children learn to shut up."

"He's not even exaggerating," murmured the shadow.

Murn stepped forward. Thin, pale, his eyes heavy from candlelight. "They talked about you yesterday," he said. "For hours. Not about you as a man. About you as a problem. As a symbol. They don't want a martyr, they say. But they talk about the noose as if it were a necessity."

Wallace studied him. "You were with them," he noted.

"They put my memories down on paper," Murn said. "And in some cases, they invented some as well. I didn't argue with them when it made them look worse."

A short, harsh laugh. "They're good at believing their own lies," Wallace said. "Otherwise, they'd go crazy."

"They want us to lure you in," I said. "With the 'last chance' story. 'A conversation on equal terms.' They might even give you something to eat before they bring out the hammer. If we go through with it, we'll be there when they put the restraints on you. If we don't, others will. Worse ones. They don't ask questions."

It was quiet. Only the stream made that useless noise that streams make when people want to decide important things.

"So?" asked the shadow. "Ask the question. You want to ask it."

"Do you even want to talk to them?" I asked. "Do you want us to take you there? In chains, without a word, with the promise that it will be a 'talk'? Or do you want to keep walking until they find you in some barn, without witnesses, without a choice?"

Wallace picked up a stone from the ground, turned it over in his hand, and threw it into the stream. The stone didn't even make a proper splash.

"I've thought about it a hundred times," he said. "More than you can imagine. If I go, they'll take me. And they won't stop there. They'll use my body to show all those who still believe in anything other than their parchments what happens when you contradict them too loudly. They'll make a sermon out of my death."

"And what if you don't go?" asked the priest.

"Then they continue their hunt," he said. "Burning villages, taking farmers, dragging monks into cellars, pulling you into rooms with candles until you no longer know what to believe. And they will say, 'He is to blame. He who didn't want to come.' In both cases, they are using me. The only difference is how much I have to witness."

His companions shifted restlessly. One of them kicked a clod of earth as if he could tear down the sky with it. "We can continue," he said. "We still have hiding places. People who won't betray us."

"Not yet," Wallace corrected. "People who aren't selling us out yet."

His gaze returned to me. "You said you wanted to be honest," he said. "So tell me this: Do you think there's any way I can get out of this with my head and honor still intact? Without a rope, without a cart, without them dragging me through the streets like a severed dog's head?"

The shadow remained silent. He knew that was not his answer.

"No," I said. "I don't believe it. Not anymore. They've gone too far. So have you. There's no easy way out. Only hard ones."

Wallace nodded. Not disappointed. Almost relieved. "Good," he said. "Then we'll talk about the tough ones."

He stepped closer so that only the two of us heard the next sentence. "Would you do it?" he asked. "If they ordered you to tie me up, would you do it?"

I knew this was the point. Not later, not in the dungeon, not on the pitch. Here.

The iron ring in my hand burned. I could feel the cold edge, the smooth inner surface waiting to touch skin.

"No," I said. "Not voluntarily. If I touch your wrists, it's to pull you away before they strike, not to push you towards them."

Something in his eyes softened without losing its hardness. Fire, I thought. What's inside is still fire. Not embers. Not smoke. Still fire.

"That's what I wanted to hear," he said. "Not because I trust you. But because you had to say it to yourself."

He turned to the sergeant. "And you?" he asked him. "You've spent more years in their ranks than I have in the dirt. What will you do when the day comes?"

The sergeant grimaced. "I'm a soldier," he said. "Not a saint. I've done things, on orders, that I'm not proud of. But I've learned one thing: the worst order is the one you later call 'without alternative'. When the time comes, I at least want to be able to say that I was aware of what I was doing."

"Does that mean yes or no?" asked one of Wallace's men.

"That means," said the sergeant, "that I'd rather have my hands on my sword than on your wrists. If they want you, they can put the iron on you themselves. I won't be the one to hold the knot for them."

The priest nodded slowly. "Then, for once, we agree," he said. "I will be there when you fall, William. That is my curse. But I will not bless the hands of those who pull the noose."

The shadow stood up and clapped slowly. "Well, there you go," he said. "There it is. The damn little line you wanted to draw. Delicate as cobwebs, but yours."

Wallace took a deep breath. "Very well," he said. "You tell me they want a talk. I tell you they want a head. We all know you can't have both. I'm not coming to their castle. Not now. Not at this invitation. If I end up there one day, it won't be on my feet."

"They'll declare you traitors," Murn said quietly. "Us too. All of us."

"They started it the first time I said 'no,'" Wallace said. "That word frightens them more than any sword. They call it treason if a man doesn't obey as they've written it."

He looked around the room. "You now have something more dangerous than these shackles," he said. "You have knowledge. You know what they are planning. You know that they have

decided what my end will be, no matter what I do. And you also know that you are meant to be a part of it, so that they can say, 'They were our own, look how neatly we disposed of our vermin.'"

His words burned. Not like a nice saying. Like liquor in an open wound.

"You have two options," he continued. "You can go along with it. Tell yourselves that you are only following orders, that it's for the greater good, for Scotland, for peace, for the God before whom they so readily bow their heads by candlelight. And in the end, perhaps one day you will stand before a beggar who recognizes you and whispers, 'You were there when they came for him.' And you will have to live with that."

Or you don't participate. You say 'No'. Not loudly, not in the marketplaces. You say it in your feet when they send you. In your hands when they give you chains. In your tongues when they ask you to tell the story correctly. And maybe you die sooner. Maybe worse. Maybe just as dirty as me. But at least you die in your own boots.

The wind tugged at us, as if it wanted to carry that sentence away before anyone could hold onto it. Too late. I knew I wouldn't be able to get rid of it now.

I put the iron ring back in my pocket. Slowly. Like something I wanted to bury.

"Then this isn't an offer," I said, "it's just a message. They want you. With candles, with carts, with ropes. And they want us to make the story look friendlier than it is."

"Exactly," said Wallace. "And now to you, bastards of the Third Wedge: If one day you are forced to tie me up because you have a blade to your throat—do it quickly. No theatrics, no speeches. But as long as you can still walk, don't go in their direction."

His companions moved closer to him, as if they wanted to warm him with their slender bodies.

"So," said Wallace. "Here's my plan: I'm not going with you. You go back. Tell them what you want. That I was suspicious. That I didn't trust you. That I'll keep running around like the mangy dog they think I am. They'll believe you. They always prefer to believe their fear rather than your truth."

"And then?" asked Aidan. "Then they send others."

"Let them," said Wallace. "Maybe they're men I can look in the eye and know: They were never by my side. You were. In the mud, in the barn, at the door. If one of them betrays me, at least I want to be able to say: He wasn't one of you."

It felt like both a curse and a blessing. He took away our chance to save him – and our chance to sell him.

The sergeant nodded. "Good," he said. "Then our delicate task is complete. We've spoken with you. We've presented you with the offer. You've declined. They'll figure out the rest themselves."

"They will be angry," Murn murmured.

"Of course," Wallace said. "Men who plan ropes are always angry when one doesn't fall into their hands according to plan."

I took two steps towards him. Close enough that I could see the dirt on his cheek, a dried trail of blood from an old, long-healed wound.

"If they get you," I said. "If. Not because we brought you, but because life is sometimes a son-of-a-bitch kind of randomness—do you want one of us there?"

He thought about it. Not for long.

"Yes," he said. "But not to put me in chains. But to remember what they call it. So that later someone will be there who can say: 'No. That's not how it was.'"

The shadow nodded vigorously. "There you have your thoughts of fire," he said. "They cannot be bound."

We didn't say goodbye. There were no hands, no "take care." Just glances. We turned and walked up the slope, back the way we'd come. Wallace stayed in the hollow, with his men, his stream, his damned fire in his head.

I stopped halfway up. I pulled the iron ring out of my pocket and looked at it. It no longer shone. It looked like something that had already been used, even though it hadn't.

I threw it into the stream. Not dramatically, no grand gesture. Simply out of my hand, quickly, matter-of-factly. The ring disappeared into the water, silently, like a decision no one witnesses.

"That won't do any good," said the shadow. "They'll get more out of it."

"I know," I thought. "But not this one."

And as we walked back to Stirling, empty-handed but with our heads full, I knew that the iron shackles weren't the worst part. The worst part was the one they had in their heads. Laced with justifications, with beautiful phrases, with candlelight.

Our thoughts were burning. Still.

The question was how long it would take before someone tried to make smoke out of it too.

The return journey is always the harder one. On the way there, you still carry some kind of hope, even if you convince yourself you're just being cynical. On the way back, you're left with only what's left when all your plans have collapsed like wet straw. We took the same path we'd come on, but it felt steeper, longer, heavier. And we had less with us than before. One less chain, a few less illusions, a few new phrases clinging to our minds.

None of us talked much. The sergeant walked in front, his gaze fixed ahead as if there were something better there than what had been left behind us in the valley. Murn shifted his position, sometimes in the middle, sometimes back, as if he didn't know which line he wanted to be in. Fergus clung to a shallow curse, repeating it over and over like a broken litany.

Aidan walked too loudly, as if he could make the ground give way beneath him. The priest didn't mutter anything. Even he had been talked out of the room.

"Well," said the shadow eventually, when the wind grew a little warmer, "satisfied, bastard? You drowned the ring, spoke the truth, looked the hero in the eye. Do you feel free?"

I didn't feel free. I felt like someone who had gotten out of a burning house and knew they still smelled of smoke.

"We made our decision," I thought. "Not to extradite him. Not to put him in chains. We could have chosen more betrayal."

"Yes," said the shadow. "And they would have chosen men who have fewer problems with it. Congratulations, you've taken yourself out of the running for first prize in knitting."

When Stirling came back into view, the city lay there like a bad joke, one that had been heard one too many times. The castle loomed over everything, still, cold, as if it had never decided anything itself, but had merely lent the stones for the theater of others. Smoke rose from chimneys, from kitchens, from forges. The usual grime continued.

Tam was waiting at the edge of the camp. Of course he was waiting. He was leaning against a post, arms folded, shoulders in a pose that was supposed to mean "screw it" but really just meant "I was afraid you wouldn't come back."

"And?" he asked, when we were close enough for him to read our faces. "Did he obediently raise his paw and say 'Yes, Mr. Councilor'?"

I shook my head. "He told us to piss off," I said. "Only more politely. And with better reasons."

Tam grinned thinly. "Then I like him a little more," he murmured.

The sergeant waved us apart; no one was allowed to speak again until they had formed their own version of the story in their head. He disappeared towards the castle, with the stride of a man who knew that now came the part he disliked most: talking to people who had never worn a wet helmet and yet thought they knew everything better.

The rest of us scattered around the camp like bad news. The priest sat down as if his spine had briefly gone weak. Murn sat next to him, staring at his hands. Fergus found a bowl and acted as if eating was the most important task of the day. Aidan slumped onto his backside as if his tendons had been severed.

I stopped. If I sit down, I already feel half-rooted. I wanted to pretend a little longer that I could run away if necessary.

"What did you do with the chain?" Tam asked quietly as we stood a little way off to the side.

"Sent to bathe," I said. "In the stream."

He raised his eyebrows. "They won't like this," he said.

"Nor should they," I said. "If they want rings, they should forge new ones. I've done my part. One part, at least."

He nodded slowly, looked at me as if checking to see if I already had any metal in my flesh. "They will ask you questions," he said.

"They'll do it anyway," I thought. Out loud I simply said, "Let them. I've got a few answers to offer. Not the ones they want, but enough to keep them busy."

The day grew older without being old enough to excuse anything. The sergeant didn't return until the sky had turned the color of thin soup. He called us together—the six of us who had been with him. His eyes were darker, the wrinkles deeper. He had that kind of exhaustion that doesn't come from marching, but from too many sentences in too small a space.

"They had hoped you would bring better news," he said.

"Better for whom?" asked Fergus.

"For them," the sergeant said. "He agreed. He's coming voluntarily. He trusts us.' That's what they would have liked to hear. Instead, they got: 'He saw through you. He said no. He's walking on.'"

"That's exactly what they should have thought," Aidan murmured.

"They don't like to think," said the sergeant. "They decide. And if the world isn't the way they decide it, it's the world's fault."

Murn raised his head. "Did they speak of treason?" he asked.

"Not yet," said the sergeant. "For now, you're just called... unsatisfactory."

The shadow snorted. "Unsatisfactory," he said. "At least it's not a death sentence, but it's an insult to anyone who tries."

"They don't completely believe you," the sergeant continued. "They think you said more than you admitted. Or less. Or differently. One of the clerks said bastards are bad at distinguishing between loyalty and personal morality."

I pulled my mouth into a slant. "He should say that to my face," I muttered. "Let's see how well he can still put words on paper after that."

"They'll call again," the sergeant said. "Not today. Not tomorrow. But soon. They want to feel that they still have some control over your minds."

The priest snorted. "There's more burning in our heads than binding them right now," he said.

"And they like that even less," replied the sergeant.

The night brought no peace. People always shout for "quiet" when they want to sleep, but in reality, they just want their thoughts to shut up for a bit. Mine wouldn't shut up. Neither would the shadow.

I lay on my straw mattress, the blanket smelling of old men who had long been dead, and of sweat that no longer had a name. Above me, the fabric of the tent flapped in the wind as if it were about to tear.

"You know this isn't over yet," said the shadow.

"Of course," I thought. "This was just the prelude. The moment when you say 'no' and they realize they don't have you under their thumb like they thought."

"They don't take 'no' very seriously," he said. "They're more the 'We have ways to convince you' type."

The next morning we saw nothing out of the ordinary. A few new parchments on the tablets, more guards along the road, a couple of people pretending to have just read the bounty on Wallace's head. The usual. Treachery doesn't change clothes overnight. It comes in the same worn-out coats as poor diet and bad weather.

It took two days before they brought the first one of us in. Not Murn this time. Ewan. The one who had said the least. Maybe that was the mistake. Men who don't talk much make writers nervous. They never know how much is still rattling around inside them.

A messenger arrived, formal and friendly. "The council would like your assessment," he said to Ewan. "Details of the events. You were there, after all."

Ewan nodded, stood up, and almost apologetically brushed the dirt off his knees. He glanced at us briefly. His gaze held a mixture of feelings: "Maybe it's nothing" and "Maybe it's everything."

"I'll be back," he said.

"Don't lie," said the shadow. "You don't know."

He didn't come back. Not that day. Not the next. We asked cautiously at first, then less cautiously. "He's being questioned," they said. "He's helping to clarify the situation."

"He helps them weave their story," the shadow translated.

On the third day, I saw him again. Not up close. From the edge of the castle courtyard. We were with a group, supposed to move some crates—supposedly foodstuffs that smelled more like paper. That's when I saw him, at the top of a staircase, between two guards. He was walking on his own, but his shoulders were slumped, as if they'd beaten some convictions out of him along the way.

His gaze briefly swept across the courtyard, searching, but either didn't find me or pretended not to. I held my breath. The moment I'd let him know I saw him, I probably would have been forced to join him on the stairs.

"They're starting," said the shadow. "First the quiet ones. The ones who don't scream right away. Let's see what we can get out of him."

That night, by the fire, no one spoke their name. That made it worse. Nameless loss is like a loose board in the floor: you step on it eventually, fall through, and act surprised, even though you knew something was there.

"They will break one of us," the priest said. "Sooner or later. With words, with hunger, with fear. No one is unbreakable. The only question is: which way will you fall once they have broken you?"

"I don't want to see Ewan fall," Fergus said. "He was one of those people who didn't even get sick when they were drunk."

The sergeant sat silently at the edge of the fire, the mug in his hand, as if it had become his only legitimate weapon. When someone finally asked what had happened to Ewan, he simply said, "He's helping them redraw the maps."

"They want to know where we stand," the shadow added. "And if one of us gives in, they'll paint us all with their brush."

I went to bed late, in the misguided hope that fatigue would then strike more quickly. It didn't do me that favor. Instead, it brought images: Wallace in the valley, the chain in the water, Ewan on the stairs, candles above a table. Shackles of iron, shackles of words, shackles of glances.

On the fourth day, the clerk arrived at the camp. Not just any clerk, but the one with the gloves. He didn't go to the officers, not directly. He stood at the front, made us line up as if we were a herd of cattle he wanted to assess individually.

"On behalf of the council," he said, "some of you are needed for further questioning. It is important to clear up any misunderstandings. The country's security is at stake."

"Every time they say 'safety', someone is looking for a new rope," murmured the shadow.

He named names. Aidan. Fergus. Murn. Meinen. Not Tam. Not the priest. Not the limping man.

My stomach clenched as if I'd been punched from the inside. My body knew what that meant before my mind translated it.

Tam took a step forward. "What if they don't want to?" he asked.

The writer smiled thinly. "Then others come and take them," he said. "And then misunderstandings are no longer discussed."

The sergeant stepped in. "I'll accompany them," he said. "They're my men."

"That's not necessary," the writer said.

"Yes," said the sergeant. "Otherwise I'll come back later to ask why they didn't return."

We walked. It wasn't a march in chains, no parade tour through the city. It was quiet. That makes it worse. Public terror at least keeps you awake. The silent one is the one that creeps up your back at night.

Inside the castle, they separated us. Of course. One door for Aidan, another for Fergus, and yet another for Murn. I was given a corridor that smelled of damp stone and a kind of sweat that only people who work indoors get.

"Come on," said the shadow. "Welcome to her favorite game: 'How much truth can we squeeze out of you before you break apart?'"

The room was smaller than I'd expected. Not a large dungeon, not a torture chamber with devices straight out of nightmares. A table, two chairs, a candle. Of course, a candle. Candles were her favorite tool. In that kind of light, you can pass anything off as "conversation."

The writer sat down opposite me. He took off his gloves. His hands were soft, but not weak. That's a dangerous combination: someone who's never lifted a finger, but has learned how to handle people.

"We just want to talk," he said. "See yourselves as part of the solution."

"I'm more part of the problem," said the shadow. "But you'd better not tell him that right away."

I sat down, my hands open on the table, the knife out of reach. The iron was gone, but I didn't need it to know that shackles weren't always made of metal.

"You were with Wallace," said the clerk. "You spoke with him. Tell me exactly what happened. Word for word."

I exhaled slowly. We had drowned iron shackles in the stream. Now we voluntarily wore shackles of thought while walking around this room.

"Taking it word for word will be difficult," I said. "But I can tell you what he didn't say."

"And what would that be?" asked the writer.

"He didn't say, 'I come voluntarily and willingly lay my neck on your table,'" I replied.

The shadow grinned. "Fire," he said. "That's the fire. Be careful they don't stamp it out."

Outside, behind the walls, behind candles and paper, they began to tighten the screws. Not on our wrists. Not yet. On our heads. They had enough iron shackles. But they preferred those of thought.

And I suddenly understood why Wallace had looked in the valley as if he'd rather end up in the mud than in a room like this. The mud kills your body. This tries to rebuild you first.

The chapter with the restraints was just beginning. The torture came later, under the heading they had for it: "Interrogation".

We weren't in the dungeon yet. But we already had one foot on the stairs leading down.

Interrogations, hunger, and mocking laughter

They called it an interrogation, but that was just another word for slow dismantling. Anyone can break someone quickly. A sword, a spear, a rope – snap, over. These people were serious. They wanted to break you into small, clean pieces so they could later claim you'd cooperated willingly.

The clerk sat opposite me like someone determined to turn me into a meticulous transcript. The candle between us didn't even flicker much. It burned steadily, always the same. As if it already knew how this would end.

“We’re starting all over again,” he said. “You were in the valley. You met Wallace. You spoke with him. We want nothing more than an accurate account of what happened. There can be no gaps. Gaps create distrust. Distrust creates unrest. Unrest harms Scotland.”

That was their repertoire. They pushed Scotland before them like a shield, behind which they hid from their own faces.

“I already told you this,” I said. “We went there, met him, and made him the offer. He asked what we were planning. We didn’t lie. He said ‘no.’ We left. End of story.”

“No story ends like that,” the writer said. “Especially not with William Wallace. You underestimate how important every word he says is. And every word you say.”

The shadow in my head yawned. “He's right,” it said. “But for the wrong reasons.”

The room was small, the air stifling. The stones were damp, not from water, but rather from everything men had released in such spaces: fear, sweat, a bit of their soul if they hadn't been careful. I could feel the chair irritating my back. The wood was harder than necessary. Intentionally so.

“We have transcripts from previous encounters,” the writer continued. “Statements from farmers, soldiers, and clergymen who saw him, spoke to him, and heard him. We know how he talks. How he thinks. Your version seems... incomplete.”

“Maybe he was tired,” I said. “We all are. He’s saving the big speech for another day.”

The clerk leaned forward and placed his hands flat on the table. “You don't understand,” he said. “We can only act if we know everything. The council is trying to be kind. We are looking for a way to end this matter without turning it into a legend. Every word you say could determine whether blood is shed or not.”

“Blood will flow anyway,” said the shadow. “If it's not his, then it's yours.”

“What do you want to hear?” I asked. “Just say it. I can tell you whichever words you prefer. Then you can shove them up your ass and everyone will pretend this all went smoothly.”

A flash of anger flickered across his face, quick, small, but there. Good. I hated those smooth faces. I preferred a hint of truth in his anger to that polite indifference.

"I want to hear," he said, "what you were thinking when he refused your invitation. Whether you hesitated, whether you felt...sympathy for him, whether any of you considered helping him escape. It's not just about him. It's about your heads."

"They're none of your damn business," I thought. Out loud I said, "We went there because you sent us. We said what you wanted to hear. He said what he always says when someone comes with parchment. And then we left. If you want to hear a different story, you'll have to write it yourselves."

"We're writing right now," he said. "With your help."

He took a piece of bread out of a bag. Not soldier's bread; we only got crumbs of that. This was fresh, whiter, softer. He placed it in the middle of the table, next to the candle. The smell was like a punch to the gut.

"You haven't eaten anything today?" he asked. "At least not much, from what I hear. The kitchen has reduced rations until the situation becomes clearer."

Hunger is a silent dog. It doesn't bark, it growls somewhere deep in your gut until you forget what it's like to be full. I was used to it. He didn't know that.

"We can talk for a long time," said the writer. "The question is whether you would prefer to talk with or without this bread."

"Now comes the kicker," murmured the shadow. "The little levers. They never start with nails. Always with bread."

I looked at the bread. Not in the way he expected. I saw my own fingers, how they would close around it, how it would feel to press it against his face.

"If you think you can get me with a slice of bread," I said, "then you should see what I haven't done for a sip of whiskey."

He smiled thinly. "Heroism has no place here," he said. "This is not a battlefield. This is a space for reason. We are trying to do without shouting."

"Then stop using candles," said the shadow.

"I'm going to ask you a few questions," he continued. "The same ones over and over again. And you're going to answer them over and over again. If your answers stay the same, all the better. If not, we'll find out why together. And the longer this goes on, the more uncomfortable it will become. For you. For your friends. You're not the only one sitting here today."

That was the real catch. Not hunger. Not tiredness. The others. Aidan. Fergus. Murn. Ewan somewhere further down in some hole, perhaps already with fewer teeth.

“What did you say afterwards?” asked the scribe. “On the way back. About him. About the council. About the assignment.”

I looked at his face. His forehead, his eyes, his lips. A clean-cut man who had convinced himself he was working for something bigger than his own ass.

“We said,” I replied, “that there is no easy way out anymore. Neither for him nor for you. We said that you will continue until you have him by the rope. No matter what we do. And that you will use us or others so that you can later say: ‘Our own men saved us.’”

He wrote it down. Word for word. I saw the corner of his mouth twitch as he put "rope" on the paper.

“Very... figurative,” he said. “So you have a certain... skepticism towards the Council’s methods.”

“I’m skeptical of anything that doesn’t smell of sweat and dirt,” I said. “The only clean thing in this war is death. Everything before that is a lie.”

“You are cynical,” he said. “That is dangerous.”

“Not as dangerous as you with your optimism,” replied the shadow.

The questions were repeated. How many men were with him? What weapons did they carry? Which direction did they go in afterward? Did he mention any names? Did he speak about previous supporters? Did he give any clues as to where they were hiding?

Again and again. Always in slight variations. Always with the bread within reach, a reminder that they could be patient if they wanted to. The candle burned down, grew downwards. The room became warmer, stuffier, smaller.

I stuck to what I'd already told him. No new places, no new names. He noticed. Of course.

“You are protecting him,” he observed. “In your own way.”

“I’m protecting myself,” I said. “From the moment I remember sitting in a room like this, selling someone I once saw standing in the mud when everyone else was gone.”

“You are far too preoccupied with yourselves,” he said. “That is the disease of this country. Everyone thinks their own petty honor is more important than the greater good.”

"The big picture is your alibi," I thought.

He stood up, walked around the table once, and stopped behind me. I could hear him breathing. If you smell a man who works exclusively with ink, you'll notice he smells different than someone who has blood substitute on their hands. Not better. Just different.

“We can speed this up,” he said quietly. “There are methods to help with memory. Hunger. Cold. Sometimes even pain. But we might not need any of that if you understand that we are on the same side.”

"We're not even standing on the same ground," muttered the shadow.

I laughed. Not loudly, not hysterically. Briefly, dryly. "You and I," I said. "Our side may be the same spot on the map. But not the same place in history."

"How do you want to be remembered in history?" he asked. "As the silent bastard who said nothing and thus harmed everyone? Or as the man who had the courage to take responsibility and ensure that this war ends?"

Now this number came up. Responsibility. Ending the war. Always the same repertoire.

"The war doesn't end with his head," I said. "It ends when you stop acting like everyone who says 'no' is an enemy. And that won't happen as long as you're working with candles."

He audibly exhaled. "Stubborn," he said. "Incorrigible. And you wonder why people distrust you."

"Distrust is healthy," said the shadow.

At some point he paused. He went to the door and knocked. A guard came and exchanged a glance with him. I didn't understand him, but I recognized that look. "It's not working yet. We're increasing the pressure."

They didn't send me back to the camp. They sent me to another room. No table, no candle. Just a bench, a chain on the wall, a bucket in the corner that smelled of everything you don't want to be anymore. No light, just a narrow slit high up through which the grayness crept in.

"Temporary storage," murmured the shadow. "For heads that aren't soft enough yet."

The door clicked shut. The sound was duller than in stories. No clanging iron, no lingering echo. Just a short, decisive click. Closed.

There was no more bread. No water. Just me, the shadow, and the faint suspicion that the others weren't faring any better. Aidan in some room, whose patience they were testing with the same questions. Fergus, who would try to drown them out with quips until his voice ached. Murn, who knew far too much not to be interesting.

The hours in that hole had no name. It was simply time, settling around your head like a damp cloth. You hear things. Footsteps. Voices, distorted by walls. Laughter somewhere, dry, mocking. Not a joyful laugh. The laughter of men who had just decided to do something they would later call "necessary."

"Do you hear that?" asked the shadow. "That's the laughter they want you to believe comes from the gods of order."

I sat down on the floor, leaning my back against the wall. It was cold, damp, but at least solid. Better than the people who had built this place. I placed my hands on my knees. No rope around them, no iron. Not yet.

Hunger gnawed at me, but it wasn't the worst of it. Worse was the mixture of tiredness and alertness. My mind wanted to drift away, but every little sound pulled it back. A groan

somewhere deep inside, a short cry, quickly cut short. A command. A laugh. That laugh again.

"They're starting to use harsher methods," said the shadow. "Either on you soon. Or on your friends now."

My thoughts grew heavier. Not like chains, more like stones piled up until you no longer know which one contains your own name.

"That's not torture yet," the writer would say. "That's just pressure."

He could shove his pressure where the sun don't shine. My mind was ablaze. Images. Wallace in the valley. The chain in the water. Ewan on the stairs. Murn by candlelight. Iona behind the counter, saying, "Remember who gave the order."

"Interrogations," I thought. "Hunger. Sneering laughter. That's their triad. And we're supposed to dance to it."

I didn't yet know how deep they were willing to go. But I realized they were just beginning to scratch at corners of me that I had thought were only mine.

The shadow sat down next to me and put its imaginary arm around my shoulders. "Keep your mouth shut if they try to sell you the belly," it said. "And if you ever scream—scream in a way that you'll still recognize yourself afterward. Not in their words, only in your own."

Outside, someone laughed again. Short, sharp, like a blow. I closed my eyes. Not out of exhaustion. As an exercise. To see if I was still me when I opened them again.

The interrogation had only just begun. They hadn't even unpacked the nails yet.

It's strange how quickly you start measuring time in other units when you're locked up. Outside, you count days, battles, cups, nights with or without sleep. In here, you measure everything in sounds. Footsteps. Door slams. How many times someone moves the bolt. How long it takes for someone outside to run out of jokes and stop laughing. I don't know how long I sat in that cell before they opened the door again. It felt like half a lifetime and, at the same time, like one long, grumpy breath.

When the bolt was finally slid back into place, it sounded almost friendly, like a promise of a change. That's how far hunger can take you: you're glad when someone comes along who wants to hurt you, because at least it's something different than going around in circles with your own head. The door opened, light from the corridor cut into the room, a hand pointed. I stood up, my knees heavy, but not weak. Not yet. Two guards, faceless helmets, the kind of person who's learned to be as little as possible at work, except metal and muscle.

"Stand up," said the voice behind the helmet, even though I was already standing. Reflex. Remnants of an order.

They didn't take me back to the first clerk's room. They took me down a flight of stairs. The corridor was different. Damper, narrower, as if the stones here knew something they weren't allowed to reveal. From some of the doorways came a muffled sound—not quite screams, not

quite silence, something in between. A person trying to pull themselves together while someone systematically erodes their composure.

"Deep enough," murmured the shadow in my head. "Down here begins the part where they later say, 'It wasn't so bad.'"

The room they took me to this time had a table, but no chair. Hooks on the wall, a barrel in the corner that smelled of diluted vinegar, as if someone were trying to wash away the stench without actually cleaning. A torch on the wall, no longer a candle. Torchlight is more honest. It flickers, it casts harsh shadows, it shows you the edges, even if you don't want to see them.

The writer was there too. No gloves, his sleeves rolled up, as if he'd decided he wanted to be closer to what he was actually writing down. Next to him was another man, broader, with the steady shoulders of someone who had often done things others later denied.

"You are making progress," said the shadow. "The desk is slowly moving towards the basement."

"I hope you've had a good rest," said the writer. "We're going to delve a little deeper now."

"Hunger is a strange form of peace," I replied. My voice sounded rough, but not broken. I made a small mental mark: I still recognize myself.

The broad-shouldered man stepped forward. No armor, just a leather jerkin and thick cloth gauntlets. His hands were calloused, not from sword hilts, but rather from tools. Someone who had learned to treat other people like wood: to hold them, straighten them, cut them to size, without giving it much thought.

"This is Maelcolm," said the clerk, as if introducing me to a squire. "He makes sure that we don't misunderstand each other."

Maelcolm nodded curtly, without a smile. I immediately liked him more than the writer. Men who hurt you without pretending are more honest than those who try to make you feel guilty about it.

"Hands," he said. No question.

I stretched them out. Not because I felt like it, but because I knew that resistance at this point would only waste energy I might need later. He fastened a simple iron shackle on me, not too tight, not too loose, a chain short enough that I couldn't raise my arms. It didn't hang me against the wall right away. Not yet. Symbolism, I thought. Step by step.

"We've reached a point," said the clerk, "where your silence is no longer helpful. Neither to you, nor to the Council. You're protecting someone who gives you nothing in return. Wallace doesn't even know the lengths we go to in order to treat you reasonably."

I had to laugh. It came out rough and dry, like a cough. "Sensible," I said. "You let us starve, lock us in holes, and repeat questions until the walls learn along with us. If that's your idea of reason, I don't even want to know what your anger looks like."

"You can avoid that," the writer said. "We only want details. Thoughts. Everything that happened between the sentences. It's not enough for us to hear what he said. We need to know how he said it. Did he hesitate when you mentioned the offer? Did he... think about it?"

"He's constantly thinking," I said. "That's his problem. And yours."

Maelcolm stepped behind me, positioning himself so he could restrain me if I got any stupid ideas. The writer took out his tools again: words, paper, that tone of conviction that people cultivate when they believe they are right because their hands don't directly see the blood.

"We'll start with Wallace," he said. "What did you see in his eyes when you told him about the conversation in Stirling? Fear? Anger? Weakness? Regret?"

I thought back to the valley. To his eyes, which didn't grow smaller, but only heavier. "I saw," I said, "that he had realized you would get him one way or another. With our feet, with others. And that he had decided at least not to grant you the pleasure of sitting in your candlelight beforehand."

The writer grimaced. "You're romanticizing him," he said. "He's a man like any other. And a dangerous one at that."

"I never denied that," I said. "But you are more dangerous. He wants to defy you. You want to make history."

He nodded slowly, as if noticing where I was talking more than necessary. "And you?" he asked. "What's your relationship with him? Were you tempted to help him? Not just by telling him about our plan—I'm talking about escape. False leads. Warnings."

The shadow turned to me. "Come on," he whispered. "How much do you want to give him?"

"I told him what you were planning," I replied. "As honestly as you never would have been. I didn't suggest he let himself be tied up. If you call that betrayal, then I suppose I am guilty."

Maelcolm gave my chain a quick, firm tug, not painfully, but noticeably. A hint: there are other ways. The writer tapped his pen holder against the table.

"You're playing with words," he said. "Perhaps you think you're being clever. But you're not. The clever thing would be to cooperate early. You're... stubborn. And stubbornness is a form of stupidity when the situation is clear."

"The situation is never clear," the shadow countered. "That's their trick."

"Let's talk about your comrades," the writer said, changing the subject as if he'd just tagged me somewhere. "Ewan, for example. He was there too. He's already helped us understand some of the connections better."

That was the sentence that hit me harder than anything else. I felt my neck tense up. "What did you do to him?" I asked.

"We talked," said the writer. "The way we talk to you. He was... more approachable. More reasonable. He understood what was at stake."

"Translation," said the shadow. "They bled him long enough until he stopped resisting."

"He also told me about you," the clerk continued. "About your words on the way back. About your judgment of the council. About Wallace. You called the council a bunch of cowardly scribes, if I remember correctly. And Wallace a man who would rather die than admit defeat."

I couldn't remember saying it in those exact words. But we had talked. We had sworn. We had tossed thoughts back and forth like knives. And Ewan had been there. Perhaps they had listened to him long enough to piece together their own mosaic from our fragments.

"So?" I asked. "What do you want to make of it? A verdict? A ballad?"

"I want to make this what it is," the writer said. "Proof that you have long since lost all respect for this matter. That your loyalty is riddled with holes. And that this makes you dangerous. To us. To yourselves."

Maelcolm moved behind me and placed a heavy hand on my shoulder. Not gently. Not brutally. Just enough to make me know there was weight there that they could shift in another direction at any time.

"So," said the writer. "Here's how it works: We'll talk as long as you talk. If you ever stop saying anything new, we'll resort to other measures. Hunger, sleep deprivation, cold. Maybe more. We'll let you hear what's happening to the others. Screams bring insight, believe me. You have to decide where your line is. Do you want to draw it where you twist the truth—or where one of you is hanging in the cellar because you absolutely refuse to admit anything?"

"And what exactly do you want me to admit?" I asked. "That I like him? That I don't like you? That I think you'll get him in the end anyway, with or without my help?"

"I want," the scribe said slowly, as if he had to repeat it to himself, "you to tell us what we need to know to catch him without creating chaos. Where he's likely to go next. Who's supplying him. Which villages would hide him. Which men would be willing to die for him. And whether you'd be willing to tell them to leave it alone."

There it was. No more games. No more half-measures. They wanted maps in our minds, names, places, routes. They wanted our voices as bait.

"Let's say I knew that," I said. "Wouldn't that just help you track him down faster? What makes you so sure that you won't just continue and take everyone who ever gave him bread along with you?"

The writer looked tired. For the first time, he didn't seem like a man playing a role, but like one trapped in his own play. "Nothing," he said. "Nothing makes me safe. We're at war. And in war, there are too many who, on principle, keep fighting even when the enemy is down. I can't promise you a clean hand. I can only tell you that it will only get worse if he continues to roam out there, as a ghost, as hope. Every day he's free costs us more blood. Yours too."

"At least he's trying to do the right thing," whispered the shadow. "In his own twisted way."

"If he finds it so bad," I thought, "why is he sitting on the wrong side of the table?"

I was silent for a moment. The hunger had transformed into something else—a dull, angry void. The walls were closing in, or perhaps I was growing larger, it was hard to tell. Maelcolm's hand remained on my shoulder, a weight that kept me grounded in the present.

"I won't give you any names," I said. "No villages, no monks who drink too much, no farmers who let him out through the back door. I've seen enough men die without having to write the list myself."

The writer tilted his head slightly, as if observing a stubborn animal. "That's a shame," he said. "Really. I would have expected more sense from you."

He nodded to Maelcolm. The grip on my shoulder tightened. No punch, no break. Just this message: We can hurt you whenever we want.

"We're taking a break," said the writer. "I'm going to talk to the others. Maybe they're wiser. I'll see you again."

He let the word hang in the air like a threat. Again. That was the point. Interrogations aren't a single scene. They're episodes of a series. You never know if you're in the third, seventh, or last one.

They took me back to the cell. No bread. No water. A lukewarm cup they slid down my throat a few hours later, just so my tongue wouldn't stick completely to the roof of my mouth. I drank. Not out of gratitude. Out of spite. If they wanted me to get weaker, they'd better try harder.

Later that night, I heard it more clearly. Screams. Not theatrical performances. That raw, involuntary sound that bursts from your throat when your body is still trying to be brave, but the pain has long since decided it doesn't care. One of the screams briefly sounded like Fergus before it broke. I could have been wrong. But the mind loves to do that: it puts familiar faces on unfamiliar voices to make you feel doubly guilty.

Eventually, laughter joined in. Not much. A few short, ugly bursts. No big, loud whoops, just that "Ha" sound when someone thinks they've just said something particularly clever while asking someone else yet another question that has no right answer. Sneering laughter, steeped in self-righteousness.

"Remember that laugh," said the shadow. "When you get out of here, you'll recognize it everywhere. In taverns, in rooms with candles, on men with signet rings. That's the sound people make when they convince themselves they're allowed to be cruel for a good cause."

I leaned my head against the wall and closed my eyes. Not to sleep. Simply to be nothing but sound for a moment. Footsteps. Shouts. Laughter. My own breathing, faster than I wanted to admit.

Interrogations, hunger, mocking laughter. The order varied, but the triad remained the same. And the shackles in question weren't made of iron. They were made of fear and the hope that you would eventually break, believing you could save someone by doing so.

"They will return," said the shadow. "Tomorrow, the day after, whenever the candles are refilled. The questions will remain the same. The only variable is you."

I knew he was right. They had a whole basement full of methods. And I only had one thing to do: decide when to keep my mouth shut and when to speak up so as not to forget who I was.

That night I dozed off briefly a few times. Without dreams. They had no room amidst the sounds.

On the third day in the hole, hunger began to become polite. At first, it roars, thumps against your ribs from the inside, complains like a drunken pig. Later, it falls silent. Then it just sits there, like a guest who's made himself at home in your hut and says nothing because he knows you won't get him out anyway.

I knew it was the third day because the slit high up had changed color, sometimes becoming light, sometimes gray, sometimes just darker. Or maybe I imagined it. Time was no longer a string, more like a tangle of knots. You could pull on it, and it would only get tighter.

The water came at irregular intervals, like a whim. Sometimes a cup, sometimes half a bowl. The bread had disappeared. But the sounds were more reliable. The groans, the metallic clanging of iron, that muffled "please, please" when someone had forgotten that pleas here only served as background music. And every now and then, that mocking laughter, sometimes farther away, sometimes closer. Sometimes I wasn't sure if it was coming from outside or from inside my own head.

"If you wait long enough," said the shadow, "they all sound the same. Victims, executioners, scribes, priests. In the end, only the one who believes his own bullshit laughs."

The door eventually opened again. Not with a dramatic clatter, more like someone checking a stable. Maelcolm stood there, broad-shouldered, with the same calm posture as always. That was the unsettling thing: the man had no moods. Only tasks.

"Up," he said.

I stood up. This time my knees creaked louder than the floor. My head felt better than it should. Hunger slows you down, but it also strangely sharpens your senses. The edges of the world became clearer—the bad kind of clear.

They brought me back to the room with the torch. The scribe was already there, another sheet of paper in front of him, his pen poised like a blade. Beside him stood a pitcher. I smelled water, perhaps even something thin, vaguely reminiscent of broth. He positioned the pitcher so that I could see it. Not within reach, just in sight. Art.

"Good morning," he said, as if the time of day mattered. "I hope the night has given you a chance to reflect."

"I did," I said. "I had nothing else to do."

He ignored the tone. "I want to tell you something," he began. "So you understand that you are not the only ones who have to make decisions here. The Council is under pressure. The English want results. The lords want their lands secure. The people no longer want to see villages burning. Every day Wallace is free costs us all something."

"And every day you breathe costs me something," murmured the shadow.

"We have men who are more willing to talk," the writer continued. "Ewan, for example."

It felt like someone was hammering a nail into my shoulder. I tried not to flinch.

"He helped us reconstruct certain movements," the writer said. "No betrayal. Facts. Where you were. When. Whom you encountered. He was... insightful. Reasonable. He understands that silence isn't always a virtue."

The laughter I heard this time came from within myself. Short, harsh. "You caused him pain," I said. "Long enough that he says things that sound more like your words than his own."

A barely perceptible twitch played across the corners of his mouth. "We did what was necessary to gain clarity," he said. "Clarity is the first step to peace."

"You are confusing peace with control," said the shadow.

The writer looked at me as if considering which part of me he would want to put down on paper next. "I prefer someone like Ewan," he finally said. "Someone who eventually understands that the world isn't divided into black and white, but into necessities. Someone who takes responsibility."

I felt the blood rush to my head. The hunger was suddenly gone. Only a hot, clear rage remained.

"Responsibility," I repeated. "You beat his bones soft, deprived him of sleep, perhaps even hung him from the wall until his arms didn't know where they began. And then, when he finally says what you want to hear, you call it responsibility."

"You have a strange idea of honor," he said. "You want to attach it to a man who doesn't even know that you are starving for him."

"He knows we could die for him," I thought. I didn't say it. Instead, I yelled, "You want my truth? You have it. Nothing more will come, even if you cut me to pieces. I'd rather hear my own screams than your stories from my mouth."

The shadow nodded. "That's a sentence you'll remember," he said. "Especially if you later regret it."

The writer sighed. Genuine weariness this time. As if he was disgusted that I wasn't functioning as he'd described in his mental notes. "We're not at pieces yet," he said. "But we're approaching the point where we have to ask ourselves if you're really as indispensable as you think you are."

He gave Maelcolm a signal. This time they didn't just put the restraints on me; they hung the chain on a hook in the wall, so high that I had to stand on my tiptoes. My shoulders protested. First quietly, then with a burning sensation that promised more.

"You know the drill," whispered the shadow. "It's old. They don't call it torture, they call it 'pressure.' As if the word changes anything about how joints feel when you pull them in the wrong direction for too long."

The minutes dragged on like nails digging into my arms from above. I tried to breathe calmly. Tried to relax my shoulders, but it was ridiculous. The body wants to go up, the body wants to go down, the body wants to get away. When none of those paths are open, it starts to hate itself.

The writer remained seated, laid the pen to the side, as if the part for small, delicate words was now over and the part for rough manual work was about to begin. Maelcolm stood beside me, constantly checking the chain so that it wouldn't prematurely begin its actual work.

"You're not the first to hang here," the clerk said after a while. "Others took longer to realize that clinging to their defiance was pointless. But in the end, they understood."

"And what was their reward?" I asked, my voice more strained. "A quicker end? A clean gallows? A friendlier entry on your record?"

"Some were allowed to go home," he said. "Not all. But some. Because they showed that they trusted the council more than a man who would only lead them into more battles."

The shadow spat invisibly onto the ground. "He's not lying completely," he said. "Some were actually allowed to go home. With fewer teeth, less sleep, and a hole in their head that will never heal."

My shoulders were really burning now. No poetic phrase. Fire in my joints. My hands went numb, then hot, then numb again. My fingers felt like they belonged to someone else.

"Imagine something else," murmured the shadow. "Not the wall. Not the chain. Imagine a scene that doesn't belong to them."

I tried to think of the barn. The smell of straw. The men's breath. Wallace, leaning against the beam, so alert that you almost fell asleep beside him from exhaustion. It only helped half the time. The present is a tenacious beast, reluctant to be pushed aside.

"You can end this," said the clerk, as if he were a healer and I was someone he was pulling a rotten tooth from. "A few names. A few paths. Don't pretend a man like Wallace could thank you later. If he falls, he falls alone."

I knew he was wrong about that. If Wallace fell, he would take more than just his own shadow. But that wasn't the kind of belief I wanted to argue with.

"When I speak," I said, "others fall. People who gave him bread. People who opened their barns when your riders were too proud to sleep in the dirt. You want me to list all of this for you so you can build your peace on their bones."

"Better on theirs than on yours?" asked the writer.

"Better not on anyone," growled the shadow. "But that's not how this world works."

Time began to take every breath personally. My shoulders felt like they were going to pop out of their sockets. My neck was a burning world of its own. I felt my knees wobble and forced them to stay still.

"You can give in at any time," said the shadow. "There's no medal for how long you last. Not in their story. Only in yours."

I gritted my teeth. Not out of heroism. Out of sheer stubbornness. I didn't want to hear later that I'd caved in after the first round. If I was going to break down, at least I'd do it late. Late is better than early. That was all I had to offer.

At some point, I don't know when, Maelcolm loosened the chain a little. Not much, but enough that I could half-stand on my feet again. The pain remained, but it no longer screamed, it only hissed.

"You could have saved yourselves the trouble," said the writer.

"Or you," I said. "By simply accepting that I'm not saying anything that will really help you."

He stood up, went to the door, and spoke quietly to someone outside. When he returned, he carried a small bowl. Inside was something thin, broth, as transparent as her promises.

He placed them on a small stool. Not within my reach. But close enough that I could smell them.

"This is the offer," he said. "You start to really help us. No half measures. No excuses. Names. Places. Assessments. We'll let you down, feed you, treat you like a man we can talk to. Or you continue as before. Then you'll end up talking eventually anyway, only with fewer teeth in your mouth and less time to benefit from that decision."

Hunger returned, offended that I had forgotten about it. The broth wasn't much, but my body knew what even a sip would mean.

"They've already got Ewan that far along," the shadow said softly. "Maybe even Fergus. Maybe Murn is just now searching for his own limits. You can stand here and pretend you're doing them all some good by gritting your teeth. Or you can accept that they'll get what they want without you. And you'll only be hurting yourself."

That was the nasty part: he wasn't entirely wrong. There was a line somewhere beyond which pride became nothing but self-destruction. The only question was where exactly that line lay. And who decided it.

I closed my eyes briefly, just for a moment. Wallace in the valley. His face as he said, "If they force you to tie me up, do it quickly, but don't pretend you didn't know."

I opened my eyes again. The writer was waiting. The bowl was waiting. Maelcolm was waiting. Hunger had been waiting the whole time.

"I will give you something," I said. My voice sounded foreign, but still like my own. "But not what you want."

The writer raised his eyebrows. "Interesting," he said. "Continue."

"I'll tell you," I continued, "what I think. Not what I know. I'll tell you that he doesn't go near main roads, that he loses more men than he gains, that your nooses are already in the minds of

those who once admired him. I'll tell you that you'll get him eventually because you're taller, richer, and more patient than he is. But I won't tell you which door to kick down next, or which woman you should best intimidate into revealing who slept in her barn."

The writer blinked. It wasn't what he'd expected. Perhaps he'd hoped I'd buckle like a rotten board. Instead, he got a crooked slat that didn't fit where he wanted it.

"So you want to become philosophical," he said dryly.

"I want to entangle you in your own game," I thought. Out loud I said, "You don't need me to get him. You need me to make you feel better when the time comes. I won't give you that relief."

It was silent. Only the torch crackled. Maelcolm's hand was still on the chain. The scribe stared at me as if considering whether it was worth investing any more energy in me.

"You are a foolish man," he said finally. Not angrily. Regretfully. "You mistake pride for strength."

"And you confuse power with right," replied the shadow.

The writer picked up the bowl, took a sip himself, as if to show that it was just ordinary food. Then he placed it back on the stool. Further away.

"Fine," he said. "Then we'll do it this way: You stay as you are. We'll see how long you can stand it. And if one day you change, at least you'll know that you brought it on yourselves."

They left me hanging for a while, long enough that my body began to develop small twitches that I could no longer control. Then they took the chain from the hook, untied the bonds, and let me fall to my knees like a sack that had been used too often.

Maelcolm pulled me up, supported me for a bit. It wasn't out of kindness. Just a precaution so I wouldn't collapse on the way and the writer would have to write even more reports later.

"Back to the cell," he said.

I left. More stumbled than walked, but on my own two feet. My shoulders burned, my hands tingled as if ants were burrowing under my skin. My head was strangely bright. A mixture of pain, an empty stomach, and the idiotic satisfaction of not having collapsed immediately.

In the cell, I slid down the wall. The shadow sat down next to me and pulled its legs up.

"You know that wasn't all," he said.

"Yes," I thought. "They have even more basements, more rooms, more methods. And I only have a few sentences and a little bit of residual pride."

"And a new sound you'll recognize," he added. "Your own voice when you were about to say, 'I give up.' Remember that sound. You'll hear it again."

Eventually, I did fall asleep. Not deeply, not for long, more like a black blink. In that blink, I saw something: a cart. A square. People who weren't hungry, but staring. Mockery instead of questions. And in the middle, something that looked like a person, until they started putting it on display.

I woke up with this image in my mind and knew, without anyone having to read me a report: This was just the preparation. The real show would take place above, under the open sky. With wheels, with ropes, with a crowd invited to watch as if to a church service.

"On the cart," murmured the shadow. "Through the mocking crowd. If you're unlucky, you won't just be a spectator."

I leaned my head back against the wall. My shoulders throbbed, my stomach felt like a hole, my head a fire that couldn't decide whether to warm me or burn everything down.

They weren't finished with us yet. Not with me, not with Wallace, not with this country. But I now had an idea of what their show would be like when they finally got their hands on him. No more candlelight, no more torches on the wall. Daylight. A cart. And a whole lot of people laughing so they wouldn't realize how disgusted they actually were.

I didn't know if I would be free then, or in chains. But I knew that when the time came, I would try to look. Not because I wanted to see it. But because someone had to be there who could later say: "That's how it was. Not how they paint it in their documents."

Someone laughed again in the corridor. Not loudly. Just briefly. Mockingly.

I clenched my hands as tightly as I could. "Go ahead and laugh," I thought. "The cart starts rolling for everyone eventually. Some sit on it. Some pull it. Some stand beside it. But nobody stays on the sidelines forever."

The shadow grinned. "Then hold on tight, bastard," he said. "The next chapter comes with wheels."

On the cart through the mocking crowd

It was the smell that was different at first. Not the smell of dungeons, sweat, and cold stone—I knew that like the back of my hand. This time there was something sweet in the air, something from outside: roasted meat, stale beer, wet manure, people. Lots of people. The city took a deep breath before it vomited.

The door to my cell didn't open with the usual weariness, but with a strange decisiveness. No hesitant bolt, no bored squeak. Just "click," "open," done. Maelcolm stood there. The same calm force as always, but in his eyes there was a spark of something more. Not necessarily joy. Expectation, perhaps.

"Get up," he said.

"If you want to hang me, bring a jug," I grumbled as I pulled myself up. "It sucks to die with a dry throat."

He didn't react. That was his talent: to comment on nothing, at most to carry out his orders. Two guards waited in the corridor, helmets shinier than usual, coats fresh, as if they'd taken them out of the chest for the occasion. A fine event, I thought. For whom, I wonder.

They didn't put any restraints on me. That surprised me more than anything else. Just a quick grab of my arm, which seemed more like a formality. When people stop giving you restraints, there are two reasons: either they trust you, or they think it doesn't matter anyway.

We went upstairs. Every step away from the cellar felt like I was becoming a different animal. Downstairs, you were a piece of meat in the dark. Upstairs, you were a human being again, walking upright. At least, that's how it looked. Maybe it was just for show.

There was more activity upstairs. Soldiers, clerks, a priest I didn't recognize, people with faces that seemed too eager to avoid looking suspicious. I didn't see Murn, Fergus, or Aidan. Perhaps they had different staircases, different corridors, different rooms. Or perhaps I'd simply missed them, my mind preoccupied with not trying to escape, only to fail on principle.

The sergeant was waiting at the end of the corridor. He looked as if he hadn't slept, but with him it was hard to tell; he always looked as if he'd just been in a fight with a rock. His gaze lingered on me, a quick inspection: Still standing, not about to collapse, serviceable.

"You're coming outside with me," he said.

"A walk?" I asked.

"Something like that," he said. "They want familiar faces in the escort. Men who have seen him. Men who can later say that everything went smoothly."

There it was, the word. Proper. The guys who called torture "pressure" called this "proper." I could have thrown up, but my stomach was too empty.

"So the time has come," murmured the shadow in my head. "The big day. Candles out, sun on, audience in."

We stepped out into the castle courtyard. The sky hung low, gray, but dry. A good day for a spectacle. Rain makes people grumpy, and grumpy people are hard to cheer up. There were guards on the walls, more below, steel and fabric everywhere, all the pompous order they loved so much.

In the middle of the yard stood the cart. Not a pretty one. A rough thing, made of planks, one wheel already half-splintered, as if they'd chosen the ugliest one they could find. The horse pulling it was thin, with a dull coat, an animal that looked as if it couldn't care less. It suited the occasion.

And then I saw him.

Wallace wasn't standing. He was still kneeling. Two men held him by the shoulders, one manipulating irons. The restraints were more extensive than the ones we'd had with us in the

valley. Rings on his hands, chains across his back, irons around his ankles. No room for maneuver. This wasn't "just in case." This was: "We'll make a statue of you before we put you on display."

He looked thinner. Not broken, but worn down. His beard longer, his cheeks sharper, his eyes—they were the same. No embers, no flaming sparks of heroism, just that calm, hard fire you see when someone has decided to no longer look away, no matter what.

They pulled him up. Not roughly, but without any consideration. His body complied because it had to. He stood up, a little stiff, like someone who can no longer quite believe his own bones. Then they lifted him onto the cart. Like wood. Like meat being taken to market. No throne, no pedestal. A stuttering plank floor that sent every jolt of the wheels straight through his bones.

The chain around his neck was new. Heavy. It ran from the iron ring around his throat to the back, where it was attached to the cart. A dog in a team, I thought. That's how they like it. Then they can always say, "We didn't pull him, he came along of his own accord."

"Look away," whispered the shadow. "If you look at it for too long, it will burn something into your head that you'll never get out."

I watched anyway. Of course. If you're already part of the scenery, you at least want to recognize the main attraction.

Wallace looked across the courtyard, not searching, just taking in. Walls, guards, steel, faces. His gaze grazed me. Just briefly. But long enough for me to know: He recognized me.

There was no accusation in his eyes. No plea. Just that "Well, there you are," the kind of thing you say to an old acquaintance when you meet them in a tavern you know is going to end badly.

The grey lord stood slightly elevated so that his words would later fall clearly. Beside him was the English ambassador, with the face of a man who refused to look particularly interested, for anything else would appear sympathetic. A few other lords, priests, and clerks stood like crows around a gleaming piece of entrails.

"In the name of the Council," began the Grey Lord, "William Wallace, the rebel, the troublemaker, the one responsible for bloodshed and chaos, will today be brought to his just punishment."

I already knew the text before he finished speaking. No man says "just punishment" without at least a momentary twitch inside him. But he went through with it, voice firm, words rehearsed.

"He refused to submit to the king," the lord continued. "He mocked the order of the realm, led men to their deaths, and incited the common people to revolt. Today we show that no man, no matter how great his transgressions, is above the law."

"Law," said the shadow. "The word they use when they mean, 'We've decided to call it that.'"

Wallace stood on the cart, the chains clinking softly as the horse moved. He said nothing. No roar, no cry of "Freedom!" as the bards would later invent. Only his breath, visible in the cool air.

I was assigned to one side of the cart with others. Two on the left flank, two on the right, one at the back, one at the front. I got the spot on the right. Good view. Bad opportunity to look away.

"You're here to keep order," the sergeant had said. "Not to comment on history."

We set off. Slowly, heavily. The wheel creaked even as we left the courtyard. In the archway, the clanking of the chains sounded like an answer to every word they had previously called "right".

The street in front of the castle was packed. Not so packed that you couldn't take another step, but crowded enough that you knew they had taken their time. People on both sides, several rows deep, some on barrels, walls, anything higher than the ground. Men, women, children, all ages, all kinds of looks.

There were those who grinned openly, nudging each other in the ribs as if they'd paid admission and now expected to see something in return. Those who had already started spitting, just to practice. Others stood more quietly, arms folded, faces hard but not happy. And at the very back, a few who didn't want to get close enough, but didn't stay away either. Gawkers with a guilty conscience.

"These are the mocking folk," said the shadow. "They pretend they have nothing to do with the rope because they didn't tie it themselves. But they've come to see how it's used. That's enough."

Shouts flew. "Traitor!" "Murderer!" "See what will become of you!" A few threw dirt, one a piece of bread that was already half-moldy. Another a withered turnip that clanged as it hit wood.

Wallace didn't flinch. A bit of dust clung to him, a piece of bread slid off the cart before it reached his feet. He made no grand gestures, no "You're blind" monologue, nothing of the sort that bards would later drink their livers to death for.

He saw. That was all. He looked at the people as if he wanted to remember every face that spat him out today. Not out of revenge. Rather, as if he wanted to be able to say later, wherever later might be: "Yes, I saw you. You were there."

A boy, maybe ten, stood at the edge of the road, too close not to be caught in it. He clung to his mother's skirt; she jutted out her chin as if to show she wasn't afraid. His eyes were too big for his face. He stared at Wallace, not with hatred, but with that brutal, childlike curiosity that doesn't yet know what it will make of you later.

Wallace saw him. For just a heartbeat. No nod, no sign. But I swear, in that moment, that boy became either a man who would later sit at a table like that of the Council—or one who, years later, in some tavern, would tell the story differently.

We rolled on. The streets narrowed, then widened again, squares, alleys, staircases. Stirling had more faces than I would have ever expected. People everywhere. Some were dressed in their best clothes, others looked as if they had come straight from the fields.

A man with a crooked mouth shouted, "Where is your freedom now, Wallace?" and laughed, that wet, disgusting laugh of someone who too readily forgets that he once shouted "Yes!" when someone had said, "We will fight back!"

The shadow in my head spat invisibly. "Those are the worst," he said. "The ones who would have walked all over you yesterday and today act like they always knew you'd lose."

There were moments when no one shouted. People just stared. Old women with deep wrinkles, unsure whether to spit or pray. Men who neither tipped their hats nor put them on. One woman who held her hand to her mouth as if she were sick.

I saw a few faces I recognized. One of the farmers from the area around the cold barn. He stood far back, half-hidden, his eyes dark. No shout, no gesture, nothing. But I saw his hands clench into fists, his knuckles white.

"They'll tell themselves later that they weren't there," said the shadow. "Or that they couldn't have done anything. Both are easy. Truth is hard."

The road dragged on. The cart squeaked, the horse snorted, Wallace was silent, the crowd roared. Eventually, we passed the tavern, the "Crooked Crown." The sign swayed slightly in the wind, as if considering whether to tear itself off and run away.

Iona stood in the doorway. No smile. Her hands on the frame, her fingers digging into the wood. Her eyes were dry, but hard. She was far enough away not to be pulled into the vortex of the front row, but close enough for me to see her.

Her gaze wasn't on Wallace. It was on us. On the men in the escort. On me. A short, sharp cut. "I see you," it was. Not as an apology, not as an accusation. Simply as a statement of fact.

I felt the knife at my side, even though they had instructed us to tuck it deeper under our coats today. "Order," they had said. "No unnecessary provocations."

"This is the biggest provocation of all," I thought. "The rest is just decoration."

Part of me wanted to do something. What, I didn't know. Jump off the cart, break the chain, scare the horse, anything. Another part was wiser. Knew that this wasn't a heroic poem, but a carefully staged ending. And that anyone who spontaneously wanted to become a hero today would, at best, end up as an extra act in the show.

The shadow was silent. That was rare. Perhaps he didn't know what to say when a man stood on a cart and didn't resist, didn't beg, didn't shout, but simply was there and endured the gaze of the people.

We reached the large square. The one they usually used for markets, announcements, and smaller-scale punishments. Today it was packed like a mouth waiting for a bite. In the middle, the prepared scaffolding stood, still half in shadow, with ropes, planks, and posts. They had put in the effort. It didn't look like improvised fury. It looked like work.

"This is where the cart goes," the sergeant said quietly, more to himself than to us. "Then the rest will take its course."

"The rest," said the shadow. "A nice word for what's to come."

The cart rolled more slowly. The shouts grew louder, but at the same time more muffled. A strange thing: the closer they got to the subject, the more the roar became a carpet of noise, in which individual words blurred. It was no longer "Death to the traitor." It was a "We are here" sung by a thousand voices.

Wallace stood. He swayed slightly, wasn't holding on, couldn't hold on, chains offered no other support. His head was up, not far above ours, but high enough that you knew: Today you're not one of them. You're the one they're pointing at.

I wondered what was going through his mind. Whether he was thinking of the men he had trudged through the mud with in Stirling. Of the village women who had given him bread. Of the barn. Of the rope we had seen back then, the one that wasn't for him. Of us, standing in the valley, telling him there was no more easy path.

Or whether he was thinking about nothing at all. Only about the next breath. Sometimes that's the truest form of courage: that you keep breathing even though you know how little it will soon be worth.

The cart stopped. The crowd closed in behind us, in front of us, beside us. The guards pushed people back, shields as barriers. Children were lifted up so they could see better. Old men pushed forward as if they had paid admission.

"On the cart through the mocking crowd," I thought. "That's exactly how they planned it. Not secretly in the courtyard. In public. So everyone could see how they were making an example of a man."

The shadow placed its hand imaginarily on my shoulder. "Remember everything," it said. "The faces, the sounds, the words that are worthless. You'll need this later. When they start rewriting history."

I stood there, sword at my side, part of the escort, part of the scenery, and knew: I wasn't one of those on the cart today. But I was standing damned close enough to catch his shadow.

The horse snorted. Somewhere someone laughed. A different laugh, higher, more nervous. Not mockery, more like fear in disguise.

The grey lord stepped forward, the priest moved beside him, the scribes sorted their papers. The show was ready. The cart had delivered.

What happened after that, none of those who were laughing today would ever be able to truly recount. But they would say: "I was there."

And I knew that later I would have to look myself in the mirror and realize: Me too.

The pitch held its breath, but not out of respect. More like a player waiting to see if his thrown bones will finally pay off. Above us, the grey sky; below us, the cobblestones; and in between, a crowd of people whose faces didn't know whether to cheer, jeer, or simply stare.

The grey lord raised his hand. The sounds didn't die down immediately, but they diminished, receding to the side. A few final shouts, then that murmur that always lingers when many people are gathered together, too afraid to admit they actually want to go home.

"Men and women of Stirling," he began, and I could have sworn the sentence was written somewhere on parchment. "Today we deliver a judgment that is not easy, but necessary. William Wallace has thrown this country into turmoil, risen up against the rightful Crown, shed blood, and destroyed order."

I couldn't hear every word anymore. It was like that time in the council chamber, when I'd stood outside the door and only caught snatches of conversation. Except now I didn't have a stone at my back, but an entire city. The sentences ran together like cheap wine: "riot," "crime," "proof," "justice," "deterrence."

Wallace was still standing on the cart, the chain around his neck, his hands bound in front of him. His shoulders were straight, as straight as could be kept in such iron. Leave a man hanging in a dungeon long enough, and his body forgets how to walk upright. But something inside him was still awake.

The shadow in my head leaned against an invisible wall. "There you have your theater," he said. "All that's missing is the moment when someone shouts out whether the accused has any last words."

The priest stepped forward, a step beside the lord, his hands clasped together as if in prayer, though he was merely sorting out his role. "William Wallace," he called out, "you are accused of rebelling against the divinely ordained order. If you show remorse, perhaps your soul may find what your body cannot find today."

That was the part where the better stories tell of the defendant giving one last, grand, and pure speech, telling the truth before the rug is pulled out from under him. I never believed in such scenes. Too much glitz, too little grit.

Wallace raised his head slightly. Not dramatically. Just enough to make it easier for his voice to escape his throat.

"You talk a lot about order," he said. Not a thunderous voice, not a sermon. A rough, well-used voice that nevertheless reached everyone who would listen. "Order here, order there. As if order were a woman you could put in bed with once you've messed up everything else."

A few in the crowd giggled reflexively. The lord briefly grimaced, then composed himself.

"You say I seduced the people," Wallace continued. "As if they were a flock of sheep just waiting for someone to come along and tell them to run against the dogs. The truth is, the people were already angry before my name even crossed your lips. You were just hoping for someone to come along for the taking. So that no one would have to point the finger at you."

The shadow nodded slowly. "Too much truth for her taste," he said.

“You stand before a legitimate council,” the lord exclaimed, clearly struggling to maintain control. “Before men who bear responsibility. You have mocked that responsibility.”

“You sold them,” Wallace replied. “For crowns, for land, for your peace by candlelight. You’re not angry because of my sword. You’re angry because of my refusal to call your lies ‘peace.’”

The crowd murmured. Some looked at each other. It wasn't jubilation, but neither was it a unanimous outcry. It was that sound when a truth briefly passes through the square and no one knows whether to hold onto it or push it away.

The priest took a step forward, as if trying to take it all back. “Your words won’t change your judgment,” he said. “You may be able to salvage your pride. But what is pride in the sight of God?”

"Perhaps the only thing he didn't buy," murmured the shadow.

Wallace looked at him. "If your God approves of this," he said quietly, "then he should be ashamed. And if he doesn't approve of it, then he should take a good look at who's laughing here today."

That wasn't a neat, grand final sentence. It was a punch to the gut. The priest blinked, the lord took a breath, the scribe scribbling frantically, as if it would later be possible to decide which words had officially been spoken.

One of the guards at the cart received a signal. He climbed up to Wallace, grabbed him by the chains, and led him from the middle of the cart to the wooden beam protruding from the scaffolding. It wasn't high. They didn't want to shoot him; they wanted to display him.

"Now comes the practical part," said the shadow dryly.

They put the noose around his neck. Not a thin rope, but a thick, oiled one that looked like it had seen many necks before. The knot was tied on the side, not at the back. That was important, I'd been told once. I knew exactly why—but I didn't really want to go into the details again.

The crowd moved closer, as far as the guards allowed. A strange pull arose, the kind that happens when many people's minds run wild with the thought: "What will it be like if...?" The cart creaked, the horse pawed the ground as if it found it all too theatrical.

The sergeant stood a short distance behind me. His hand rested loosely on his sword, but I knew he would have preferred to hold someone else's heart in his hand. Perhaps his own, in another time.

“In the name of the King,” cried the Lord, “in the name of the Council, in the name of the Law, the sentence will be carried out.”

There was no drumroll. No "Three... two... one." Just a brief signal, a tug on the ropes, and the cart lurched into motion. Not far at all. Just enough so that the body, which just moments before had been standing on the planks, suddenly had no ground beneath it.

I deliberately avoided looking at the point where the rope and the neck met. The shadow did anyway, the dog. But even he remained silent.

The body twitched. No long dance, no theatrical fidgeting, just those few reflexive movements, when the muscles hadn't yet grasped that the brain was severing its own internal circuits. Feet searching for purchase where there was none. Hands clenching into fists, with nothing left to grasp.

The crowd held its breath again. Even the jeers fell silent for a moment. This is the moment they later try to hide in their minds. No one likes to admit to having stared while someone else's breath was cut off.

I heard no grand, final cry. No "Scotland!" shouted to the heavens, no "Freedom!" What I heard was a stifled, clipped sound, the kind all people make when something invisible is choking them. Not a hero's cry. A human sound.

"That's how they all sound," the shadow said softly. "Heroes, traitors, thieves, peasants. If you take away their air, none of them sound special anymore."

It went on. Not forever, but long enough to become uncomfortable. People started clearing their throats, as if trying to get rid of a lump in their throats. One man laughed nervously, then fell silent when his neighbor looked at him. A child started to cry, without knowing why.

Eventually, he just hung there. Not a twitch, just weight. His head slightly tilted, his hair covering part of his face, his eyes half-closed or half-open – hard to tell from a distance.

It could have been enough. For many, it would have been enough. But the council wanted more. Always more.

The cart was pulled back under the body. They didn't untie the rope right away, leaving it hanging while they prepared the next thing. Planks were brought over, metal, a few men who looked as if they had come this morning specifically to do some carpentry.

"Now comes the part they will later call 'making a statement'," murmured the shadow.

The grey lord continued speaking, his voice sounding as if it had seen too many dead rooms. "The traitor shall not only die," he said, "he shall show where the path leads when one places oneself above crown and law. His body will be used after the judgment to reinforce order."

"Attach," I thought. "What a word."

The crowd murmured again. A few of those who had just been roaring the loudest suddenly looked as if they had gone too far. Others, however, were only now getting into the spirit. There are people for whom death isn't enough. They want to see what's left afterward.

I felt my stomach clench, even though there was hardly anything left in it. I knew stories of what they do to men, not just to get rid of them, but to use them as a warning sign. You don't have to believe every detail to know that they would have been enough.

The guards worked mechanically. They had their own mental walls behind which they hid. If you follow orders long enough, you learn to lock away the "why."

The shadow was silent. No comment, no cynical remark. That was the true measure of the shit that was happening. When even your inner voices fall silent for a moment, you know you've crossed a line.

I searched the crowd for a face that didn't want to be there. I found too many. The farmer from earlier, Iona in the distance outside the tavern, an old woman with folded hands, a boy with far too large eyes. All witnesses. No one innocent.

"They're turning him into a signpost," the shadow finally said. "So that everyone knows exactly where the line is that must not be crossed. So that no one can say they didn't see what they meant."

The grey lord continued to speak of "justice," "order," and "deterrence." The words fell like stones into a pit that already held enough.

And there I stood, sword at my side, official escort, and felt something shift within me. Not a great, revolutionary spark. More like a stone breaking free from a wall – slowly, subtly, but irrevocably.

"Look," said the shadow. "Not because you want to see it. Because you can't later claim you didn't know."

I watched. Not every movement, not every tool they unpacked, but the faces. The executioners', the lords', the clerks', the crowd's. The laughing ones, the silent ones, the disgusted ones, the greedy ones.

On the cart stood no man left who had any choice. But below, around him, stood hundreds, all deciding what they would make of this day. A story of "just judgment." Or one that made them sick when they thought at night of the laughter that had swept across the square that day.

I didn't yet know which direction things would take for me. I only knew that something inside me no longer fit with what they called "order".

The show wasn't over yet. It had only just reached its climax. The rest would find its way into the songs, the stories, the pubs.

But in my mind, the cart had already moved on. Away from the square, through streets, through years. And I had the feeling I would be running alongside it for a very long time.

There are moments when a place ceases to be a place and becomes a maw. The entire stone, the surrounding houses, the windows from which people stare, too cowardly to come down—everything becomes teeth, all vying for the same piece of meat. In that moment, Stirling was no longer a pavement, a town, a home. It was merely a frame for what they called "law," which looked like a bad temper set in iron.

They hadn't taken him down yet. He hung there, like someone forgotten, but too important to truly be forgotten. His body heavy in the rope, the chains dull, his face half in shadow, half in light. For some, he was already just a carcass. For others, an image they would never be able to shake, no matter how many years and sleepless nights lay in between.

A command cut through the murmuring. Short, sharp, like a knife that takes no detours. Two men on the ropes, one on the cart, one on the beam that hung above them like a wooden condemnation. They didn't release it gently. No "careful," no "don't drop him." The body came down like something used and now put away. Feet on the planks, chains clanked, one man cursed softly as the weight briefly shifted into his arm.

I was standing close enough to hear the dull thud as he briefly landed on the cart. No heroic sound. It was the sound of flesh on wood, like a half-empty sack of grain that hasn't been properly set down. There was nothing majestic about it, no matter what they later make of it in songs.

The crowd gasped. Not because anyone had said anything, but because the body was horizontal again. Death is more bearable when it's hanging. Then it's further away, belongs more to heaven, which the priests so readily attribute to a single god. But when someone is lying horizontally again, on a board, within reach, then your mind realizes: This is someone like you. Only finished.

The grey lord continued speaking. I heard words like "high treason," "deterred," "example." It all sounded as if he'd said it so many times that it had become more air than meaning. The English envoy beside him now had the nonchalant bearing of a man who knows: the unpleasant part is over, the rest is a bonus.

Then came the torturer. Of course, they didn't call him that. Officially, he was some kind of "executioner," but you don't need to hang a fancy sign around someone's neck to make them know their job is to carve warning signs out of bodies. The guy had the eyes of a craftsman who'd taken on one too many jobs. Not a sadist in the cheap sense, not a snarling dog. More like someone who'd convinced himself he was just another cog in a machine that would run just fine without him.

"That's the most dangerous of them," murmured the shadow. "Not the one who laughs while cutting. The one who pretends to be just working with wood while cutting."

They secured him. Arms apart, legs firmly planted, torso immobilized, all with that routine, almost bored thoroughness that is worse than brutal haste. The crowd surged forward, but the guards kept them at a distance, shields marking the boundary between "we're watching" and "we're joining in."

The priest mumbled something. It sounded like a prayer, but I'd been to enough masses to know this was more of a form. "Forgive him," something about "will," something about "grace," which at that moment was as far away as a halfway decent day's wages.

"Look away," said something inside me that wasn't the shadow. The other part, the soft one, which had known since childhood that there are things that, later on, you can't remember where they get stuck inside you.

I didn't look away. Not because I was brave. Rather, because I knew they would have preferred it that way. And I didn't want to give them that satisfaction.

The first thing they took from him was his stomach. Not with a grand, dramatic blow, but rather with a precise, dirty cut. No blood-fountain spectacle, no red rain, as the stories so often portray. This was craftsmanship. Slow. Precise. The torturer knew exactly how deep, how

wide, how long to cut to produce as much horror as possible and as little immediate death as possible.

The crowd made noise. No one had demanded that it be "just," but now, seeing justice gripping their stomachs, they didn't know whether to applaud or vomit. A few laughed, that thin, high-pitched laugh of people who've realized too late that they're on the wrong side of the stage. Some shouted something, words that meant nothing anymore.

"So far," the shadow said softly. "So far their order extends."

I didn't see any details. Not all of them. The torches were far enough away, the light was oblique, I wasn't right next to them. But I saw enough to know when they moved a little further inside him. I saw his chest rise and fall, jerkily, irregularly. Whether he was still conscious, I didn't know. A body can pretend to be inhabited for a very long time.

The priests prayed louder. That was their way of not having to look. Words as a wall. "Lord," "soul," "purification." As if polishing dirt with dirt.

The grey lord did what men like him always do when they're overwhelmed by their own decision: he looked away, ahead, over the heads of the crowd, toward a point that didn't exist. I wondered if, for a brief moment, he hadn't hoped he was somewhere else, at some boring lease negotiation. But he stayed. He was too deep in.

"You must be present when your sentence is carried out," said the shadow. "Otherwise, no one will believe you later that you were serious."

The torturer continued working, step by step, as if he had a plan inside him that no one was allowed to see. It was bad enough from a distance. Up close it would have been worse. But I was close enough to see the face of the man wielding the knife. And there was none of what you find in stories about monsters. No tongue hanging out, no crazed look. Just concentration. Like someone who wants to know if what he's delivering today is as "clean" as the order demands.

The crowd shifted. Some turned away, left, pushed their way back through the rows as if they'd suddenly forgotten why they'd come in the first place. Others moved closer. Those who wanted to see more. Perhaps because they hoped that by doing so, they'd later remember that they'd once been "there." Perhaps because something inside them was broken, something that only found brief respite in the pain of others.

I looked for Iona. I saw her at the edge of the square, in front of the tavern, further back than before. She hadn't come any closer. If anything, she'd stepped back a bit. Still in the doorway, but no longer at the front. Her hands were no longer on the frame, but clasped together, as if she were afraid they might do something she'd later regret.

The farmer from the barn was gone. Or I couldn't find him. Maybe he was the first to turn back. Maybe he was standing somewhere in an alley, vomiting. Maybe he was standing way in the back, staring, because he couldn't do anything else.

The boy who had been staring at Wallace earlier was still there. On the shoulders of a man who was probably his father. The child was crying. Not loudly, just those silent tears you have when you realize something inside you is becoming too big for your body. The man held him

tightly, pressed his head against him in a makeshift way, but didn't turn him away. That was the real betrayal.

"These people," said the shadow, "will be sitting in a tavern in twenty or thirty years and saying, 'I saw him. I was there.' And they won't know whether to be proud or sick of it."

At some point—time here had become nothing more than a sticky mass—I heard one of the men on the scaffolding say, "That's enough." Not loudly, but with a voice that carried something like exhaustion. Perhaps he was a doctor. Perhaps a priest with more of a conscience than the others.

The grey lord nodded curtly. The torturer stopped. It wasn't a generous act of clemency. More of a statement of fact: the message had been received. Anything after that would have been purely private.

The body lay still now. As still as only someone who truly owns nothing can be. Not a twitch, not a breath. Just mass. They continued, but this was routine. Detaching parts, dismantling the body, like butchering an animal to take to different markets.

"And that," said the shadow matter-of-factly, "is the point at which they turn a person into a shield."

They had already planned where the pieces would go. Castles, towns, crossroads. Scattered across the land, like nails on a map. Each piece as a little letter: "This is how it ends for someone who believes that 'no' is a reasonable word."

I didn't notice exactly when the cart was empty. We stood there, holding the outer ring, shouting orders when the crowd pushed too hard. It was like a storm: you can't count every drop, you just realize that everything is getting wet.

Eventually, the worst was over. The tools were cleared away, the scaffolding remained, as if it were a harmless setup for some market the next day. Men with buckets came and poured water over the pavement, which didn't clean it, but only made it wetter. Blood mixes with dirt to form a kind of memory that can never be erased.

The grey lord said something about "May this be a warning." I barely heard it. The square had heard enough voices. One more sentence, and the stones would have started talking back.

The cart was gone. So was the horse. The crowd slowly dispersed. Like a wave that had decided to wreak havoc somewhere else. A few lingered, as if they couldn't believe the show was truly over. They had thought something would change afterward. The sky, the air, something. But everything remained the same. Only the images in their minds were new.

We were relieved. Other guards took over the remaining duties. We were told to return to the camp, check our equipment, and "be ready." For what? For the next person they wanted to display? For the silence that would follow?

The sergeant strode ahead without turning around. His shoulders felt heavier than before. Not from marching, not from the sword. From the stares. It's a burden for which there are no straps.

Tam waited near the edge of the camp. He hadn't watched. At least not up close. His face was pale, his hands restless.

"And?" he asked when I was within earshot.

I opened my mouth, realizing I had no words that weren't too small. "They used him," I finally managed. "Right to the very end. And convinced themselves they were healing the country."

Tam nodded slowly. "And you?" he asked. "Did they use you too?"

"Yes," said the shadow. "They used you as eyes. As proof. As an alibi."

"I stood there," I said. "With sword at my side, cloak on my shoulders, face forward. I was part of the order."

The sentence tasted like I was chewing a mouthful of iron.

"Were you looking away?" Tam asked.

I shook my head. "No."

He looked at me, for a long time. Then he nodded. "Good," he said. "If you're going to eat dirt, at least don't do it with your eyes closed."

Later, when the crowd had dispersed and Stirling again pretended it was just a tired town and not a mouth with bloody teeth, we sat around the fire. Not all of us. Some were still in cramped rooms, answering questions they'd already answered a hundred times.

The priest stared into the embers as if he could find a spot that was still clean. "They will say it was necessary," he murmured. "They will say it was for the people. Those who laughed today will say they wept. Those who wept today will say they weren't even there."

"And you?" I asked.

He shrugged. "I was there," he said. "And I did nothing to stop it."

"As if you could have done it," said Fergus, who was sitting to my right, his voice hoarse, his eyes red; whether from the smoke or something else, I didn't even want to know.

"It's not about whether I could have done it," the priest said. "It's about the fact that I didn't try."

Murn said nothing at all. His lips were pressed so tightly together that they were almost colorless. There was a look in his eyes that I had only ever seen before in prison walls. Cracks, small, but deep.

"They have won," said the shadow. "Not just over him. Over everyone who stood there today and convinced themselves it wasn't their noose too."

I leaned my head against the tent pole and looked up where the sky was beginning to darken. Wallace was now scattered. Part of him would be hanging somewhere on a city wall, another on a gate, a third perhaps on a road leading south.

“They took his body,” I thought. “But what they don’t realize is that they’ve only given him more places to live on. Every piece that rots somewhere becomes a story. And every story will sound different from what they decided today in their candlelit rooms.”

The shadow chuckled softly. Not mockingly. More wearily. “A heart for freedom,” he said. “It may no longer be beating in his chest. But you heard it throughout the square today.”

I closed my eyes. Inside me, the car was still running. Over cobblestones, through streets, through mouths. And I knew I would never get rid of the sound.

On the cart stood one man who was to be made into a symbol. At the edge of the cart stood one who didn’t know what to do with the filth he saw. And among the crowd stood hundreds who had to decide whether they had laughed or remained silent that day.

It was over, they declared. The traitor had been executed, the sentence carried out, order restored.

Inside me, nothing was over. Nothing was restored. Only a boundary had shifted. And somewhere, among all the stones and bodies, something began to burn that wasn’t as easily extinguished as a candle in the town hall.

Body for torture, heart for freedom

They said things would calm down after that. As if the square were a startled dog that only needed one good whack on the muzzle to finally lie down. Stirling would go back to normal, they said. The markets would resume, the taverns would once again talk only of bad beer and even worse marriages, the guards would once again curse rats, rain, and tired feet.

The strange thing is that the quieter the city tried to be, the louder it got in my head.

The night after the cart ride wasn’t a real night. I lay, as so often, on my straw mattress and smelled sweat, stale smoke, leather—that mixture a soldier’s tent always has, no matter where it’s pitched. The others snored, muttered, and tossed and turned. One of them ground his teeth as if he were still working on a bone that was no longer there.

My eyes were open. It wouldn’t have been any darker with them closed. The shadow sat beside me, its back against the tent pole, as if it were both tired and too awake at the same time.

“Well, you bastard,” he said at one point. “How does it feel to have been part of something bigger than yourself – and yet still only leave dirt on your boots?”

I didn’t answer. Sometimes questions have no place in a mouth that tastes of iron.

The day after was strangely clean. The castle had had the courtyard scrubbed, as if enough water and salt could wash every memory from the stones. The town square was damp and slippery in places, as if it had rained, when in fact it was only the eager shoveling of those who didn't want anyone to see how much blood a "just punishment" truly requires.

Parts of the body were already on their way. Messengers, wagons, sacks. You didn't have to be there to know what they smelled like. Death stinks the same everywhere, whether against a castle wall, at a crossroads, or in a forgotten ditch.

We were given our tasks: controlling the streets, patrolling the city, and being open to dialogue with the people, as they called it. If someone spread "false stories," we were to "counteract" them.

"You are not just a soldier now," the sergeant said as we formed up in the morning. "You are also a voice."

"You mean poster," murmured the shadow. "An announcement made flesh."

I ended up with a small group: Tam, Murn, and two others. We were to walk through the districts in the shadow of the castle, to the places where the huts are too close together and the windows have too little glass. Places where rumors grow like weeds.

People acted as if they weren't paying attention to us. But you can tell by the way people look at their necks. If you're walking down an alley and suddenly everyone's necks freeze, you know you've interrupted a conversation. Look away for a moment, doors close a crack tighter, a child is pulled aside.

"They think you've come to count their tongues," said the shadow.

I stopped in front of a bakery. The smell of warm bread was an insult. My stomach protested with an offended growl. The baker, a broad fellow with flour in his beard, looked at us, not hostilely, but cautiously.

"You watched yesterday too," I said. No accusation, no question. Just an observation, hanging in the air like the steam from a loaf of bread.

He nodded slowly. "Hard not to look when you're reminded of it so loudly," he said. "The square was packed."

"So?" asked Tam. "Was it... good?"

That was a shitty question, but it was honest.

The baker scratched his hairline, leaving a light trail. "It was well organized," he said. "If that's what you mean. Lots of guards. No commotion. He didn't scream like a pig. People like that. If someone's quiet, they can convince themselves he was strong. That puts their minds at ease."

"And yours?" I asked.

He looked past us as if he were looking at something that was no longer there. "I didn't sleep last night," he said. "Neither did my wife. My son cried until he was sick. But don't worry—if anyone asks me, I'll say it was justified. Otherwise, they'll come and hang me for having the wrong opinion."

He didn't laugh. Neither did I. We continued walking.

A group of women stood on a corner, aprons tied high, hands red from water and work. They whispered, scattering like sparrows as we approached. One remained standing. Older, with wrinkles on her face that came more from worry than from years.

"You want to know what we're talking about?" she asked before I could even open my mouth.

"It depends on what you're talking about," I said.

"That he stood his ground," she said. "That he didn't beg. That he made their law louder than they wanted."

"Do you see?" whispered the shadow. "Body for them, heart for her."

"Others say he was a fool," she continued. "That he only brought us misery. That if he had given up sooner, fewer villages would have burned down. That you don't argue with people who hold the ropes."

"And you?" Murn asked quietly.

She looked at him, her eyes holding that look of someone who'd seen too many coffins. "I say," she said, "that men who tie ropes always find a reason. With or without him."

We said nothing. What could you possibly say? "Thank you for your honest opinion?" We weren't writers; we didn't have a pen to shape their sentences. We only had our boots and the dull feeling that we were walking on ground that no longer belonged to us.

In the shadow of a wall I saw a girl, maybe thirteen or fourteen. She had been drawing in the dirt with a stick before we turned the corner. When she saw us, she took a step back. The shadow of her drawing remained.

I stepped closer and looked. A rough cart, four wheels, a stick figure on it, another stick figure with its arms raised. It was childlike, yet clear.

"Pretty," said the shadow. "Second-tier art."

The girl looked at me, her eyes too big. "They've scattered him everywhere," she said. "That's what they say. Arms here, head there, body over there. Like bread being torn apart."

"Who says so?" I asked.

"The men standing in the tavern," she said. "And those who are about to go in there to forget what they have seen."

I wanted to kick the stick, to blur the image. I didn't. She needed something to spit on when we were gone.

"Leave it," murmured the shadow. "You saw enough blurry images yesterday."

Back at the camp, the air smelled of smoke and cooked stew, as always. The difference wasn't in the smell, but in the conversations. No one talked directly about the cart. They talked about everything else. About the horse. About the English envoy. About a woman with a red cloth who had supposedly fainted. About a man who had made a bet on how long it would take.

Fergus sat by the fire, his arms wrapped around his knees. His voice was rougher than usual. "Did you see how they behaved afterward?" he asked. "As if they were just after Mass. Some actually crossed themselves, others went straight to the tavern. I saw one laugh, and I could see in his eyes that he didn't know if he was laughing at the joke or because he was afraid he'd never be able to laugh again."

"They call it cleansing," said the priest. "Body gone, order restored, faith soothed. As if they were washing away their guilt with his blood."

"They got his body," I said. "But they didn't get what they wanted to get rid of."

"What would that be?" asked Tam.

I searched for a word and couldn't find one I liked. "The idea that you can say 'no,'" I finally said. "That has no neck to break."

The shadow clapped slowly. "There," he said, "almost as clever as him."

Later, we were called in again, one by one. This time not to the deepest cellar, but to a room that pretended to be normal. A table, two benches, a window overlooking a patch of sky small enough that it made no difference.

The writer was there. He looked more tired. Not from lack of sleep, but from talking. Men like him are like mules – you don't immediately notice their burden, only from how stubbornly they keep going.

"We are gathering impressions," he said. "How the people are reacting. Whether there is calm or... unrest. You were outside. You heard what they are saying."

"They say a lot," I said. "It depends on which corner you mean."

"I mean everyone," he said. "Those who mocked. Those who remained silent. Those who looked away. Those who fear they are next."

A brief spark of honesty. I realized he was interested in the result, not just the record.

"They'll tell you it was the right thing to do," I replied. "If you ask them directly. But behind closed doors, they say you went too far. Some say not far enough. A few say you've only made yourselves look foolish with what you did to him."

He wrote. The pen scratched across the parchment, as if it were writing on the stone at the same time.

"And what do you say?" he asked after a pause. "Not as a soldier. As a man."

The shadow pricked up its ears. "Come on," it said. "Now it's going to get pretty."

I looked out the window. A strip of sky that looked as if someone had forgotten to dirty it. "I'm saying," I said, "that you had a body that could no longer hurt you, and yet you kept beating it as if it were still fighting. If you call that justice, then you have a different vocabulary than I do."

His hand faltered. Only briefly, but it faltered.

"He was more than a body," the writer said. "He was a symbol. And symbols must be destroyed, otherwise they become bigger than the men who wear them."

"You tried to destroy the symbol," I replied. "But all you achieved was to transfer it from flesh to minds. Bodies can be quartered. Minds cannot."

"Thoughts can be guided," he said. "With stories. With warnings."

"With fear," added the shadow.

"You will tell your story," I said. "In your halls, with your candles, your seals. You will say you saved the country. And outside, in taverns and barns, other stories will be told. About a man on a cart who didn't beg. About a belly that was cut open because those in power were afraid of one word: 'No.' And in the minds of children, it will be decided which story will live longer."

The writer looked at me for a long time. Long enough for me to realize how much he wished I was wrong.

"You really believe," he said quietly, "that this... man will become something you call freedom?"

The shadow answered before I could open my mouth. "It's already happened," it said in my head. "You were there. In the mud, in the dungeon, at the cart. What do you think is burning inside you when you can't sleep at night?"

I looked at the clerk. "I believe," I said, "that you got his flesh. Nothing more."

He didn't write down that sentence. He put down his pen as if it had suddenly become heavy.

"The conversation is over," he said. Not sharply, just tiredly.

As I went out, I saw Murn waiting in the corridor, pale, with those eyes that hadn't been quite still since the candle rooms. Behind him was Fergus, clenching his teeth as if they were the last thing no one could break from him.

Tam stood outside in the yard and lit a pipe. The smoke smelled sharp, familiar. He blew it out and looked at me.

"And?" he asked.

"They think they've won," I said.

"Didn't they?" he asked in return.

"Body, yes," I said. "In the rest, they've just set themselves on fire."

The shadow nodded slowly, content as a cat with blood on its paws – not because it had killed an animal, but because it had seen an entire house go up in flames.

Life in Stirling resumed. Markets. Shouts. Blacksmiths. Children's laughter, too bright to sound right. The castle did what castles do: it stood.

But beneath it all was something that no longer pretended to be asleep. In the glances, in the half-finished sentences, in the drawings in the dirt.

They had taught us how far they were willing to go to maintain their order. And they had inadvertently shown us that while a body may be fit for torture, a heart that once beat for freedom cannot be compressed back to the size of a council protocol.

Even though it was in my chest, and no longer in his.

The days that followed lay piled on top of each other like dirty blankets no one wanted to shake out. You know something's rotting underneath, but you pretend it's just the normal stench of the camp. The castle played "everyday life," the town rehearsed the role of the somewhat calmed crowd, and we played the men who didn't see any of it again every night when they closed their eyes.

The first official order that came after the cart was not "Silence" or "Pray" or "Forget what you saw." It was: "More eyes on the streets." They wanted no songs, no whispered words by the well, no stories that might taint their clear judgment. So they sent us out, in groups, two by two, four by four, with open swords or just our coats as a threat.

"We're walking ear-washing spoons now," said Fergus, as we trudged through an alley that smelled of piss and cabbage. "If someone belches too loudly, they'll write them up as a rebel."

"At least they're noticing that something's amiss," the priest murmured. "It would be worse if they didn't realize at all that their foundations were shaking."

I was running with Tam, in front. Not because I wanted to lead, but rather because I couldn't run behind someone else without feeling like I was stepping into a pit they hadn't seen before.

The same mix at every corner: eyes that look away too quickly when you meet them. Mouths that tear open. Hands that suddenly find something to do, kneading dough, lifting barrels, sorting yarn. Life acted as if it would go on – but it stumbled.

We passed one of the city gates. Where previously only coats of arms and perhaps a few hanged thieves had hung, there was now a new "mark." They had attached one of its parts there. I didn't have to think about which one. You can tell the weight of a torso even if they've left it in the sun for too long.

"Don't look," said the sergeant when we first had to pass by it.

I glanced over. Just briefly, out of the corner of my eye. Enough to know that the cloth they had wrapped him in was no longer able to mask the smell. Flies, dark stains, the usual scene. For the travelers, it was a sign: "Think before you speak." For the people of Stirling, it was a reminder: "He was here. You saw him. And you did nothing."

"They want everyone who comes to meet him first," said the shadow. "Not the market, not the blacksmith, not the children. Him. Or what's left of him."

We kept going. What else could you do? You can't fight a dead man, and you can't cut the ropes without ending up on top yourself. So you walk. All you remember is how the air tastes different at that gate.

That evening a messenger brought news from another city. A crumpled parchment, which was read aloud in the officers' tent while we crouched outside like dogs who understand the sounds but not the words.

"They took his head south," the sergeant said later by the fire, after they had gotten him to reveal what was written in it. "Far away. There, where they believe it's easier to see how much they love the law."

"Southward," repeated the shadow. "Of course. The closer to the king, the more brilliantly the rope must shine."

Tam stared into his bowl, in which something was floating that should have been called soup. "Why not here?" he asked.

"Because they don't believe us," said the priest. "They don't believe that we up here have enough reverence for what they understand by an order. In their minds, we're still peasants with swords. We have to show them: This is what it's like when the right hand strikes."

"Perhaps they don't want to see him every day," Murn said. "They saw him once. Up close. From the front row. And that was enough for them."

I thought about the cart, the place, his body on the board, what they had done to him afterward. "They want him far away," I said. "But they forget that the journey isn't the problem. The problem is that too many people saw that cart. You can send a head. You can't send pictures."

The shadow nodded. "Body for her," he said. "Heart for you. That's how it works."

A few days later, they sent us back to the castle. Not all of us, just a few at a time, at intervals, so it would look like routine, not like a new pressure. The scribe waited, as always. He looked worse. The skin under his eyes was thin and blue, his hands tighter around the pen than before.

“There are reports,” he began, “that stories are spreading in the taverns. About the cart. About what happened afterwards. About you.”

"About us?" I asked.

“Men love to name names,” he said. “‘I was standing next to him.’ ‘I was two rows behind him.’ ‘I saw him...’” He made a vague hand gesture. “Popular vanity. They want to see their own feet in history.”

“And what bothers you about that?” I asked. “You want them to say: ‘I saw justice being carried out.’”

“I want,” he said slowly, “they to tell the same story we write down. Not ten different ones where he ends up looking like a saint we slaughtered.”

The shadow grinned crookedly. "Spoiler alert: That's exactly what you did," he muttered.

“You’re exaggerating,” the writer continued. “You say he laughed when you tied him up. That he spat in your faces. That with his last words he blessed the people. You were there. You know that’s not true.”

I thought of that day, of his soft voice, of the lack of a hero's roar. "He didn't laugh," I said. "He didn't bless you. He looked you in the eye. That's enough."

“But they tell it differently,” said the writer. “And if a lie is repeated often enough, it becomes the truth. You must help to correct that.”

"How?" I asked. "Am I supposed to go into every tavern and say, 'Excuse me, he wasn't as great as you say. He didn't fart so loudly the walls shook when the rope tightened'?"

"You're not funny," replied the writer.

"You're not honest," I thought.

“We need men like you,” he said, “who say: ‘I was there. That’s how it was. Nothing more, nothing less.’ Without embellishment. Without heroic music.”

I could have laughed. Of all people, those who distort the world with candlelight and parchment suddenly wanted sober witnesses.

"And which version do you want to hear?" I asked. "The one where he wept and begged for forgiveness? Or the one where he accepted everything without complaint and you looked magnanimous? You can choose one, and I'll tell you right now: That's not how it was."

The writer massaged the bridge of his nose. "You're not making it easy for us," he said.

"Neither can you nor us," said the shadow.

“You can talk to your comrades, to the men you lead,” the writer continued. “You can tell them that it was necessary. That it was right. That we saved lives.”

"And what if I don't believe it?" I asked.

He looked at me sharply. "Then you are dangerous," he said. "Not because you carry a sword, but because you talk. Or remain silent when you should speak."

That was the point: they didn't just want our bodies, our services, our boots on their streets. They wanted our tongues. Not to speak the truth, but to infuse our voices with what they called "order".

"I won't lie," I said. "If anyone asks me what it was like, I'll tell them what I saw. No hero, no worm. A man who stood up. A body you slaughtered. And a crowd who watched. If that's not enough for you—tough luck."

The writer met my gaze. For a moment, something within him seemed to struggle, a remnant of something that didn't belong in books. Then he shut down inwardly.

"You are free," he said. "For today."

"Free," I thought as I left the room. The word had a taste like cold ashes.

In the courtyard I saw Aidan. He was being led out of another room, looking pale, with that thin layer of sweat you get when someone has asked you questions that come too close to your own limit.

"And?" I asked.

He shrugged. "They wanted to know if I thought he was a hero," he said. "I said heroes die on the field, not on boards. They liked that. Then they wanted to know if I thought he was a traitor. I said traitors run away, he stayed put. They liked that less."

Tam stepped forward. "They're trying to fill the hole with your words," he said.

"Which hole?" Aidan asked.

"That gaping hole in their own stomachs since they realized they may have killed a man who had more backbone than their entire council put together," Tam said.

The shadow whistled softly. "He's slowing down," he said. "You're contagious."

The tavern was packed that evening. More crowded than usual. The cart had made them thirstier. Iona pushed jugs, wiped tables, took payments, all with a face that tried to be neutral but didn't quite manage it.

We sat in the corner, the five of us. Beer, bread, a little lard. The conversations around us sloshed around like a dirty broth. About prices, about women, about the weather – and always underneath, like a deep, dark current: "I was there." "Did you see how..." "They say he..."

At a nearby table, someone was saying aloud: "...and then he cursed them all! With such a voice, brother, I tell you, even the ravens flew from the roof! He shouted that Scotland would break its chains and that our grandchildren..."

His friend nodded eagerly. "Yeah, I heard. My cousin was standing right at the front, next to the scaffolding. He says he even laughed when they came with the knives."

The shadow groaned. "And there they are, the beautiful, brand-new lies," he said. "Thicker than the smoke hanging here."

Iona placed jugs in front of us without asking if we wanted more. "Did you hear that?" I asked, nodding towards the table.

"I hear everything," she said. "For two days now. Everyone claimed to be standing next to him. In reality, most of them were standing three rows back, hoping no one would recognize them."

"So?" asked the priest, who was sitting with us in the corner, his hands around his cup as if he were praying. "Does it bother you?"

She thought for a moment. "Yes," she said. "Because they lie. And no, because at least they lie instead of saying, 'I didn't care.' If someone fabricates a better version of what they saw, it means the truth bothers them inside."

I had to admit: she had a point.

"What do you tell them when someone asks you?" I asked her.

"I'm saying that I was working," she said. "That I saw from here how you went out with him, and later back in. That I saw how some came back as if they had left a piece of themselves behind. And that I saw how you drank in the evening as if you were sick with nausea."

She looked at me, directly. "And what do you say?" she asked.

The shadow grinned. "Come on," he whispered. "The world is waiting for your dirty truth."

I took a large gulp, held the beer in my mouth for a moment before swallowing. It tasted of old wood and accusations.

"I'm saying," I said, "that I walked alongside the cart and watched. That I saw how they turned a man into meat. And that I saw how the crowd decided whether it wanted to remain human beings or already be an audience."

"And him?" asked Iona. "The one up there."

I thought of his face, which no longer quite seemed to fit his body, of the way he had stood, of his voice, which had been neither loud nor small.

"He did what he could," I said. "No one can do more."

It wasn't a heroic statement. It was simply the truth.

Later, when we reached the camp again and night fell, I felt both lighter and heavier at the same time. Lighter because I had said it. Heavier because I knew that what burned inside me wouldn't simply die down just because I had washed my feet.

The shadow sat down next to my camp as usual. "You know you're already much too far in," he said.

"In what?", I thought.

"In this shitty thing that the others call 'freedom,'" he said. "You saw them, you had to smell them, you were there when they tried to cut them out of a body with knives. And now you sit here talking about hearts and stories. You can't go back to the guy who just wants his ration, his pay, and his peace. He rode along with him on the cart."

I knew he was right. And I hated him for it.

The castle slept, or pretended to. The city breathed. Somewhere a drunkard wailed, somewhere someone made love loudly, somewhere a baby cried, unaware of the theater into which it had been born.

In my mind, the cart was still rolling. No longer through Stirling. Through everything. Through me. Through what lay before me, without my being able to see it.

They had used his body for their torture. But the heart that had refused to say "yes" hadn't died with him. It had divided itself. Into glances, into sentences, into fists, into drawings in the dirt.

And somehow, without me having signed for it, a piece of it had ended up in my chest.

There are days when you realize something inside you has shifted, without anyone having punched you in the gut. No bang, no scream, no broken bone. Just that moment when you do something you never would have done before – and you catch yourself not even feeling guilty about it.

For me, it started with a no that I hadn't even spoken. It was simply there. In my hands, in my feet, in the path they had taken before my mind followed.

It was two or three days after the incident with the head in the south and the torsos at the gates. The morning was damp, but not determined enough to be proper rain. That revolting Scottish grayness that makes you wonder whether to pull up your hood or just forget about the whole day. We were stationed near one of the smaller gates, the one the farmers from the surrounding villages come through when they're too late to pretend to be city folk.

The body part hung there, framed by stone like an ugly coat of arms. The wind had flattened the smell, but not improved it. Flies had long since decided that the war was won for them. Two of us stood directly below, supposed to "watch over the people," as if we had to teach them how to look up.

A few children had positioned themselves at a safe distance, precisely where their mothers thought they could "only half" see. Children always see everything. The youngest of them, a bright little thing with pigtails and eyes that learned far too quickly, announced to the group: "That's the one they'll sing about."

Her mother grabbed her arm roughly. "Don't talk such nonsense," she hissed. "He's a traitor. If you say his name, they'll come and hang you."

The girl didn't look at me. She looked at the torso, the rags, the bones. "If he were only a traitor," she said, "why did they cut him into pieces? You bury a dog whole."

The shadow in my head laughed dryly. "The little ones understand it faster than those with cards," he said.

"Move along!" shouted one of the guards standing closer, pretending he was only concerned about the traffic. In truth, he was concerned about sentences that shouldn't be uttered. The people obeyed. Footsteps, eyes averted, mouths closed. But I realized that the child's words were like small stones stuck in their boots.

Later, when we changed positions, the sergeant came over to me. He had that look on his face that men have when they have to say something unpleasant and are already tired of it having to be said at all.

"From above," he grumbled. "We're supposed to pay more attention to what's said around us. There are complaints that we let too much slide. Songs, sayings, drawings. Especially from the children."

"The children are not the problem," I said.

"For them, yes," the sergeant replied. "They believe you can kill an idea by silencing it. They've never had an idea in their minds."

He looked at me for a moment too long, as if considering whether to add something. And then he did. "And you?" he asked. "What do you think?"

"I believe," I said, "that you can cut a man into pieces, as finely as you like – if one of them remembers his name, you have gained nothing."

A brief flash in his eyes. "You speak slowly, like someone who overthinks things," he muttered. "Be careful with that. Overthinking has killed more people around here than swords."

"Says the right one," said the shadow.

In the afternoon, they called us back to the tavern. Not on business, of course—officially, we had the day off. When a man like me has the day off, he doesn't end up praying in the woods or with a woman who loves him. He ends up at a wobbly table, with a mug that's never full enough, listening to others gloss over the day's misfortunes.

The "Crooked Crown" was packed beyond belief. Men in shabby clothes, women with tired arms, three soldiers from another unit laughing too loudly to actually be having fun. The air was stagnant, thick with smoke and stories. I sat down in the corner with Tam and Fergus. Murn arrived later, as if he'd been fighting with his own thoughts.

At a table in the middle stood someone who had clearly decided that today was his day. Someone I recognized – a businessman, neither one of the very rich nor one of the very poor. Right in between. Exactly the kind who's most afraid of falling.

"I tell you," he cried, arms outstretched, cup in hand, "I was standing almost directly underneath them when they tightened the rope! And do you know what he shouted? He roared, 'You can tear my body apart, but my heart belongs to Scotland!' That's what he said! I swear by all the saints!"

The shadow groaned. "He didn't say that," he said. "That's far too clean for a real neck with a rope."

The men around him laughed and toasted, one patted him on the back, another exclaimed "That's right!" as if he had personally helped formulate it.

I felt a twitch in the back of my neck. Not anger in that sense, more like the kind of itch you get when you see someone standing over a corpse and starting to redecorate it.

"Leave it," Tam said quietly. "What's the point? They want their heroes like that. So they can feel better about themselves: big man, big last words, then they can sleep better."

The salesman went around in circles again. "And then," he continued, "they slashed open his stomach, but he laughed! He just laughed! I heard it!"

I put my cup down. A bit too hard. Beer spilled over the edge, dripping onto the table. Iona shot me a look from the bar that said: "Not here. Not another fight in the bar."

I got up anyway.

"Now it's coming," sighed the shadow. "The heart-for-freedom moment."

I walked to the table, letting my boots audibly land on the floorboards. The salesman didn't notice me until I was standing next to him. He looked up, his face red from beer and his own sense of importance.

"So you were almost right next to it," I said calmly. "By the rope."

He grinned broadly. "Yes, soldier. I was close enough to smell his breath."

"Then you had a better seat than me," I said. "And I was in the front row."

His grin slipped away slightly. "What do you want to say?" he asked.

The others at the table fell silent. The whole tavern remained silent, but the noise subsided, as if someone had lifted a piece of the ceiling.

"What I want to say," I began, "is that he didn't scream what you just described. He didn't roar that his heart belonged to Scotland. He didn't laugh when they ran over him. He spoke, yes. He told them to their faces that they were hiding behind their laws. He didn't beg. He didn't whimper. But he didn't put on the show you're putting on here."

The salesman put his hand on his hip. "Maybe I heard better than you did," he said defiantly. "Maybe you just don't want to admit that he was more of a man than you'll ever be."

That was more effective than any knife. Not because he was right – but because I knew he'd found a sore spot without realizing how deep he'd gone.

“Listen,” I said, my voice suddenly much quieter than I'd thought. “You need your heroes with grand last words? Fine. Then make some up for yourself. But leave him alone. It's enough that he stood up when they tried to break him. It's enough that he didn't try to grovel at the last minute. You don't need to put any more theatrics in his mouth just to make your beer go down easier.”

The men around him were mostly looking at the table or into their mugs. The guy couldn't hold my gaze for even a heartbeat.

"It doesn't matter exactly what he said," someone muttered from the back. "The main thing is that the story is roughly true."

“That's precisely the problem,” the priest said suddenly. I have no idea how he'd gotten so close to us without me noticing. He put down his cup and stepped beside me. “The sickness of this country is all about approximation. Approximately courageous, approximately just, approximately honest. In the end, everything is just approximate—and no one knows anymore exactly where the mess started.”

“You clergymen,” snarled the businessman, “it's easy for you to talk. You're never hanging from ropes.”

“Not physically,” said the priest. “Inside, yes. Believe me.”

It could have turned ugly. Four men with too much beer and wounded pride, two of us who'd already seen too much. I saw Tam's hand subtly move towards the knife, not to stab, just to make sure he had one.

Then Iona intervened. She was small, but her voice had a certain something that cut through everything. “Enough,” she said. “You all want to have your say, but none of you scrubbed the yard yesterday. I had the blood scraped out of the cracks. Believe me, I don't give a damn whether he made a joke while he was dying or not. The filth was the same.”

A few people laughed awkwardly. One muttered, “It's okay, Iona.” The salesman's shoulders slumped slightly.

“Maybe,” he said meekly, “people just want to believe that someone was standing there who...” He searched for a word. Couldn't find one. “...who was bigger than us.”

“He was,” I said. “But not in the way you're lying to yourself.”

He raised the cup to his lips, drank too quickly, almost choking. Then he shrugged, as if trying to get rid of the whole scene like a flea in a shirt. “It's okay,” he muttered. “You were closer. So it was different.”

I went back to our corner. Tam looked at me, a mixture of approval and anger.

"You'll soon be picking fights with everyone," he said.

"Maybe," I said.

"You have to be careful," the priest interjected. "Those in power know how to handle heroes. And martyrs, too. What they absolutely can't stand are men who pretend to be just soldiers – and then start trying to falsify history."

The shadow nodded. "The old man is right," he said. "You become more dangerous to them the more you only speak the truth and don't sing songs."

"I'm not singing," I thought. "I'm just describing what I see."

"Exactly," said the shadow. "And that's their problem."

Later, back at camp, as day finally gave way to night, I sat in front of my tent and looked at my hands. Calloused, scarred, with a few dried bloodstains that no longer knew whose they had belonged to.

"Bodies for torture," I thought. "They hacked his skin, his bones, his organs to pieces and scattered them across the land. But they used my hands, my feet, my eyes as tools. And I let them use them."

"You couldn't help it," said Tam, who had sat down next to me without me noticing.

"Yes," I said. "But not without dying. And I wasn't there yet."

He laughed briefly, bitterly. "Freedom is always expensive, say those who don't have to pay for it."

"You did something in the tavern today that would have cost someone else their teeth," said the priest, who was also squatting nearby as if the evening were too short to tell us apart. "You ruined a man's heroic song. Do you know what that means?"

"That I'm ruining the innkeeper's business?" I asked.

"That you've started to draw a divide between what happened and what's being made of it," he said. "That's more dangerous than any sword. For her."

The shadow moved closer. "He wants to tell you," he whispered, "that you are now officially infected. Heart-for-Freedom disease. Deadly, but slow."

I lay down eventually. Sleep was no longer reliable. It came like a dog that doesn't want to be called: when it felt like it, it would sit on you, and then just as suddenly be gone again.

That night I didn't dream of the execution. Not of chains, not of knives, not of carts. I dreamt of something else: a field we had crossed once before, when it was only about marching routes and provisions. Fog, damp, grass knee-deep.

In the dream, hearts lay scattered across the field. Real, bloody, beating hearts, just lying there on the grass. None of them inside a body, all free. Some beat fast, some slow, some barely at all. Men in armor walked among them, trampling them, pushing them aside with their boots,

shoveling dirt over them as if they were trash. And every time they crushed one, another one jumped higher somewhere else.

"That's him," said the shadow in my dream, standing beside me and grinning. "The man they hacked to pieces. That's him, scattered in heads, in stomachs, in fists. You won't find him on a rope anymore. You'll find him wherever someone suddenly realizes that 'no' is still a word."

I woke up with a heartbeat that felt like it was about to burst my ribs. It was dark in the tent, with only a little gray light from outside. Someone was snoring. Someone was muttering. Someone was crying softly, probably in their sleep.

I placed my hand on my chest. It was beating. Not fast, not slow. Just there. A stubborn bastard of a heart that refused to simply pump blood.

"Bodies for torture," I thought. "Yes. They got them. But what's inside doesn't belong to them."

The shadow smiled wearily. "And that," he said, "will be a problem. For everyone."

Outside, the town quietly began to stir. Merchants repaired their carts, women fetched water, dogs checked for any leftover food overnight. Stirling acted as if it were just another town.

I knew better. I had seen what lay beneath the cobblestones when you lifted them. Blood. Stories. Hearts that no one can truly break.

They had taught us how far they would go to maintain their order. They had sacrificed a body to demonstrate their power. And inadvertently, they had shown us where their fear resided.

My body still belonged to them. For the moment. For pay. For orders. For the March paths that were yet to come.

But my heart had found a new home elsewhere. In a valley, in mud, on a cart, in a sentence I couldn't get out of my head: "He did what he could."

Perhaps the day would come when I could say the same about myself. Perhaps not. But I knew: when it came, it wouldn't be by candlelight in a council meeting.

It will take place somewhere on cobblestones where Scotland vomits.

Scotland vomited blood onto cobblestones

It didn't start with a battle. Battles are cleaner. You have flags, drums, orders, a beginning, an end, a winner, a loser. This was different. Slowly. Like a stomach that first just rumbles, then starts to feel heavy, then suddenly sends up everything it can no longer hold.

Winter hadn't really turned out to be winter. Too much rain, too little snow, too much mud, too little beauty. Scotland looked like a dog that had been kicked too often: tough but tired, with a coat that must once have gleamed before someone had trained it to crave hunger. The

roads were mud, the fields lay dormant, the castles pretended to sleep, but their eyes were open.

After Wallace's cart and the scattered pieces of his body, they could have left it at that if they'd been wiser. They could have said, "It's over," and gone back to their land registers, their wine casks, their tournaments. Instead, they were afraid. Fear is like bad whiskey—it makes people louder, dumber, and far more dangerous than they ever would be sober.

The first lists emerged quietly. Men, women, villages "known" for having helped him. A loaf of bread here, a hiding place there, a timely warning. Things you do if you want to be able to look yourself in the mirror without shirking responsibility. Now these small acts were blown out of proportion, suddenly labeled "supporting a traitor."

"They used to call it neighborliness," the shadow murmured as the sergeant read us the new orders. "Now it's a crime."

"We will go to the surrounding villages," the sergeant said, his voice harder than usual, but not proud. "We are to show our presence. Ask questions. Check names. No unilateral actions, no unnecessary harshness. Official interrogations, that's what it says here." He waved the parchment as if it were getting his hands dirty.

"What does that mean in a language that doesn't reek of sealing wax?" Fergus asked from behind.

The sergeant looked at him for a long time, then said: "The idea is that we go out and make sure they don't turn us into monsters, while we pretend to be orderly."

We set off at dusk. A handful of men, tired horses, cold breath in the air. Stirling lay behind us like a block of stone and guilt. Ahead of us were hills, fields, a few bare trees, villages huddled in valleys as if they could thereby absolve themselves of responsibility.

I knew the first village. Too well. There had been the barn, that last refuge, that damp, cold hole where we had slept while Wallace sat somewhere between the beams, as if listening to the nails. The people there had given us bread, not much, but enough so that we wouldn't listen to our own stomachs instead of orders.

This time they saw us coming. The doors weren't open like last time, but ajar, half-closed. The shutters were only slightly open. The dogs didn't even bark, as if they'd been scolded beforehand.

The village elder, a man with a beard like old straw, approached us. He held his back straight, but his hands trembled slightly. Not from the cold. From what he saw in our coats.

"We come on behalf of the council," said the sergeant.

"Of course," said the old man. "You never come in the name of the weather."

A few men in the background chuckled dryly, but quickly fell silent. That was the tone now: jokes that no one laughs to the end.

“You gave shelter to a wanted man,” the sergeant began, reading from the text the clerk had handed him. “You provided for him, giving him the opportunity to continue his plans against the crown and the established order.”

The old man looked first at the sergeant, then at us. His gaze lingered briefly on me. I knew he recognized me. Not as a friend, not as an enemy – as someone who had looked different last time.

“We gave bread to men,” he said. “Tired, dirty, smelly men. I knew that one of them had a name that frightened you. I didn’t know that you once used it as your own and now pretend he was never more than dirt.”

"They're holding your hospitality to your head as a weapon," said the shadow. "Politely, with official ink."

“We are not here to argue,” the sergeant said. “We need names. Who helped him? Who saw him? Who told others to support him?”

The people behind the old man grew quieter. A woman pulled her scarf tighter, a boy took a step back, another clenched his fists as if he had just understood why his mother had told him to keep his mouth shut.

"You were there last time," the old man said to me. "You sat at my table. Have you returned with a different heart?"

The sergeant gave me a look that said, "Shut your mouth."

The problem was: My heart had actually changed. Not in the way they needed it to.

“We have our mission,” I said. “And you have your people.”

The old man nodded. "That's what I thought," he said. "Very well. I'll give you a name."

That suddenly made the men behind me stand at attention. A name. That was exactly what they wanted to hear. One they could pin everything to. One they could use like a nail to tie a rope to.

“Scotland,” said the old man.

There wasn't a single heartbeat of silence. Longer. "What?" growled one of the younger ones among us, who had no patience for subtleties.

The old man spread his hands wide. “You want to know who gave him bread? Scotland. Who offered him a bed? Scotland. Who hid him when you came with ropes and parchment? Scotland. Why do you think he came this far in the first place?”

The shadow applauded inwardly. "The old man has more courage than many with a sword," he said.

The sergeant closed his eyes briefly, as if he had a headache. "Old men with sayings won't get us anywhere," he said wearily. "We need concrete information."

"You'll get what I have," said the old man. "And what I have is a country that you're currently cutting into small, bloody pieces because you claim it would otherwise be too big for your ropes."

A few of our men grew restless. One nervously tugged at his belt, another fiddled with the hilt of his sword, as if reassuring himself that he was still there. Words can be more dangerous than arrows when they find their mark.

"We're going door to door," the sergeant said tersely. "Asking questions. If we later find out you lied, there will be consequences."

"Consequences," the shadow repeated. "The new word for 'We'll do the same shit to you as we did to him, only not so nicely in public.'"

House after house. Questions, glances, silence. A woman who claimed she had only cooked soup, without knowing who was eating it. An old man who confessed he had slipped a piece of bread to a "traveling pilgrim" but never asked his name. A boy who became nervous when Murn looked at him, and then burst into tears because months ago he had seen a figure with a sword somewhere at the edge of the woods and now believed that this was already treason.

Stirling may have been the place where his body was scattered, but out here in the villages, the country was vomiting. Not in one great torrent, but in small, revolting gags. A man disappeared. A farm burned down "for disobedience." A girl who had supposedly "spoken too loudly of freedom" and was suddenly in another town with relatives—or in the river. No one asked too many questions.

Back in Stirling, we saw the other side. There, where the English dried their boots, where merchants parked their wagons, where the lords commuted between the castle and the tavern. The cobblestones in the main streets had been scrubbed clean. Water, brooms, sand. Hardly a trace of the blood from the cart day remained. Only in a few places was the stoneware darker, as if it had decided to leave a trail of shadow.

"They believe that if they clean the stones, the ground will forget what has been walked on," said the priest.

But the city wasn't as stupid as they pretended. In the side streets, the resentment was more evident. There, where the rain didn't wash everything away, where manure, garbage, and gossip converged. Twice I saw two men attacking each other, not a big fight, nothing with flags or slogans. Just raw rage that needed an outlet. The first time, it was supposedly over a fish bucket. The second time, over a woman. Both lies. It was about the fact that they had nowhere else to go without the castle biting back.

One evening, when the air was heavy with smoke from the campfires, we strolled through one of the narrower alleyways. Just routine, they said. Checking to see if there's any commotion. Commotion is everywhere. You just have to learn what kind.

I first saw it in a passageway between two houses. A stain on the ground, darker than the rest. Not fresh, but not old enough to be insignificant. Blood. Not much, no battle, no major fight. But the way it had run spoke a language no writer likes. No stream, no spurt. Just that viscous, insidious run when someone's lying on the ground and no one gets there fast enough.

On the wall next to it, someone had scratched something. Not deeply, but deliberately: a rough outline of a man with a rope, and underneath it a word. SCHOTT. The rest of the letters were missing. Either someone had interrupted him, or he had realized that it was pointless to try and condense the country into five letters.

"Look," said the shadow. "Someone else is throwing up too. Not just you."

Tam kicked something. A cracked clay pot, a piece of fabric, half a shoe. A dog came around the corner, sniffed at the spot, wrinkled its nose, and walked away. Even animals know when something smells not just of death, but of something else—of deep-seated fear.

"What happened here?" the sergeant asked a woman who was standing in a doorway, pretending to unravel wool.

"Nothing," she said too quickly.

"Nothing leaves no stain," said the sergeant. "Who?"

She looked down, then up again, then past us. "A man," she said. "He was talking too much. About the cart, about what you all did. One of yours told him to shut up. He didn't. Then he was lying there."

I felt my stomach twitch briefly. "One of ours," I repeated.

"With your cloak," she said. "With your sword. With the way you look."

The sergeant pressed his lips together. "Name?" he asked.

She shook her head. "They all have names," she said. "But you already have enough per page. If I give you any more, you won't know who's on which page."

The shadow laughed dryly. "That woman belongs on the list of people you'd rather not listen to," he said.

We continued walking, but I couldn't get the stain out of my mind. It was smaller than what I had seen in the square. No officially spilled blood, no divisible corpse. Just a man who had talked too much about something the castle prefers to commit to paper, not to words.

"Scotland is vomiting," I thought. "But not in one go. In small, bitter spurts. Here a village, there an alley, there a stain, there a story that sticks half in your throat."

Last night I dreamt of cobblestones. Not of people, not of carts. Just stones. Endless rows, wet, cold. Between them, in the cracks, something dark collected, something that wouldn't wash away. Every time water ran over it, it only spread. And somewhere I heard a choking sound, as if the earth itself could no longer bear what had been forced down its throat.

The shadow stood in the dream on one of these stones, smoking a pipe that had never existed. "Well, you bastard," he said, "now you see what you're carrying under your boots? This isn't just your filth. This is Scotland. And Scotland has started vomiting back."

I woke up with a dry mouth and the taste of smoke and metal. It was still dark outside, but you could already hear the castle sorting out its sounds: changing of the guard, a creaking gate, and somewhere a rooster that hadn't grasped it lived in a city.

I sat down, rubbed my face, felt my rough chin, the lines etched in by the last few months. I thought of Wallace, the barn, the cart, the square, the torso by the city gate, the stain in the alley.

"They wanted to draw a clear line," I thought. "Order here, unrest there. Instead, they drew a line, and the whole country is starting to bleed on both sides."

The shadow yawned. "Well," he said. "Welcome to the great vomit. Tighten your boots, bastard. The cobblestones are getting slippery."

The next morning smelled of cold smoke and wet wool. Stirling was breathing heavily, as if the town had a hangover from a drinking binge where no one had enjoyed themselves. The birds were there, but they weren't singing properly, more of a lost squawk, as if they were trying to remember how the song actually went.

In the courtyard, a group of recruits wrestled with wooden swords and their own feet. An instructor yelled at them as if volume were a virtue. The sergeant stood at the side, arms folded, watching them. He seemed to see something different. Perhaps the next blood on the next pavement.

We received new instructions. This time they weren't on clean parchment, but in the tone of the officer's voice as he read them. That tone that pretends everything is normal, yet you can tell how much he hates every single sentence.

"There is increasing unrest," he said. "People are talking. In taverns, at fountains, in the alleys. They are singing songs we haven't authorized. They are drawing things on our walls that don't belong there. The council wants us to take more decisive action. Anyone who incites unrest will be arrested. Anyone who repeatedly causes trouble will be convicted. Anyone who refuses to obey orders will be treated as an enemy."

"As an enemy," the shadow repeated. "No longer a 'subject.' No longer a 'citizen.' Enemy. It happens quickly once they start to slip."

"We are not thugs," the officer added hastily, as if someone had put the words in his mouth. "We are law enforcement. This is not a hunt for our own people. It is about maintaining peace."

I almost laughed in his face. Peace. A beautiful word for a room where no one shouts anymore because everyone has seen the noose around their neighbor's neck.

Tam whispered beside me: "Whenever they start telling you what you are not, you know what you have to do next."

The day was a dreary, gray cough. We walked routes I could have found with my eyes closed. Main streets, side alleys, squares where vendors set up their stalls. Everywhere the same scene: people trying to blend in, and in doing so, succeeding. Men who wanted to laugh but

couldn't get their mouths open. Women who spoke faster as we passed, so we couldn't piece together their fragmented words.

We first heard it at a well whose rim was worn smooth by centuries of hands. Not loud, not clear, more a mixture of humming and indistinct words. A few women, two older men, a boy who pulled up a bucket and sang as he did so.

"He stood on the cart, no flag, no splendor, just a rope around his neck, and the knives in the wreath..."

One of the women immediately interrupted him, giving him a slap on the back of the head. "Watch what you sing," she hissed.

"I heard about it from someone," he mumbled. "It's just a song."

We came closer. The voices fell silent. Only the squelching of the bucket in the water remained.

"Good morning," I said, too politely to be honest.

A woman nodded curtly. "Soldier," she said, as if it were an illness.

"Beautiful melody," I said. "Where did you get it?"

"We don't sing," said one of the old men. "We're fetching water. Sometimes you hum while you're doing it. Otherwise, you forget you're thirsty."

The shadow grinned. "You're a bad liar," he said. "That's good. Bad lies betray your lack of practice."

"I've heard," I continued undeterred, "that new songs are circulating. About the cart. About what happened. About men who supposedly laughed as they died."

The woman grimaced as if she'd bitten into something she couldn't swallow. "Songs are the only thing no one can take away from us," she said. "Not yet."

Tam stepped forward slightly. "Some people talk nonsense," he said. "They make it bigger than it was. Or smaller. Whichever suits them better. We were there. We know how it really was. Do you want to hear the truth or continue lying in peace?"

The old woman looked at him sharply. "We know enough truth," she said. "We have seen strange shadows when the ropes were carried from the castle to the square. We know how the pavement smells when it isn't scrubbed quickly enough. Your version doesn't make it any better."

The boy looked at me. "Did he say anything?" he asked. "I mean... besides what they're saying in the tavern?"

I could have told him a fairy tale. A beautiful last line to go to bed with, believing that perhaps the world is more just than it seems. Instead, I said: "He told them to their faces that

they were hiding behind their laws. And then he confessed when they hanged him. No fuss. No begging."

The boy nodded slowly, as if he were overlaying two images in his mind and then aligning them. "That's enough," he said.

The woman looked at me. "And now?" she asked. "What do you want? To punish us for humming songs?"

I looked at the sergeant. He had remained silent throughout the entire conversation, observing. I saw his jaw grinding. Then he said, "We just want to know if anyone is trying to persuade you to do things that will put you in danger. Strangers. Men who travel from village to village, bringing stories, causing unrest."

The woman laughed briefly, harshly. "The only men who travel from village to village causing trouble are the ones wearing your coats," she said.

The shadow clapped softly. "That woman should be on the council," he murmured. "She'd set the room on fire."

I suppressed a grin. The sergeant sighed. "Take care," he simply said. "Not all of us listen before we strike."

We moved on. It had been more than nothing, less than something. A small knot in the great rope that encircled this country.

Later, at the market, Scotland vomited more visibly. Not literally, although plenty of people couldn't trust their stomachs anymore. It showed in the crush of bodies. In the prices that no one believed anymore. In the quick, sharp arguments over trifles. A woman shouted at a vendor because the grain was too expensive. A man berated another because his horse had supposedly come too close to his stall. A third threw a sack of potatoes on the ground, just like that, because he needed somewhere to put his hands.

The guards tried to intervene. Not just us. Other units, men who didn't know Stirling, who had only been stationed here because soldiers were needed somewhere who had no personal memories of Wallace. A stranger is easier to beat up.

Things escalated at a fish stall. A fat vendor, red-faced, smelled of herring and greed. A skinny customer whose eyes were lower than his wallet.

"You're cheating me!" shouted the thin man.

"I'm not cheating anyone!" the fat man yelled back. "Prices are high because the country's gone mad! Ask them!" He pointed at us.

"The country hasn't gone crazy," said the thin man. "Those at the top have, and we're paying for their fear with our stomachs!"

He shouldn't have said "fear." Fear is a word that becomes dangerous to people who think they don't have it. Two guards from the other unit grabbed him. Too hard. He broke free,

slammed into the stall, fish flew, the vendor shrieked. Someone laughed. Someone shouted, "Quiet now!"

A fish slapped against my boots. Wet, cold, dead. I looked up, saw faces that suddenly didn't know whether to laugh or run.

The guards rammed the thin man against a wall. One raised his fist, ready to strike. Then something happened that wasn't in the orders.

Another man—not one of us, not one of them, just some guy from the crowd—stepped forward, grabbed the guard's hand, and held it tight. "He was just talking," the man said. "Leave him alone."

The air suddenly became denser. So dense that you could have kneaded it with your hand.

"Stand back!" shouted one of the guards. "Or you come with us!"

"Then they'll just take another one," muttered the shadow. "What does it matter when the country's already in tatters?"

The man slowly released his hand, but he didn't step back. "You tore a man apart because he contradicted you," he said. "How many more will you tear apart before you realize you're running out of people?"

It happened so fast that it could later be described as an "accident." The security guard freed his hand, shoved the man, who fell and hit his head on the edge of the fish stall. A dull thud, then silence. Blood spread, dark, fast, finding its way between the cobblestones.

"There," said the shadow. "Another splash in the big stomach."

The crowd first retreated, then moved forward. That's how people are. They want to get away from the blood and closer, at the same time. One woman screamed, another grabbed the man who didn't stand up. The guards were now shouting all at once, one yelling for a healer, another brandishing his sword as if the air itself were the enemy.

The trader looked at the fish lying in blood and began to curse. Not at the man on the ground. At his merchandise. Scotland was vomiting, and the man only saw that his stall was ruined.

The sergeant was faster than us. He pushed his way through, crouched down, and bent over the man. He placed two fingers on his throat, withdrew them, and glanced up briefly. That was enough. Dead.

We formed a circle, partly to keep the crowd at a distance, partly to prevent them from seeing what they had already seen anyway. One of the other guards stood nearby, pale, with wide eyes. The one who had pushed.

"I... I didn't mean to..." he stammered.

"Nobody wanted him there," said the sergeant. "Nevertheless, he's lying there."

The shadow clutched its forehead. "See?" it said. "That's the vomiting I'm talking about. It's not just coming from above anymore. It's coming from all stomachs at once."

The crowd began to murmur. "Another one," someone whispered. "First the one at the gate, now this one."

"They're wiping us out one by one," said another. "One after the other. Not with rope, but with their fucking fists."

We removed the body. Not on a cart, not on a plank, just two men who grabbed it by the arms and legs and carried it into a side alley where it could be lifted onto a wagon. No priest, no lord, no trial. Just another stain on a city that couldn't take any more.

Later, at the camp, we received instructions on how to tell the story. "It was an accident," the officer said. "An unfortunate escalation. The man refused to follow instructions and resisted. The guard acted in self-defense."

"Was it like that?" asked Tam.

"That's how it will be in the documents," the officer said. "And documents outlive your memories."

The shadow began to laugh. A dry, broken laugh. "Not this time," he said. "Not with this bastard. He doesn't forget things that easily."

The tavern was unusually quiet that evening. The noise was muffled, as if through a cloth. People were talking, but more quietly, more quickly, as if afraid that words had become measurable.

Something new had appeared on the wall next to the door. A scratched line, not very deep, not very wide. A cart. Two wheels. A rough figure on it. Next to it, a small line that looked like a reclining body. And below it, three letters: BLU. The rest was missing. Interrupted again, too soon.

"Do you realize what's happening?" asked the shadow. "They can't get it out of their hands anymore. Carts, blood, rope. It's creeping into the walls, into the tables, into people's heads."

Iona placed beers in front of us, biting the inside of her cheek as she did so. "The guy from the market was already at the church this morning," she said. "His wife was there. She didn't scream. She just looked like someone had pulled the house out from under her."

"What do they say?" I asked.

"They say it was an accident," she replied. "They say no one is to blame. You know what that means: everyone is to blame."

The priest sipped from his cup as if trying to draw answers from it. "That's the real problem," he said. "They taught us that blood on stone only counts if a council recites a ruling beforehand. Anything else is collateral damage. But the stones don't know that. To them, all blood is equally wet."

I thought of the stain in the alley, the torso by the gate, the market. The way everything mingled. Wallace, the "traitor," the stranger in the alley, the man at the fish stall. Each with his own story, each with his own death, each with his own stain. And we, standing in between, with boots that connected it all.

"Scotland is vomiting blood on the cobblestones," I thought. "Not because it enjoys it. Because the lies are sitting in its stomach."

The shadow placed an invisible hand on the back of my neck. "Eventually," he said, "someone will slip. Not just any farmer. One of those up there. And then they'll realize how slippery what they're standing on has become."

I drank. Not because I was thirsty. Because I needed something to replace the metallic taste in my mouth. It didn't work.

Outside, the city went on. Carts, voices, a few drunken songs, children laughing too loudly, just to see if they'd get arrested. Everywhere there was stone, there were cracks. And in those cracks, something began that was bigger than ropes and seals.

They had placed heads on the gates as a sign. They had hung torsos on walls as a warning. They had dropped men into alleyways as accidents. They had let blood run down guards' boots as collateral damage.

In the end, it was all the same: Scotland, which could no longer swallow everything.

And there I stood in the middle, with a coat that no longer just smelled of a soldier, but of aiding and abetting.

"It's only vomiting for now," said the shadow. "Wait until it starts biting."

There was that one hour between night and morning when Stirling sounded as if the town were briefly dead. No market cries, no hammering, no drunken shouts, no orders. Only the crackling of wood in the wind, a dog in the distance, now and then a latecomer returning home, believing himself to be quieter than he was. In that hour you hear more truth than in all the speeches of the lords combined.

I was sitting at the edge of the courtyard at that very hour, my coat wrapped tightly around me, my back against the cold stone. The others were snoring somewhere in their tents, or lying awake staring at blankets, just as I had done the previous nights. Today, I felt compelled to stay outside. Perhaps because I wanted to see the sky. Perhaps because I wanted to hear if Scotland was still choking.

The shadow crouched beside me, knees drawn up as if it were just as cold as I was. "Do you hear it?" it asked.

"What?", I thought.

"The swallowing," he said. "They try to push it down. Everything. Pictures, songs, stains, screams. But at some point, nothing else fits."

I listened. The castle seemed quiet. But behind the silence was this low rumble. Not a sound you could hear. More the sum of everything that had entered its walls in recent weeks. Shouts, prayers, laughter that didn't belong. It stayed inside, like smoke in a poorly drawn chimney.

"You're closer than most," said the shadow. "You've seen him in the mud, in the dungeon, on the cart, in the gossip. You know they couldn't bury him. Only get him under their skin."

The next day the order arrived, beginning like all others: neutral, factual, and clearly worded. And ending like almost all others: with dirt on our hands.

"There are reports," the officer said, "that groups are meeting in one of the districts near the lower gate. At night. They talk. They sing. One of them claimed they were swearing new oaths."

Tam murmured: "Perhaps they're swearing that they finally want some peace and quiet."

"We'll take a unit and have a look around," the officer continued. "No open confrontation if possible. Observe. Scatter. If necessary, make a few arrests so people realize we're not blind."

"You are just short-sighted," commented the shadow.

We set off at dusk. Eight men. Enough to make an impression, too few to start an open battle. The sergeant in front, me beside him, Tam, Murn, two of the boys who still believed you could get through this winter with a clean blade.

The quarter by the lower gate had always been a stomach that took in too much and retained too little. Small houses, crooked roofs, narrow alleyways, always carrying some kind of stench. Now it smelled stronger. Not of corpses, not of fire. Of fearful sweat and cheap hope. A mixture that hits you like bad liquor.

We stayed in the shade as best we could. The sergeant knew the way. He'd been walking the city longer than some of us had held a sword. He led us past a backyard, then through a narrow, half-bricked-up passage. On the other side was a sort of square—more of a widening of dirt and stone between three houses, with an old well that had long since ceased to do anything except collect stories.

There they were. Not many. Twenty perhaps. Men, two women, a few teenagers pretending to be older. They weren't standing in rows, not in formations. Just in a circle. No fire, just a few lanterns whose light wasn't enough to see everything clearly.

One man spoke. Not a preacher, not a lord, not a man in a special coat. An ordinary fellow, broad-shouldered, with hard hands, a face that had said "no" far too often before anyone dared to silence him.

"...and if they continue to pull our people out of the ranks," we heard him say, "if they continue to pretend that this is all just order, then we will stop nodding obediently. Then we will stop the carts before they roll out of the yard. Then we will be more than just spectators."

A murmur, deep, uncertain. No cheers. Approval that didn't yet know how loud it could become.

"That's it," whispered the shadow. "That's the next gag reflex."

"We should intervene," hissed one of the young soldiers behind me. "This is already an uprising."

The sergeant raised his hand. "Not yet," he murmured. "We'll observe first."

It was a strange thing to stand there, in the shadows, with sword and cloak and official mission, and to listen to someone who didn't need parchments to move people.

The man continued: "They showed us what they do to anyone who gets in their way. They hung the skin of the land before our gates, as if we were all just sheep to be scared and run home. But what happens when the sheep realizes it has teeth? What happens when the dog stops just barking?"

One of them laughed briefly, harshly. "Then they'll come with more ropes," he said.

"Then we need more knives," the spokesman replied. "Not for the king, not for the country. For us. For our children. For those who don't want to keep their mouths shut every time someone walks down the alley in a coat and accidentally pushes a man to death."

My stomach clenched briefly, as if someone had ripped it from the inside. The man from the fish stall was still too fresh.

"You are tired," said the shadow. "Tired of watching, tired of explaining, tired of whitewashing with words. And these ones are tired of bleeding."

One of the women stepped forward. She was neither old nor young, somewhere in between, with a face you could find in any marketplace. "And what do you want?" she asked the speaker. "Do you want us to end up like him? On boards? Hanging from ropes? Dismembered? Our children to one day squeeze past gates where their mothers are hanging?"

He looked at her for a long time. "I don't want them to have to say later, 'My mother saw everything and did nothing,'" he said.

The words resonated. Not just with her. With me too.

The sergeant next to me let out an audible sigh. "That's enough," he whispered. "If we wait any longer, we'll have the council breathing down our necks tomorrow."

We stepped out of the shadows. No heroic entrance, no dramatic steps. Just eight men who were suddenly no longer part of the darkness, but part of the problem.

A jolt ran through the group. Some whirled around, hands going to knives, sticks, empty fists. Others took a half step back, as if they had forgotten why they had come in the first place.

"You saw nothing," said the spokesman.

"Yes," said the sergeant. "We've seen a lot. More than we'd like."

He took a step forward, deliberately leaving the sword scabbarded. "What do you think you're doing here?" he asked.

The man didn't budge an inch. "Talking," he said. "And talking isn't forbidden yet. Or have you inflated the law even further in the meantime?"

A few people laughed nervously. I couldn't blame them. If you start arguing about words, you've already got the noose around your neck.

"You don't talk about prices or the weather," the sergeant said. "You talk about resistance. About knives. About stopping carts. You know what that means."

The man shrugged. "We know what it means if we don't do it," he said. "Then we just stand on the sidelines and watch them strap the next one on."

The woman next to him suddenly stood in such a way that she touched his arm. Not by much. Just a finger on his sleeve, as if she wanted to prevent him from staggering away.

The young soldier behind me whispered: "Should we grab them?"

The sergeant looked at the group. Faces: tired, angry, ragged. People who no longer knew whether to pray or curse. And us. Men marching through alleys at night to stop songs.

"We'll take those who talked," he said quietly. "Two, three. We'll send the others home. Otherwise, we'll have a storm in the neighborhood tomorrow."

He gestured toward the speaker and another man who had been standing at the sidelines, nodding. "You're coming with us," he said. "There are questions they want to ask you."

"And what if we don't go?" asked the speaker.

The shadow sighed. "There it is. The question that everything is leading up to."

"Then we'll take you with us," said the sergeant. Not loudly, not sharply. Just a statement. "With ropes, if necessary. We all know where that leads."

It was a moment that dragged on, like a rope that hadn't yet been pulled tight. The woman whispered something to the man. I only heard one word: "Children."

He breathed in, out, then raised his hands slightly. Not high, not in submission, more as a sign that he wouldn't immediately clench them into fists. "I'm leaving," he said. "Not because I'm afraid of your questions. But because I don't want any of you to lose your temper tonight and smear any more blood on these stones."

"How classy," murmured one of the boys behind me.

"Shut up," I growled.

We put them in handcuffs. Again, that cold iron, so fond of pretending to be just a tool. The man didn't flinch. The other swallowed hard, said nothing. The woman watched, her lips

pressed tightly. The others in the group took a few steps back; one tried to speak, but was pulled by the sleeve by his neighbor.

"Get lost," the sergeant said to the group. "Go home. And if I see you here again tomorrow, the council will be pleased to meet you."

They left. Not running, not in an orderly fashion. In small groups, like animals slowly retreating into the forest because hunters were standing ahead.

We led the two of them away. Not through the main street, not across the square. Through back streets, through alleys where the stones had already seen enough.

"Do you see what you're doing?" asked the shadow.

"Yes," I thought.

"You are now the rope between her mouth and the dungeon," he said. "You have your hand on the leash. They have given you the role you hated when you saw him in it."

In the dungeon, others took them from us. Same procedure as back home. Names, questions, hands checking how tight the shackles are. Doors that slam shut like coffin lids.

On my way out, I met the scribe. He had a stack of parchments under his arm, which would never carry as much truth as the cracks in the pavement outside.

"Any new cases?" he asked casually.

"Two," I said. "They spoke when they should have been silent. Or remained silent when they should have sung along. It depends on your point of view."

He looked at me sharply. "You're becoming cynical," he said.

"Don't you?" I asked in return.

He remained silent.

Outside, in the courtyard, I met the sergeant. He was standing alone, his hands behind his back, his face turned towards the sky, as if checking whether it was at least still neutral.

"You could have taken them all with you," I said.

He looked at me. "Then the neighborhood would be in flames tomorrow," he said. "I'm old, but not completely stupid."

"And so?" I asked.

"So we have two," he said. "With whom they can play by candlelight until they get bored. The others will talk, dream, whisper. They would have done that anyway."

He stepped closer, his voice trailing off. "You think I don't see what's happening here?" he asked. "I see it. I see the stains, the carts, the ropes, the songs. I see them trying to shove

anyone who opens their mouth into those holes down there. But I have a choice between two kinds of filth: the kind that comes from the castle, and the kind that comes when everything falls apart. And I'm damned enough to know that the second kind of filth makes more bodies."

"You want to slow the cart down," said the shadow. "He believes that will help."

"So we hold people back before they can leave?" I asked.

"No," said the sergeant. "We hold them back before they run. That makes a difference. Small. But it might be enough so that we can still look in the mirror in the morning without smashing it."

That night I went down alone to the vicinity of the lower gates. I had no orders to do so. Sometimes you don't need orders, just the urge to check if you're imagining things.

The gate was dark, just a lantern flickering in the wind. Above us, on the stone, hung his piece. Or someone else's. It was hard to tell by now. Meat becomes anonymous when you deny it its name for too long.

There was a new stain on the pavement under the archway. Small, round, as if someone had spat. Next to the stain, they had scratched a word. This time it was finished.

BLOOD

No name. No hero. No country. Only what unites them all. Enemy, friend, council, peasant, traitor, bystander.

"There you have it," said the shadow. "That's the lowest common denominator of this country: blood on stone."

I stopped, looked at the word, then upwards, at the flesh that hung there like a piece of rotten hope.

"They wanted us to look up," I thought. "So we'd be scared. And now we're starting to look down. At what we ourselves are stepping on."

The wind blew through the archway, cold and damp. It carried sounds from afar: dogs, a drunken voice, somewhere the squeal of a cart over uneven cobblestones. For a moment, I heard that choking again. Not loud, not clear. But there.

"Scotland vomits blood on the cobblestones," said the shadow. "And one day it will scream."

I knew what the next chapter would be, even though I didn't know what it would feel like to be in the middle of it.

A scream that finds no ears.

I turned around, pulled my coat tighter, and headed back towards the castle. Something crunched under my boots. Perhaps a small stone. Perhaps dried blood. Perhaps one of those dirty truths you can never completely eradicate from a country, no matter how thoroughly you scrub.

Behind me, the word remained in stone. Before me waited a council that believed parchment lasts longer than a plaster.

They were both wrong.

A cry that finds no ears

The first scream came in the night, as if the walls had decided to prove to me that they were still alive. It wasn't one of those clear screams you know from stories. Not a "No!", not a "Help!", nothing that would write well on parchment. It was more of a distorted, raw sound, somewhere between animal, human, and metal bent for too long.

I lay on my straw mattress, half awake, half in that dark in-between space where dreams have already begun and memories are still unsure whether they are allowed to leave. Then the scream cut through, as if someone were driving a knife through a curtain.

No one got up. That was the worst part. No rustling of blankets, no "Did you hear that?", no cursing. Just a brief, collective pause in breathing, like when a thunderstorm hits and everyone momentarily forgets they have lungs – and then they carry on as if it had just been a noise.

"They've gotten used to it," said the shadow beside me. "Like rain. Screams are as much a part of the castle as rats and priests."

The second scream came a few heartbeats later. Shorter, more fragmented, with something in it that sounded like water where there shouldn't have been any. Then just that muffled rumble when someone tries to breathe and swallows blood instead.

Someone turned around in the dark, the straw rustled. "Shut your mouth already," someone grumbled sleepily. I didn't even know if he meant the person who was shouting, or his own head.

I stared up at the tent ceiling, which I couldn't see. "This is coming from below," I thought. "Dungeon. Interrogation. Another one they're testing to see how much voice he has before they stuff his mouth with iron."

"A scream without ears," murmured the shadow. "Or too many who no longer want to hear."

The next morning, the courtyard was as usual. Recruits, wooden swords, instructors, the same grime, the same breath in the air. No one spoke about the night. No one asked, "Who did that?" Down there, names eventually become irrelevant. You don't scream as John or Ewan or Fergus. You scream as a sound that only interests the rest of the world insofar as it disturbs your own sleep.

We received new orders. More patrols, more guards at the gates, a greater presence in the markets. The officer spoke of "isolated incidents," "tensions," "rumors." He never used the word "fear." It would have given way if he'd bitten down on it.

"They want us to listen, but not to hear," said the shadow. "Steps count, not words."

We marched through the city as if we were earplugs they could stuff into the alleys. I paused briefly in front of the "Crooked Crown." Inside, laughter, only half-serious. If you listen closely, you'll realize that the laughter and the shouts are coming from the same throat. Just in different directions.

The women were at the well, the usual mix of buckets, cloths, and children's cries. One of them had red eyes, as if she had cried all night. As we passed, she fell silent, her mouth closed, and the water sloshed against the rim.

"What is it?" I asked.

She looked at me as if I were the scream itself. "Nothing," she said.

"Nothing leaves no trace," I said. "Who?"

She pressed her lips together so tightly they turned white, then hissed, "My brother. They took him last night. He was talking by the fire. Nothing special. Just what everyone thinks. Tonight..." Her voice trailed off. "I heard him," she whispered. "Once. Then never again."

My stomach felt heavy. "We heard him too," the shadow said softly. "And did nothing but keep breathing."

"Did you ask about him?" I asked.

She laughed, briefly, bitterly. "Whom should I ask? The scribe who turns his screams into ink? The priest who tells me to pray that his soul is cleansed before they cut him into pieces? You?"

Her hand trembled on the bucket handle. Water sloshed over, ran down her fingers, and mixed with something that wasn't water.

"When I scream," she said, "do you hear it too? Or only when it comes from below, through two walls and a staircase?"

I had no answer that didn't sound like dirt. So I said nothing.

"Do you see?" whispered the shadow. "There it is. The scream. It has found the ears. Yours. And you don't know what to do with them."

Later, in the castle, I was standing in the corridor when they brought in one of the new prisoners. Not one of the two from the night's round—a different one. Thin, pale face, bloody lip, a gaze that was already farther away than his feet would ever travel.

He didn't scream. Not anymore. The screams had stayed outside, with his sister, his bed, his fire. In here, he carried only the echo.

The guards led him past me as if he were a sack with a loose bottom. I looked into his eyes. There was nothing grand in them. No heroic glory, no spark of martyrdom. Only that stubborn, quiet "I just wanted to talk" deep within.

"Another one whose voice they've wrapped in paper," said the shadow.

In the council chamber, one floor above, no people were shouting. There, words were shouting. In long sentences, on parchment, with seals, with "In the name of" and "It is decreed." A clerk was reading a report that sounded as if he had seen a completely different country.

"The mood among the people is generally calm," he read. "Isolated expressions of discontent were suppressed through targeted measures. The presence of troops is having an effect. The recent incidents are regrettable, but underscore the need for decisive action."

The grey lord nodded. The English envoy made a face as if he were considering how many of these "incidents" could fit into a report without the king having a bad breakfast.

"Regrettable," repeated the shadow. "Nice word. It's the polite guise they put screams in before filing them away."

I stood against the wall, officially as a bodyguard, unofficially as an ear for their own version of the world. They talked about numbers, not votes. About "incidents," not people.

"If we give in," said one of the younger lords with too smooth skin, "we will only encourage further uprisings. We must stand firm. The execution of the traitor was not enough. We must show that his imitators cannot expect lenient punishments."

"He means: more screams," said the shadow.

The priest raised his hand. "We must not forget," he said, his voice sounding as if it had drowned too often in similar spaces, "that we are also talking about souls here. If we continue to exert only pressure without allowing any avenues to repentance, then..."

"Then they will become martyrs," the English envoy interrupted. "We must avoid that. No more clean deaths. No more heroic displays. If we act, then let it be in such a way that they are forgotten."

"You haven't understood the principle," I thought. "The more blood you spill, the more sticks to your own shoes. And every step you take leaves a mark."

"Forgotten," repeated the shadow. "The biggest lie in a country where every wall still remembers who pissed against it."

The writer continued taking notes. Perhaps he was writing: "The measures are having an effect." Perhaps: "The people are intimidated." No one wrote: "The cries have grown louder."

In the tavern that evening, no one shouted. Not loudly. Only softly. Men who yelled at each other when they really wanted to cry. Women who roughly pulled their children aside when a soldier entered the door. Chairs that scraped hard across the floor, as if annoyed by constantly having to play witness.

Iona placed beer in front of us, glanced briefly over her shoulder as if she were afraid of missing something.

"You are silent," she said.

"I'm listening," I said.

"What do you hear?" she asked.

I let my gaze wander around the room. At the table on the right, someone was laughing so loudly you knew he was trying to laugh over his own head. Against the wall on the left, a guy was gripping his mug so tightly his knuckles were white, as if he'd rather smash it over someone's head. By the fireplace, a woman was stroking her baby's back as if the child were a door about to fly off its hinges.

"I can hear people shouting without opening their mouths," I said.

The shadow nodded. "Welcome to the country's new language," it said. "Silent noise."

Later, when most were already half-sunk in their cups, one of them began to sing. Softly, at first. An old song, not about Wallace, not about carts, not about ropes. One from long ago. Harvest, rain, wine, which was never as good as they sang about.

After the third line, he changed the lyrics. Just one word, two. "Rain" became "blood," "winter" became "cart." It wasn't a big deal. No one applauded. No one shouted "Shut up!" They listened, pretending not to.

"If they stop his mouth now," said the shadow, "the scream will simply go down the next throat."

I thought of the man in the dungeon, the scream in the night. Of the nun at the well, the boy with the questions, the speaker in the backyard, who was probably counting the damp on the cellar walls now.

"Perhaps," I thought, "that's the worst part: not that they kill you, but that they pretend they didn't hear you."

As I stood outside that night, with the castle at my back, the city in front of me, the sky above like a tired cloth, I thought about how many screams can accumulate in such a country before anything breaks.

"You are one too," said the shadow.

"What?", I thought.

"A scream," he said. "Still quiet. Still inside you. But it will get louder. And believe me, bastard – they don't have ears big enough for what's coming."

I wanted to say something, something like, "I'm just a soldier." It caught in my throat. Perhaps because my own scream was just beginning to make its way from my chest to my head.

Stirling wasn't asleep. It was only pretending. The stains lay in the alleys, the signs hung on the gates, people gasped for air in the cellars, songs were distorted in the taverns, and words were nailed to paper in the council chamber.

An entire country screamed. Not in unison, not in time. In disarray, wrong, broken. And no one in power wanted to admit they heard it.

"A scream that finds no ears," I thought. "Or too many who put their fingers in it."

The shadow chuckled softly. "Wait," he said. "The echo is more patient than you."

The next day was one of those days when the light pretended too much that nothing had happened. Sun over Stirling, thin, pale, but there. Children's laughter somewhere, wheelbarrows rumbled over the cobblestones, a cat groomed itself in the middle of the road as if it owned the place. You might have thought the country had decided to just carry on and sweep the rest under the rug and under the rug. If you didn't know what it looked like under the rugs.

We were on duty at the wall, overlooking the surrounding countryside where the hills lay like old animals that had seen too much. Tam stood beside me, his chin on his hands, his hands on the parapet. Silence between us, not an uncomfortable one, more the kind you share with someone you have too much in common to even speak of.

"Are you thinking about him?" he asked at some point.

I didn't know who he meant. Wallace. The man in the dungeon whose scream we'd heard last night. The fishmonger. Myself. The list grew longer. "Yes," I said.

"I tried to pray yesterday," Tam murmured. "Not for him. For myself. So that I wouldn't eventually reach a point where I couldn't even hear those screams anymore. Do you know what happened?"

"You have fallen asleep," said the shadow.

"I didn't hear anything," said Tam. "No God, no comfort. Just my own skull crunching. Maybe that's the punishment for working for the wrong people for too long."

I leaned against the parapet and looked down at the street leading to the lower gate. Two women with baskets, an old man with a walking stick, a group of children pushing a wooden hoop as if the most important thing in the world was whether it would make it around the next corner without tipping over. A dark stain, left by something that had once lived, still clung to a niche in the brickwork.

"Maybe it's not a punishment," I said. "Maybe it's just the echo. If you walk over screams long enough, your bones start to rumble."

The shadow chuckled. "Grew romantic, bastard," he whispered. "Watch out, you'll be writing poems in no time."

In the afternoon they sent us down to the dungeon, not to interrogate anyone. To fetch him. The one whose sister had been standing by the well. The scream of the night suddenly had a face.

Maelcolm was waiting for us at the entrance. He looked as always: heavy, calm, one of those living walls the castle had spat out in man form. I never knew whether I hated him more or envied him. Perhaps his calmness was just another kind of madness.

"You get him there," he said, pointing to one of the doors further back. "The council wants to see him."

"Alive?" I asked.

"For now," said Maelcolm.

"The 'still' is always the loudest word in such sentences," commented the shadow.

The corridor was narrow, the air humid, the smell of sweat, urine, blood, and wet stones seared itself into my nostrils like a second breath. I stopped in front of the cell door and listened inside. No screaming. Just that shallow, broken breathing that tells you: There's someone else there, but he's not whole anymore.

I opened the door. No dramatic clatter, no thunder. Just a tired hinge. He was crouching in the corner. His hands were chained to the wall, his head slumped forward, his hair plastered to his forehead. His lips were bloody, not just from the beating, but also from the teeth he'd been biting to stop himself from screaming.

He looked up as the light crept in. Those eyes. No heroic gleam, no pleading puppy-dog eyes. Just that "Really? Again?" in the depths.

"You're coming up," I said.

"Where to?" he asked.

"To the council," I said. "They want to hear what you have to say."

He laughed. A nasty, dry laugh. "Yesterday they just wanted to hear me scream," he said. "I delivered. Today they want sentences. Are you never satisfied?"

"No," said the shadow. "That's the problem."

We removed the chains from the wall, leaving the ones on his wrists. It wasn't an act of trust, just a measure. I placed my hand on his arm, not hard, but firmly enough for him to know this wasn't going to be a walk in the park.

"If you shout upstairs," I thought, "they still won't hear you. They'll just note down: 'The defendant was agitated.'"

On the way up the stairs, he had to stop twice. His legs wouldn't go up, his head wouldn't go up, everything inside him was saying: Down, away, alone. But the chains, my hand, the guards behind us – all of it was saying: Up. So he went.

The usual assembly awaited in the council chamber: the grey lord, the English ambassador, a few others who looked as if their faces had been cast in the same mold. The clerk with his quill, the priest with his god, whom he had half-lost somewhere along the way.

They placed him in the middle. No throne, no chair, only stones under his knees in case he fell. He remained standing.

"Name," said the writer.

The man named it. No false pride, no secret shame. Just a fact.

"You are accused," the Lord began, "of having discussed dissent in an unauthorized meeting. You are accused of encouraging others to defy the Council's orders, to question the execution of the traitor, and to incite the people against order."

That word again. Order. It hovered in the room like a thick, white lump, covering everything that stank beneath it.

The man remained silent.

"Do you have anything to say?" asked the Lord.

"Yes," said the man. "But you can't hear it anyway."

The shadow laughed bitterly. "Someone was paying attention."

The clerk frowned. "What did you say that night?" he asked. "We have reports, but we want to hear it from you."

The man shrugged slightly, as far as the chains allowed. "I told you," he began slowly, "that you were afraid. That you believed a rope and a knife would suffice. And that you now realize that the screams you unleashed won't stay confined to the dungeon."

The grey lord pressed his lips together. "You called for resistance," he said. "You spoke of knives, of stopping carts, of..."

"I was talking about children," the man interrupted. "I said I don't want them to have to say later, 'Our parents saw everything and did nothing.' If you call that rioting, then your law is more sick than I thought."

Silence. No running, no whispering. Only the scribe's pen scratching across the parchment, as if sawing through the air.

"You can still go back," said the priest, his voice sounding as if he were offering someone a piece of bread he himself didn't want to eat. "Show repentance. Distance yourselves from your words. Say that you only spoke in anger. God loves those who repent."

The man looked at him for a long time. "God likes that," he said softly. "And you? Do you love that? Or do you only love men who crawl past you on their knees?"

The English envoy cleared his throat. "That's enough," he said. "We know what we're dealing with. We must make a statement."

The shadow invisibly covered its face with its hands. "One more," it muttered. "One more fucking sign."

"You will not be executed today," said the grey lord. "Not yet. You will remain in the dungeon until it is decided whether you are... useful. Perhaps in time you will understand that silence is better than shouting."

The man laughed again, that dry, broken laugh. "Then you should lock yourselves up," he said. "You're the ones screaming. We just hear it differently."

Maelcolm took a step forward, the chain clanked, the man fell silent, not out of fear, but simply because words cannot prevail against iron.

"Back," said the Lord.

We led him outside. He stumbled on the stairs going down, caught himself, and then eventually lay down. Not voluntarily. His body had decided it needed a break.

"Leave me here," he murmured. "The stones are honest. They don't pretend to listen."

I stood beside him for a moment before pulling him back up. "You have a choice," I heard myself say. "Whether your screams get stuck in the walls down below or in people's heads up above."

He looked at me, surprised. "And you?" he asked. "Where are yours?"

The shadow held its breath.

"I don't know yet," I said.

Later, upstairs, I sat with the priest on the wall. He had developed the habit of sitting in the wind after the meetings, as if he needed to shake the smoke of the council chamber from his robes.

"You like him," he said.

"Who?" I asked.

"The man from below," he said. "You like his way of talking past you."

"I like that he says what we all think but don't dare to say," I said.

The priest sighed. "I used to believe," he began, "that cries were part of faith. That a person was allowed to cry out when they were wronged, and that a God would hear it. Now I realize that most cries get stuck somewhere on their way up. In beams, in walls, in ears that become blocked. I don't know if they ever reach the heights I promise people."

"So you've spent years telling them to scream, and now you're not sure if anyone's listening," said the shadow. "Nice profession."

"Why do you continue?" I asked.

He gazed into the distance, where the sky deepened and the hills grew darker. "Because I don't know what else to do," he said. "Because I'm too cowardly to take off my robe and say,

'I lied to you.' And because I hope that maybe there's someone out there who will forgive me for dragging him into this whole mess."

"They're screaming down there all by themselves, without you," I said.

"Yes," he said. "But I told them to do it piously. That's my part in it."

We were silent for a while. Below us the city, before us the sky, behind us the castle where screams were recorded.

"Do you know what the worst thing is?" the priest finally asked.

"You tell me," grumbled the shadow.

"Not that they scream," he said. "People have always screamed. The worst thing is that they stop. Not because the pain is gone. But because it has eaten away at them what they could scream with."

I thought about the night. About those two screams, then silence. "Perhaps the silence is louder," I said.

That evening in the tavern, it was as if someone had turned the volume down to half. The usual sounds were there, but muffled. Someone tried to tell a joke, but forgot the punchline halfway through. Another stared into his cup as if searching for a way out.

I sat down at the counter, opposite Iona. She was polishing a jug that didn't get any cleaner no matter how long she rubbed it.

"You heard my brother," she said suddenly, without us having exchanged another word. "You were there, weren't you?"

I nodded. "Yes."

"And?" she asked. "What did he say?"

I could have said: "He spat in their faces." "He cursed them." "He swore that..." All lies they were inventing in other taverns.

"He said that you can't see everything and you can't do anything," I said. "That he doesn't want your children to live like that later on."

She nodded slowly. "That sounds like him," she said. "Did he scream?"

"Yes," I said.

"Good," she said. "Then I know he was still alive when he was down there. I prefer someone who shouts to someone who plays dead in silence."

The shadow whispered: "You see? For some, the scream is the last sign that they were still there."

Iona leaned forward, placing her hands on the counter. "And you?" she asked. "When do you scream?"

"I've shouted enough," I said automatically.

She shook her head. "No," she said. "You talk. You swear. You laugh in places where no one should laugh. But I've never heard you scream."

I didn't know what to say to that. So I remained silent.

"Perhaps," said the shadow, "your scream is not one that comes through the mouth. Perhaps you are the one who will one day scream with your feet."

That night, on my way to the privy alone, I paused beneath the archway, out of habit, compulsion, or something in between. Above me, still the flesh they had left hanging, or perhaps the next piece. I had lost count. Beneath me, the word carved in stone: BLOOD.

I placed my hand on the cold stone, felt the grooves of the letters. Someone had gone to the trouble of scratching them there, in the dark, at risk. No name, no praise, no curse. Just what everyone shares.

"If someone screams and no one hears him," I thought, "at least what comes out of him remains."

The wind passed through the arch, catching my coat as if it wanted to urge me onward. I stayed for another moment.

"Scream," the shadow said softly. "Not loudly, not now. But start thinking about what you'll do when they tie your mouth one day. Your scream has to go somewhere. Into your hands, into your feet, into the direction you're going. Otherwise, it will destroy you from the inside."

I stepped away from the word, left it behind, went back into the castle, into the sleeping tents, into the stench, into the dreams that were already waiting for me like dogs.

The city would continue to pretend it heard nothing. The castle would continue to pretend that no one needed to hear anything. The lords would continue to pretend that shouting was merely a disturbance.

But I knew now that they were there, even if no one wrote them down. In the eyes of the women at the fountain, in the ankles of the men who gripped their cups too tightly, in the teeth of the children who secretly made up new lyrics to old songs.

A cry that finds no ears will eventually find its own way. And somehow I had the feeling that mine would lead me somewhere beyond the reach of any council seal.

The morning after smelled of ash, even though no one had seen a fire large enough to smell like that. Sometimes something only burns internally, and the air just goes along with it, out of politeness.

We had weapons inspection in the courtyard. Blades shown, straps tightened, boots reasonably clean, faces as neutral as possible. The officer walked along the line, nodding here,

grumbling there, grimacing if there was even one too many specks of mud. As if that were his problem: a little bit of mud.

I had barely slept. The night had been filled with half-finished screams, not all of them coming from others. Some had writhed inside my own skull, unable to escape. Nevertheless, I stood upright. The body can do a lot when it has no other choice.

"Today," the officer began, "you will show yourselves. There is a new letter from the council."

The scribe stepped forward, parchment in hand, his face as if he would rather have been shoveling dirt. He cleared his throat. "In the name of the council," he read, "it is decreed that from now on, each unit shall appoint a man as a witness who can attest that the troops are loyal, carry out orders without hesitation, and are not swayed by rumors, songs, or rebellion."

"They are looking for ears for their deafness," commented the shadow. "Someone to tell them that no one is screaming."

The officer continued: "These men will sign protocols. They will record if any of you... doubts. If any of you use words that don't belong in a soldier's mouth. It serves for your protection and the security of the Reich."

Tam whispered so quietly that only I heard it: "Whenever they say it's for your protection, run for your life."

"One spy per unit," said the shadow. "I would have phrased it more elegantly, but that's basically it."

The officer let his gaze travel down the row. You could see a mental checklist running through his head. Who was too stupid to think? Who was too smooth to have scruples? Who was so ambitious he'd sell his own mother for a better belt?

He stopped next to me.

"No," I thought. "Not me."

He looked at me, for a long time. I looked back, my mouth firm, my hands still.

"I need someone," he said loudly enough for the others to hear, "who has eyes and a brain that still works. Someone who doesn't tremble every time the council farts. Someone who doesn't immediately reach for their blade the moment someone opens their mouth, but also doesn't run away when things get serious."

The shadow growled. "Look. He means you."

"You," the officer said, tapping my chest with two fingers. "It's you. From today on, you're the one who tells me if someone steps out of line. And the one who confirms in the log that we've done our job properly."

The words fell like a bucket of dirt. You know there's something in there you don't want – but it still gets to you.

I could have said "no." I could have laughed, spat, cursed. I could have said, "Find someone else, I've got enough blood on my boots." But there was the line behind me. Men I knew, men I'd lain in the mud with, men I'd pulled out of the shit, and men who'd pulled me out of ditches. If I said "no" now, one of them would walk right into the trap.

"If you refuse, they'll take the dumber one," said the shadow. "And he'll write down that you're the next person they want to hear from down there."

My tongue was stuck to the roof of my mouth. "Understood," I heard myself say.

The officer nodded in satisfaction. "Good," he said. "You're not only responsible for the reports, but also for the tone in your unit. No incitement. No secret meetings. If you notice anything, come to me. Not to the tavern."

The others were silent. A few gave me familiar looks: suspicion, respect, pity. No one was foolish enough to shout "snitch." Not yet.

After the roll call, the sergeant came over to me as we were putting away the weapons. He was leaning against a post, as if he were more tired than usual.

"Congratulations," he said dryly.

"I could have done without it," I growled.

He nodded. "Me too," he said. "I don't need anyone to tell me what I see. But the council wants paperwork. And paperwork wants a signature. Better yours than someone who thinks he's the law just because he's too stupid to think."

"You think I'm doing this for you?" I asked.

"No," he said. "I think you do that because you know you have to choose between two piles of shit. And you take the one where you might still find a few clean stones."

The shadow agreed. "He knows you better than you'd like," he murmured.

In the afternoon, Tam, Murn, Fergus, and I sat in the tent. The wind rattled the canvas, someone outside was clattering pieces of armor, and somewhere someone was cursing a blister on their heel.

"So," said Fergus, "from today on, you are the man with the pen."

"I hate feathers," I said.

"I hate ropes," he replied. "But they use them anyway."

Murn remained silent. He had been a different person since the candle rooms, since the questions, since the cart. Calmer, yes, but not in a good way. More like water is still just before the ground gives way beneath you.

Tam looked at me, for a long time, without the usual mockery in his eyes. "What are you going to do with that?" he asked.

"What am I supposed to do?" I asked in return. "They want me to write down that we've been good."

"Is that you?" asked the shadow.

I thought of the man in the dungeon, the scream, his sister, the word in the stone.

"No," I said. "I'm not."

Fergus laughed harshly. "Then just write that we've been good," he said. "For the first time in their cursed lives, they can actually use a lie."

"You want me to cover for her?" I asked.

He looked at me, seriously. "I want you to cover for us," he said. "If one of us speaks up because he can't take it anymore, I don't want some petty tyrant running up to the officer and saying, 'That one's dangerous.' I want you to be the one who decides what you write down—and what you don't."

The shadow nodded. "There it is. Your scream. No sound. A missing signature."

Murn raised his head. "They've put us in a good position," he said. "Either we become the eyes to their deafness, or we let someone else play that role and watch them sell us out."

"There is a third option," said Tam.

"Which ones?" I asked.

"We become ears for those whom no one hears," he said. "You write what those in power want to read – and you remember what happens here. When the day comes that someone asks what really happened, you're the one who can tell."

I didn't know whether to laugh or cry. It sounded too big for someone like me. And at the same time, too small for what was happening.

"You want me to become the custodian of legends," I said.

"I want," said Tam, "at least one of us not to be completely drowned in this filth. And if it comes down to words, then that's you."

The shadow grinned crookedly. "Go on," he said. "Put your heart in ink. They'll think you're writing for them."

That evening, the priest sat down next to me as I sat alone in front of the tent. He had a bottle with him, something thin that still went straight to my legs.

"I heard you've been given a new title," he said.

"Witness," I said. "A nice word, if you don't know it."

He took a sip and handed me the bottle. "In my books," he said, "a witness is someone who later testifies before a larger audience about what really happened. Not someone who signs off on lies."

"In their books, a witness is someone who signs until his hand does the same thing as his head," I said.

"And what are you?" he asked.

I didn't know. I took a sip, felt the cheap brew scratch my throat. "Right now, I'm one of those people who doesn't know how to turn a scream into a report," I said.

The priest nodded slowly. "Perhaps you're not supposed to do that," he murmured. "Perhaps you're supposed to write down that no one shouted. And remember for yourself how loud it was."

Night came, settling over everything like a wet sack. Again, screams from downstairs. Not as loud as the previous one. Or perhaps I had grown accustomed to it. That's the real danger: that at some point you no longer know whether it's gotten quieter or you've simply become deaf.

I lay awake, the pen in my head, the one I would have to pick up the next day. The officer wanted an initial report. "On the situation in the unit." Short, factual, clear, he had said.

The shadow lay beside me, on its back, arms behind its head, as if it had stumbled into an inn. "Well, bastard," it said. "What are you writing? 'All good, no problems, everything quiet, signed: the biggest liar in the North'?"

I thought of Tam, of Fergus, of Murn. Of their faces when they thought no one was watching. I thought of the young soldier who had pushed the man at the fish stall against the table, and how he looked when he realized he had postponed a life. I thought of the woman by the well, of Iona behind the counter, of the children with the half-finished songs.

The next morning I was indeed sitting in front of parchment. Not in the council chamber, not under their gaze. In the tent, on a crate that served as a table. The quill felt wrong in my hand, as if someone had sewn a stranger's finger onto it.

"Report on the situation in the unit," I wrote at the top. The letters were crooked, but legible. I had never been a writer. The school of my life was made of fists and curses, not lines and ink.

I stared at the empty space below.

"All the men are performing their duties," I finally wrote. "Orders are being carried out. There is unrest in the country, hard to ignore. It is being discussed in the unit. So far, no open insubordination."

The shadow whistled softly. "That's quite a lot of truth for an official document," he said.

I hesitated. Then I wrote: "The men are tired."

Point.

I looked at the word. Tiredly. It stood there, black, smaller than the dirt under my fingernails, and yet bigger than anything else they exchanged in their chambers.

"If they are clever," said the shadow, "they will overlook that. If they are stupid, they will think you mean about marching."

I signed. Not with any title, not with "Faithful Servant of the Council." Just with my name, crooked, but true.

When I handed in the report, the officer briefly glanced over it. His finger stopped on that one word.

"Tired," he read. "That's not a category."

"Yes," I said. "In the field, yes."

He looked at me as if trying to decide whether this was already an outrage or still humor. Then he nodded curtly. "I'll add it," he said. "They only read what they want to read anyway."

In the evening, Stirling sounded again like a city trying to talk about itself without having the right words. Market cries, horses, children too loud, soldiers too quiet.

In the tavern, someone was telling a new story. Not a heroic saga, not a folksy tale. A small, sordid story about a soldier who had supposedly delayed an order for just a heartbeat. As a result, a man had escaped. The storyteller didn't know whether to admire or despise him, so he made a joke out of it.

I listened, said nothing. The shadow tilted its head. "Well?" it asked. "Was that you? Or will it be?"

I didn't know it. Not yet. But I knew that my scream was no longer just in my head. It was slowly seeping into my fingers, into my handwriting, into my decisions about when to report something and when to say, "I didn't see anything."

A cry that finds no ears is dangerous. It seeks other paths. In songs, in stains, in carved words, in skewed reports, in small delays, in tired men who eventually fail to act in time.

They had believed that with carts, ropes, torture, and dungeons they could stifle any sound they disliked. Now they began to appoint witnesses, because they realized that the silence was lying to them.

I found my place in the middle. Not out of heroism, not by design. Simply because I had watched for too long, until my own mind decided it was time to scream. Quietly, crookedly, imprecisely. But still.

"After the head, the legend remains," I suddenly thought. "Not the one that is written. The one that we remember."

The shadow grinned. "Exactly," he said. "And you, bastard, are about to start writing a chapter of it inside yourself."

After the head, the legend remains.

Legends usually begin with someone drunk enough to believe they're sober. That's more or less what happened with Wallace. The head was gone, the body scattered, the ropes dried, the carts back in the barn, the knives cleaned – and then they sat there, with their jugs and their guilty consciences, and someone had to speak up to make it all make sense.

At first, there were only fragments. "I was there." "I saw him." "He looked at me like this." "He said this." That was all it took. The rest stuck itself, like mud to a boot.

The castle had its own version. A neat parchment, sealed with seals, containing a text so dry it almost turned to dust when read aloud. "On such-and-such a day, the traitor William Wallace was brought to trial. He showed no remorse. The law was carried out. The land is pacified."

"Peaceful," the shadow had spat back then. "If this is peaceful, then an open conflict is just a blemish."

Down in the city, things were different. In the "Crooked Crown" there was no parchment, only beer, blood, and brains that refused to stay still. There they began to reattach their heads—not to their bodies, but to history.

The first one I consciously encountered was a traveling singer. The kind with more holes in his cloak than teeth in his mouth, but still enough of a voice to captivate a crowd for a few minutes. He showed up on one of those days when the rain couldn't decide whether to stay or go. He came in, shook the dripping water out of his hair, and ordered with a gesture as if he'd never done anything else.

Iona looked at him suspiciously. "Can you pay?" she asked.

"I can sing," he said.

"I didn't ask that," she said, but she placed a jug in front of him anyway. She knew how it went: first he sang, then others paid, just so he would keep singing and they wouldn't have to hear their own thoughts.

The guy drank, cleared his throat, stood in a corner where he was clearly visible, and began. First, old stories, harmless ones. Harvests, girls, long nights, short marriages. The usual lies you can smile at before the next drink.

Then he changed it. The melody remained the same, only the lyrics suddenly had sharper edges.

"A man stood on the cart, not a king, not a priest, just one with a battered body and a spread-out scythe..."

A few heads turned. I saw two soldiers from another unit tense up, their hands moving closer to their belts.

"He laughed in their faces, with a rope around his neck, and spat on the gentlemen; their rights were nothing but meager..."

The shadow groaned. "There it is again," he said. "The laughter that never was. But it's easier to sing than 'He was breathing heavily.'"

I stood up, not because I had any orders, but because my gut told me: If you stay seated, you become complicit – and if you beat him, you are too.

I took a few steps forward, then stopped and leaned against a beam. The singer saw me, registered the coat, the blade, the way I was standing. He swallowed, skipped a line, changed it mid-word.

"...and yet, he still wore his heart free, until they tore it to pieces..."

The men at the table on the right nodded as if they had seen it all. None of them had been there. One had been chopping wood somewhere in the forest during the entire execution, another had been cursing in a field, and the third had been standing in another town. It didn't matter. In their minds, they were all right there at the front now.

I waited until he was finished. No applause, just that approving hum that men make when they've convinced themselves they've heard something important.

Then I went to him. He was smaller than when he had sung. His eyes searched for escape routes, but found none.

"You weren't there," I said. No accusation. Just a statement.

He swallowed. "No," he admitted. "I heard it."

"By whom?" I asked.

"From everyone," he said. "In Falkirk, in Perth, in Stirling. Everywhere they tell what it was like. They need..." He searched for a word, reached into the air, found "...pictures."

"Pictures," the shadow repeated. "Better than the scars they have."

"They need something to hold onto," he continued. "You don't seriously think they want to hear that he just stood there breathing heavily while they sucked the life out of him. They want to believe that there was someone bigger than their own filth."

I looked at him for a long time. "And you?" I asked. "Do you believe that?"

He shrugged. "I think," he said, "I can sleep better at night if I sing that he laughed. Otherwise, I'd have to lie down with the image of a man who knew he was losing and still didn't run away. And then I'd wonder why I'm still here and not him."

The shadow nodded slowly. "Well, fine," he said. "At least he's honest about his lie."

"They'll wring your neck if you keep singing like that," I said.

"Those up there?" he asked. "Or you?"

"It depends on who hears first," I said.

He grinned crookedly. "Then I'll sing in such a way that the right people will hear it first," he said. "Those with full stomachs and empty nights."

I could have had him thrown out. I could have said, "No one sings his song in my presence unless it's true." Instead, I turned around and went back to our corner. Tam raised an eyebrow, Fergus snorted.

"You let him," said Fergus.

"He didn't listen to me anyway," I replied. "And if I silence him, someone with fewer scruples will just find the song."

"After the head, the legend remains," whispered the priest, who sat beside us and turned his cup. "I used to believe that God decides which stories endure. Now I see: it's the ones that need them most."

"Who is 'she'?" I asked.

"Those who can't sleep at night," he said. "That means all of us."

The castle also created its own legend. In the reports, in the sermons, in conversations with messengers from other cities. "The rebellion is broken," they said. "The traitor's head adorns our gate. The country sees how we deal with rebels."

The strange thing was that more and more messengers arrived with more questions. "Is it true that he cursed God as he died?" "Is it true that he's hanging in pieces all over Scotland?" "Is it true that his eyes remained open?"

Nobody asked, "Is it true that you are afraid?"

"The legend eats away at you both ways," said the shadow. "They need him as a monster so they can appear clean. The others need him as a saint so their cowardice isn't so obvious. And in the middle of it all, you bastard, with your fucking memory that refuses to make him either one."

I saw him when I closed my eyes. Not the Wallace from the songs, not the one on the parchments. The one from the barn, with straw in his hair and a gaze that saw more than the beams. The one on the bridge, with mud on his boots and blood on his blade. The one in the dungeon, amidst the stench, half broken, half stubborn. The one on the cart, no laughter, only that silent, furious calm that had frightened me more than any scream.

And then I saw the others. The ones who made something out of it that they could live with.

In the villages, the stories became more gruesome the further away you went. In a hamlet three days' march away, a woman told me he had strangled three Englishmen with his bare hands while still hanging from the rope. I didn't tell her that a body slowly suffocating has no hands left for heroic deeds.

In another village, an old man swore that Wallace had appeared to him in a dream and told him when to sow the seeds. He pointed to his field, which was doing better than his neighbors'. "See?" he said. "That's his hand."

"Of course," said the shadow. "If the rain comes at the right time, it was the saint, not the sky."

I didn't laugh. Who am I to steal an old man's lifeline?

In Stirling itself, the legend operated differently. It was quieter, heavier, more tangible, conveyed through hands than words. One man carved a small wooden figure: a man with a sword, no face, just a rough outline. He placed it by the fireplace. His wife rolled her eyes but left it there.

Another man no longer carved crosses on his door frame, but something that, with a bit of goodwill, looked like a cart. No one asked why. No one pretended not to know.

"After the mind is gone, what remains is what they need," the priest said at one point. "Some need revenge. Some need comfort. Some need an excuse. Some need a mirror."

"And you?" I asked.

He looked into his cup. "I need someone I can tell I've disappointed," he said. "And who won't send me straight to hell."

The shadow leaned against my shoulder. "You need something different," he whispered. "You need a version of him you can live with. One that isn't too big so it doesn't crush you, and not too small so you're ashamed to have known him."

Perhaps he was right. When the children in the street were playing their own games, he was suddenly there too. Two boys, a stick for a sword, one shouted: "I am Wallace!", the other: "I am the king!", and then they hit each other, laughed, and fell in the dirt.

"I don't want to be the king!" shouted one after scoring a goal. "He'll lose!"

I stopped and watched them. The mothers observed the scene with a look of worry and resignation.

"They used to play knights," one said. "Now they play traitors."

"It depends on the side you're looking from," I said.

As always, I paused briefly at the gate. My head was far away, but its place was still there. The stones knew him. And down below, in the stone, the word. BLOOD. The rain hadn't washed it away. It had become darker, more honest.

"After the head, this is what remains," said the shadow. "Not the beautiful songs. Not the clean judgments. This: stains, carved words, children who shout his name without knowing what it will cost them one day."

I thought of how, somewhere in a castle further south, his skull was being viewed like a stuffed animal. A trophy. Proof that they had "won." Perhaps a lord was showing it to a visiting fennecromancer and saying, "Look, this is how rebellion ends."

Up here, nobody showed anything to anyone. It was all there. The cart, the screams, the songs, the stains, the dungeons. And in the middle of it all, people like me, who still knew what had happened, and watched as it transformed into something else.

"Do you know what the worst thing about legends is?" asked the shadow.

"You tell me," I thought.

"They are more convenient than the truth," he said. "And if you're unlucky, you'll start believing them yourself."

I knew the day would come when I'd be old, sitting somewhere, telling the story to some brat. The only question was: Which version? The one with the laughter? The one with the quiet rage? The one with the ropes and the flesh? Or the one where I couldn't justify myself?

After the head, the legend remained. And somewhere within it, tiny, utterly filthy, I remained too. As someone who had been there when they tried to turn a man into a shield – and in the end only succeeded in making his name heard in more mouths than they had dungeons.

Legends travel faster than messengers. A horse needs days to travel from castle to castle, a song needs an evening and two drunken throats. If you hang around in taverns long enough, you'll realize how the world is truly connected: not by roads, not by letters, but by people who have seen too much and can't handle enough, and therefore speak out.

The council realized it too late. At first, they thought they had everything under control. Heads off, meat at the gates, a few polite words in their reports, done. They hadn't counted on the fact that what remains wouldn't be hanging from the gallows, but sitting at tables, raising their jugs.

A few days after the singer's performance at the "Krumme Krone" (Crooked Crown), the first real ban was issued. Not by us, but by them, with a seal, with "In the name of." In the courtyard, the officer read it aloud, the clerk beside him like an executioner with a quill pen.

"It is now forbidden," he read, "to honor the name of the traitor William Wallace in songs, stories, or public speeches. Anyone who nevertheless glorifies his person will be considered a rebel and treated accordingly."

"Glory," the shadow repeated. "As if they knew how little there was to glorify that day."

"This means," the officer added, "that you pay attention in taverns, markets, and gatherings. We need names. Who is singing, who is telling stories, who is listening and clapping."

"So now we're critics too," Fergus muttered. "All that's missing is them telling us whether the melody is good enough."

I stood in line and felt the word "witness," which they had pinned to my chest, grow heavier. A few days ago, it had sounded like a halfway decent lie. Now it was just another word for: "You're the first one who gets to be guilty."

That evening I went to the tavern anyway. What else was I supposed to do? Sit in my tent and listen to my own voice? The "Crooked Crown" was more crowded than usual. Prohibitions have the same effect on people as rain does on rats – they drive them out of their holes.

Inside it was hot, stuffy, and loud. But it was a different kind of volume than before. No joyful roaring, more of a subdued hum, as if all the voices had simultaneously decided to shrink down so as not to be immediately drowned out.

The singer was back. Of course he was. Someone like that can smell a taboo like others smell a roast. Only he wasn't standing in the center. He sat in the corner, playing softly. Old songs, with innocuous lyrics. A woman in a cornfield, a boy in the rain, a soul in the afterlife so pale that even God had to yawn.

Nobody sang Wallace. Not openly. But you could see it in their eyes. When the singer raised his voice at a point where the verses used to come over the cart, the men flinched slightly, as if they had been expecting a ghost.

Eventually, a group of soldiers came in—not us, others. English coats, different colors, different faces. They stood spread out at the bar, pretending they were only there for the beer, but their eyes were everywhere.

"There you have them," said the shadow. "The ears they want."

The singer changed the melody. Not a word about traitors, carts, or ropes. Instead, something about a hunter who gets lost in the woods. If you closed your eyes, you could convince yourself that it was a coincidence he sang "Not everyone who returns home finds their house again" at that exact point.

Tam leaned towards me. "They think that if no one sings anymore, he's gone," he muttered. "Like little children who put their heads under the pillow and think the monster under the bed can't see them."

"At least children still scream," I said.

At the next table, someone began to speak quietly. Not a singer, not a bard, just a man with too much beer and a story that wouldn't leave him alone.

"I saw him," he said. "On the bridge. Not in Stirling, before. He was standing there with his men, all dirty, all with eyes that wanted too much. The English on the other side, so clean, as if they'd come out of a treasure chest. Do you know what I thought?"

His counterpart shook his head.

"I thought," he continued, "that the clean ones win. Always. That the dirty ones only have a chance if God happens to be looking away. And then I saw how they started. He was in front. Not like a hero, like a man who didn't know any other direction."

I knew he was lying. Or making something up. I'd been on the bridge. I'd seen what Wallace looked like. And I'd never seen this guy before.

"See?" whispered the shadow. "He's stealing your place and doesn't even realize it."

I stood up and walked over. Not with a drawn sword, just with the face I'd been wearing for weeks. Like a bandage that no one would ever remove.

"You weren't on the bridge," I said.

He blinked, trying to focus on me. "How do you know that?" he slurred.

"Because I was there," I said. "And I didn't see you. And believe me, I would have seen you. You're loud enough as that type."

His friend laughed nervously. "It doesn't matter," he interjected. "The main thing is that someone was there and told the story."

"No," I said. "That's exactly the problem."

The English soldiers looked over at us. The room contracted, like a lung before a cough.

The singer in the corner changed the melody again. I only half listened, but one line stuck in my mind: "Some were there, some just have red eyes from drinking."

"If you correct him," said the shadow, "they will hate you because you are ruining their image. If you let them lie, you will eventually become one of them."

I took a breath, realizing my hand had unconsciously reached for the sword's hilt. I took it away. "Go ahead and tell your bullshit," I said to the man. "But next time you say you were there, at least put yourself at the back of your own story. You'll be more honest that way."

He stared at me, half understood, then nodded somehow.

The legend was already there in the room. It didn't need my blessing. It crept through the cracks in people's minds, seeking out the places where shame, guilt, and pride intertwined.

A few days later, we were sent out, away from Stirling, to a village that consisted more of huts than houses. More "interrogations." But this time with a different undertone. Not just: "Who gave him bread?" Now also: "Who is saying what about him?"

The village priest – a thin man with tired eyes – greeted us in front of his church. He held a cross in his hand, as if it were an identification card. "I know what you want," he said. "And I'll tell you right now: I have forbidden them to speak of him."

"Did it work?" asked the sergeant.

The priest laughed bitterly. "As good as your prohibition up here," he said, tapping his temple. "They talk when I'm not there. They whisper when I pass by. They sing other words when I'm near. And when I'm gone, they sing his."

We walked through the village. Someone had carved a symbol into the door of a barn: two crosses with a line between them. With a lot of imagination: a man with outstretched arms. The kind of imagination you can afford when you have nothing left to lose.

The shadow grinned. "There he is again," he said. "Smaller, but more persistent."

We asked questions, we listened, and received answers that were more evasive than the wind. "I only heard someone say..." "They say they have a song in the next village..." "A traveler was here recently who swore he'd seen the rope..."

It was always someone else. The source was always a little further away. Nobody said, "I did."

In a small hut with two beds and a fireplace, I met an old woman who could no longer hear well, but spoke amazingly clearly.

"You are here because of him," she said.

"Because of whom?" I asked.

She rolled her eyes. "Don't pretend," she said. "I'm old, but not stupid. You didn't come for our lovely potatoes. You want to know who's talking about him."

I nodded. "You too?" I asked.

"I pray for him," she said. "Every night. That doesn't count as talking, does it? Your God up there likes it when old women move their mouths without anyone listening."

The priest at my side cleared his throat unpleasantly.

"What are you praying for?" I asked.

She smiled crookedly. "That he won't be hacked to pieces where he is now," she said. "That he can sit somewhere whole, with his head, his heart, his belly, without anyone messing with him. That he can watch you all banging your heads down here. And that he can laugh, but not the way they sing in the songs, but quietly, without malicious glee."

"You think he's laughing?" I asked.

"I think he's tired," she said. "Like we are. And I think you're more afraid of his stories than his bones."

The shadow nodded in agreement. "The old woman knows," he said.

Back in Stirling, the reports grew thicker. Every week a new stack of parchment, filled with "It has been established," "It has been noticed," "It is recommended." My name appeared under some of them, my crooked handwriting between neatly drawn lines. I was now officially part of the machine trying to turn legends into dust.

And yet I wrote things in that didn't fit into her script. Small sentences, like random scratches. "In the taverns, his name isn't spoken openly, but the atmosphere isn't calm." "Despite the prohibition, people cling to stories, they only change the form." "Children use his name in games."

The officer overlooked it, or pretended to. The council might have too. But the pen had scratched it onto the parchment, and paper forgets less than they think.

One day, an English captain stood before us in the courtyard, clean, smooth, with armor that looked more like decoration than protection. He looked at us as if we were unreliable tools.

"You were there when the traitor was led away," he said to me after the officer had introduced me. "You saw how the mob reacted."

"Yes," I said.

"We must prevent," he continued, "his person from becoming a symbol. Symbols are dangerous. You can't behead them. What would you suggest?"

The shadow laughed loudly. "Well, look at that, now they're asking you how to kill a ghost."

I looked into the captain's eyes. They were bright, clear, a little too cold. "You're too late," I said.

He blinked. "What do you mean by that?"

"He is already a symbol," I said. "Whatever you do now, just work on the form faster or slower."

"So we're not supposed to do anything?" he asked, slightly irritated.

"You should cut up fewer people," I said. "But I know that's hard to understand when you've just realized how well the knives work."

The officer next to me narrowed his eyes. I had gone too far. But the captain laughed – briefly, sharply.

"You're a cheeky dog," he said. "But perhaps not entirely stupid."

"I'm tired," I said. "That's all."

That night I sat by the gate again. Above me, the empty space where meat had once hung. Below, the word in the stone: BLOOD. I lightly ran my boot over it, not to remove it, but simply to realize it was still there.

"After the mind, the legend remains," I thought. "After the legend, eventually only a feeling remains. And feelings are the only thing they can't send south to nail to a gate."

The shadow sat down next to me, invisibly pulling the coat tighter. "Do you know what makes all this even more bitter?" he asked.

"What?", I thought.

"That at some point you'll start needing his legend," he said. "Not because you think he's a saint. But because you need proof that someone before you said 'no' and didn't immediately crumble to dust. You don't want to be the first one to open their mouth."

I could have protested. I could have said I minded my own business. But I knew he was right. A small, dirty altar had long since taken shape inside me, upon which lay not a pristine halo,

but a scarred face with tired eyes. Someone who hadn't begged for mercy. Someone who had done what he could.

The legend outside grew bigger, more colorful, louder. In some versions, he had been invulnerable until the very last moment. In others, he had performed miracles, turning bad harvests into good ones, making women infertile and men fertile, or vice versa, depending on whom you asked.

My version remained small. Mud, blood, wood, iron, a voice that wasn't loud, but was direct. And a country that couldn't stop putting its name in every nook and cranny, no matter how many punishments were imposed.

After the head, the legend remained. And after the legend, the question remained: what do I do with what I had truly seen? Would I eventually participate in embellishing, smoothing over, and lying – or would I leave the truth as it is: ugly, unsatisfying, and yet the only thing that still belongs to me?

The shadow tapped me on the forehead. "Write it down there," he said. "Before someone else does it for you."

I gazed into the dark archway, where the wind spoke its own language, and knew that the next step was drawing near. The point at which it's no longer enough to simply watch and keep a private archive within oneself.

After the head, the legend remains. After that, only what you yourself are willing to risk remains.

It wasn't one day that changed everything, but rather a series of days that felt like they all bore the same burden. You could have stacked them like stale bread: same gray, same taste, only each one a touch harder, until eventually the only thing you could use to smash someone's skull in was with them.

The legend grew during this time like mold – quietly, in damp places, where no one really looked because they were busy with more important things: chopping wood, getting food, not hanging around.

The council spoke of "pacification," the priests of "trial," the merchants of "difficult times," the guards of "strenuous shifts." No one used the word that kept nagging at me: "aftermath." As if a second, invisible stage were being built above everything, on which something was happening that no one officially wanted to see, and on which Wallace was constantly pacing back and forth—this time without a cart, but in a hundred heads.

It started with more and more men bringing it up with me. Not loudly, not in front of everyone. Always just in passing, as if it were a side note.

For example, on the training ground, when I wanted to raise Tam's shield a bit. "That way you'll only be half-dead, not completely," I said. He grinned crookedly.

"Tell me," muttered one of the younger recruits behind us, "is it true that he spat on one of us just before the noose? I heard he spat in his face and told him to tell his king he could shove his law up his ass."

I turned around. The boy had that look puppies have when they don't yet know how dirty the yard really is.

"Who told you that?" I asked.

"My cousin," he said. "He knows someone who was there."

"Of course," said the shadow. "There's always someone who knows someone."

"I was there," I said. "He didn't spit on anyone."

The boy was briefly disappointed, as if I had told him there would be no Christmas, no fairies, no good harvest. "Nothing at all?" he asked.

"He told them to hide behind parchment," I said. "And then he confessed. That's enough."

The boy nodded slowly, as if exchanging the sober version for the colorful one and wondering if he had been cheated.

Another time, while fetching water, a merchant stood next to me, waiting with his cart in front of the castle to be let in. He examined my armor, my cloak, the scar on my lip.

"You're from around here, right?" he asked.

"Enough here to know the shit," I said.

He grinned crookedly. "In Perth they say," he said, "that he laughed at the first blow. That he told the executioner to be careful not to cut himself on the knife."

I looked at the surface of the water in the fountain. My reflection was distorted, warped, cut through by waves.

"In Stirling," I said, "they say he smelled like anyone whose entrails have been pulled out. That men fainted, not from awe, but from nausea. And that those who shouted 'Heil' the loudest were the first ones who couldn't lift their heads in the tavern that evening."

The dealer looked at me. "A shitty story," he said.

"Yes," I said. "That's why it's correct."

The shadow slapped softly in my head. "You're getting good at wiping the shine off their faces," he whispered. "I wonder how long they'll let you get away with it."

It wasn't as if I'd become a crusader for truth. I didn't run through villages and taverns correcting every half-drunken aside. But sometimes, when someone started going on about "the great Wallace" with too much shining eye candy, I couldn't help but throw a bit of dirt into the legend.

Perhaps to protect him from disappointment. Perhaps to save myself from glorification. Perhaps simply because I couldn't bear the thought of the cart I had seen becoming some kind of mobile shrine.

One evening, the "Crooked Crown" was so packed the air was stagnant. It was as if everyone had a date with their own cowardice and absolutely had to get drunk before facing it. Iona ran back and forth between tables and the bar, beads of sweat on her forehead, her braid half untidy.

In the corner where the pipe and cards usually were, a small circle had formed. Men, close together, bodies tilted forward as if sitting around a fire that burned only in their minds. I recognized the traveling minstrel. He had a visitor: a fellow with a piece of parchment and a piece of charcoal in his hand.

"What are they doing?" Tam asked.

"They're writing him," said the shadow. "Look."

I pressed closer. The parchment man had frowned, as if he were putting a bridle on a stubborn ox.

"Say it again," he murmured.

The singer rambled on: "...and there he stood, you know, quite calm, as if the cart were a throne and not his damned path to the knife."

"'Throne' is good," murmured the writer. "That sounds... grand."

"Yes, write Throne," said one of the listeners. "That fits. He's like a king in our minds now."

The shadow groaned. "And there we have it. Coronation in the tavern."

"So you're now writing down what you're lying to yourselves?" I asked.

They looked up. The writer blinked, the singer grimaced. "We're recording it," he said. "So they can't twist it up there. If we write it down here, they can't just say he was a smelly dog."

"They can do many things," I said. "Even burn parchment."

"Then we'll learn it by heart," said the man with the jug. "One line each. Let them come and set us all on fire if they want to put it out."

I had to admit: That was a plan so stupid it was dangerously good.

"What have you been writing so far?" I asked the parchment man.

He read aloud, haltingly, somewhat solemnly: "In those days William Wallace, a man of great courage and noble heart, rose up and led the people against the oppressors."

I grimaced. "You've never been in the mud, have you?" I asked.

He looked at me, puzzled. "What do you mean?"

"No one who's seen a man's stomach cut open in the rain talks like that," I said. "'Great courage and a noble heart' – no one who's had blood on their boots would ever hear that."

"How would you write it?" the singer asked sharply.

The shadow rubbed its hands together. "Now I'm curious," it said.

I took the charcoal from the man's hand. It was soft, greasy, and immediately left black grooves on my fingers. I stared at the parchment. The beginning was already there, clean, smooth, like an overly tidy grave.

There was space underneath. Lots of space.

"Write," one growled. "If you can do better."

I started. My hand felt heavy, like after a long march.

"William Wallace was a man who didn't stop saying 'no' in time," I wrote. "He had more dirt on his boots than those who judged him, but less on his soul."

The men read along as best they could. Not all of them were literate, but they knew enough about letters to see that it said something other than "noble".

"That doesn't translate well into songs," the singer remarked.

"Maybe they should choke," I said.

The shadow laughed contentedly. "There it is," he said. "Your version. Not pretty. But yours."

"And what else?" asked the writer. "I can't just sing that to the next person like that."

"You shouldn't," I said. "You can sing whatever you want. But if you're going to write something down that's meant to last longer than your intoxication, then write it in such a way that a man who was there wouldn't eat it up in disgust."

"You were there," said one of the group. "So tell me."

All eyes were fixed on me. From the background came a snort – the priest, half in shadow, half in light. He too was listening.

I took a deep breath. "He wasn't a saint," I said. "He wasn't a king, an angel, a figurine for your fireplaces. He was a man born on a bad day who decided he wasn't going to take it lying down. He made mistakes. Villages burned, people died who were never asked if they wanted to perish as part of his plan. He was stubborn, loud, often late, sometimes too early. And in the end, he stood on a platform in front of people who wanted to hate him or use him—and he didn't shrink back. That's what I saw."

Silence. Only the crackling of wood in the fireplace, the scraping of a chair, breathing.

"You forgot how he stank," whispered the shadow.

"And the country?" asked the writer. "You have to say something about... freedom, justice, blah blah."

I shrugged. "The country," I said, "is what's sitting here today: men who drink too much because they don't know what to do with what they've seen; women who grip their children too tightly when a guard walks by; children who put his name in games, unaware of what it will cost them. If you want to call that 'freedom'—fine. I call it a country that no longer pretends it isn't disgusted."

The priest nodded slowly. "Amen," he murmured.

The scribe looked at the parchment, at the two sentences that stood side by side like two men who couldn't stand each other: his clean, "noble" version and my crooked, dirty one.

"They'll tear it to shreds," the singer said.

"Maybe," I said. "But before they do, someone who was there will have read it."

The shadow placed its hand on the back of my neck. "You realize," it said, "that you're starting out just like them. Only in the opposite direction. If you're not careful, your ugly stuff will become your own legend. The honest one who saw everything right."

I ignored him. I had to confront what was lying inside me, otherwise it would eat me up from the inside.

Later that evening, when the singer had returned to the old songs and the scribe had rolled up his parchment, I sat alone with a mug in my hand. Iona wiped the counter as if trying to scrape the day out of the wood.

"So now she's a writer too," she said.

"I only stopped them from making a saint out of him," I growled.

"Saints sell better," she said pragmatically. "But you're right. I wouldn't have wanted him on the wall either, with a golden crown. He would have laughed himself to death."

"He didn't laugh," I said automatically.

"I know," she said. "But he's laughing now, somewhere. At us. At you. At her up there. Because none of us know what to do with him."

The shadow yawned. "And yet here we sit, trying our best," he said.

When we walked back to camp later, the sky was clear. For the first time in days, the stars were visible, like holes in a dirty blanket. Tam walked beside me, a foot's width apart from my tracks.

"You know they'll be watching you," he said. "The council, the officers, the clerks. And those there," he nodded back towards the tavern, "will remember that you don't go along with everything."

"I'm doing enough," I said.

“Yes,” he said. “But you start to realize what you no longer want to participate in. That’s the beginning of...”

He was searching for a word.

“Problems,” said the shadow.

"Freedom," I said quietly.

Tam gave a short, bitter laugh. "Freedom from what?" he asked.

I thought about it. About the lie. About the clean image they wanted to present to him and to us. Perhaps never completely, but at least deep down inside.

"About stories that aren't true," I said.

We passed the gate. The stain in the stone, the word beneath it, the empty space above – all still there. I stopped, for just a heartbeat.

"After the head, the legend remains," I thought. "After the legend, there remain sentences, wooden figures, carved symbols, off-key songs, crooked accounts. And somewhere, someone will sit in a tavern, in another time, and continue to tell it all, until no one knows what actually happened anymore – only what was made of it."

"Perhaps he will tell your version," said the shadow.

“Maybe,” I said. “Maybe not. Maybe he mixes them with all the other filth, and in the end there’s a man who was everything and nothing.”

I continued walking. Behind me lay the city, the castle, the stone with the word. Ahead of me, the camp, the men, the next order, the next night.

The legend had taken its own course. I couldn't stop it. But I could refuse to have it explained to me by those who had held the noose.

After the head, the legend remained. And after the legend, the tavern remained – the only place where all versions could coexist without a seal or a sword immediately being slammed onto the table.

I knew the next part of the story would take place there. Not on the battlefield, not in the council chamber, not in the dungeon. Amidst beer, smoke, and lies.

The place where Scotland lied most honestly.

The tavern continues its story

The years piled up like empty jugs in a corner: all the same, all with a stale residue at the bottom. Stirling changed as cities always change—slowly, yet in a way that you still notice

when you're old enough to wonder about it. New faces on old doors, new owners in old rooms, new coats of arms above the same gates. The tavern remained.

The "Crooked Crown" was like a tooth no one wanted pulled: half rotten, half useful. Some nights I thought the building itself had heard more than some of the people who sat in it. It had heard Wallace when they whispered his name. It had heard the songs about him, the clean ones, the dirty ones, the lies. It had heard me when I tried to hide a piece of the truth among all the platitudes, like a knife handle in straw.

I grew older without wanting to, and more sober without realizing it. At some point, I was no longer the man patrolling, but the one sitting at the table, watching younger men act as if they had invented everything. My coat hung less often on my shoulders, more often over the back of my chair. The sword rested more often against the wall than at my hip. But the scars were still there, and the way people look at you when they know you've experienced things they only know from hearsay.

The English came and went, as they always do. Sometimes more, sometimes less. Sometimes with heavy boots, sometimes with gentle words. The coats of arms changed colors, the seals their names, the paper its tone. One called it peace. Another administration. A third called it a "new order." The pavement didn't call it anything at all. It simply continued to accept everything that dripped onto it.

The tavern continued its storytelling. Every evening, with different voices, the same topics, and new lies.

It was one of those evenings when the smoke hung low and the beer was too warm, when I was once again sitting in my usual spot. The bench in the corner was so perfectly shaped to fit me that I sometimes wondered if either of us could even exist without the other.

Iona had aged, of course. More lines on her face, the skin on her hands rougher, her braid a little thinner. But her movements still held the same hardness, the same quickness, the same look as back then, when she had first placed the jug in front of me and asked if I wanted to scream or drink.

"You're sitting crooked," she said as she placed the beer in front of me.

"The bank too," I said.

"She's just adapting," she said. "Get yourself a life that's straight sometime."

"Too late," said the shadow. "The thing has already been installed crooked."

It was crowded. Merchants, farmers, a few young soldiers who hadn't yet grasped that one day they would be sitting in the chairs where the old men now squatted. In one corner, someone was playing a fiddle that made more crackling than melodious sounds. Two lads were playing dice. One was cheating; the other knew it and pretended not to, because winning didn't help him either.

At the table next to me, a man with an overly smooth voice was saying: "...and then, friends, he knocked the Englishman off his horse with a single blow. Right in the middle of the mud. I've never seen anything like it. It was... it was the ghost of Wallace in his arms, I tell you."

His counterpart was so young he couldn't even grow a proper beard. His eyes were shining. "Did you see it yourself?" he asked.

"Of course," the man said. "I was there. Very close by."

The shadow groaned. "There's another one who was on all fronts at once," he muttered.

I took a sip, held the beer in my mouth for a moment, as if checking whether there was still room for the truth tonight. The boy turned his head, saw me. The scar on my lip drew his gaze like a nail draws shavings.

"You too?" he asked. "Were you out with Wallace?"

He said his name as if he were talking about a relative who had just happened to end up on the wrong cart.

"I was in Stirling," I said. "When they brought him."

His eyes widened. "In the square? By the cart?"

"Yes," I said.

The conversations at the next table grew quieter. Words quickly become attached to a sentence like that. "I was there." That's all it takes – half the room moves closer, the other half pretends to be too busy to listen.

"Tell me," said the boy, without any shame. "The old stories..." He made a vague hand gesture. "They always say he would have bitten through the rope with his teeth if they hadn't broken his jaw."

"I've also heard," someone chimed in, "that he gave orders to the walls in the dungeon. That the stones remembered and that's why everything is crumbling today."

Laughter. Teeth, jugs, shoulders. They knew it was nonsense. But they needed the nonsense so they wouldn't have to see themselves too clearly.

I saw Iona. She leaned briefly against the counter, the pitcher in her hand, and her look said: "Come on. Open your mouth. Or keep it closed. Both come at a price."

"You are a witness, whether you like it or not," whispered the shadow. "They will continue to spin the legend even without you. The only question is whether you will throw a few grains of sand in their teeth."

I put the pitcher down. "He didn't laugh," I said. No big drumming, no raised voice. Just loud enough for the table to hear.

The boy blinked. "Right?"

"No," I said. "He was breathing heavily. He was scared. Anyone who tells you otherwise wasn't there or is lying on principle."

A murmur. This time not an approving one. More like an irritated one. They wanted heroic material, not anatomy.

"But didn't he..." the smooth narrator began, "...spit in the executioner's face?"

"No," I said. "He looked them in the eye. That was worse."

The shadow grinned. "There."

The boy stared at me as if I were about to crush his favorite toy with a boot. "But in the songs..."

"In the songs, everyone is loud, clean, and immortal at the right moment," I interrupted. "In reality, he was a man whose dignity they slowly tried to strip away, piece by piece. And he held on to as much of it as he could. That's more than most people manage."

"It doesn't matter," interjected one of the older men, who had already half-emptied his cup. "In the end, what matters is what he triggered. Not how he was breathing while they were cutting open his stomach."

"No," I said. "Both are important. If you make him too big, you become smaller yourself. If you blow him up to sainthood, you have an excuse for why you don't have even half the backbone he does."

The boy blushed. Not with anger, but with shame.

"What did he say?" he asked more quietly. "Just before..."

I thought about it. The words he had actually said were etched into my mind, not cleanly, not heroically. I still heard them, sometimes at night, sometimes in the noise.

"He said," I began, "that they hide behind their law. That they pretend the rope is clean just because a man waved a piece of parchment beforehand. He didn't curse the world. He told them what they are."

"What then?" the boy asked.

"Cowardly," I said.

Silence. A word as heavy as a jug when you slam it directly against someone's forehead.

"That's not in any song," muttered the singer from the corner who had been listening.

"Then write one that includes it," I said.

He laughed briefly. "Nobody wants to hear that," he said. "People want him to have died with a scream that tore open the heavens. Not with a sentence that makes them look in the mirror."

"The tavern never asked what people wanted to hear," Iona interjected as she wiped another table. "The tavern only says what they've heard before. The rest is up to you."

The shadow clapped softly. "That woman is the only sensible person in the entire damned kingdom," he said.

The smooth-talking storyteller snorted. "Well, if you ask me," he began, "it's better for the country if people have a legend to look up to, rather than just knowing that he stank and was scared like we were."

"The country doesn't need an excuse not to act," I said. "It already has enough. If you make him into a mythical creature, he's far away. Untouchable. 'There's only one like him.' If you see him for what he was—a man with dirty boots who said no—then you have no excuse for not at least trying."

The boy stared into his cup. "I don't know if I could be like that," he murmured.

"Neither am I," I said. "I was there. And I did nothing but look. If you need a hero, find someone else. I'm not one."

The shadow nodded slowly. "Finally, you're saying something that actually fits."

A few men giggled uncertainly. One said, "Oh, let him have his truth. We have ours."

"Exactly," said the singer. "The tavern keeps telling its story. Today your version, tomorrow mine, the day after something in between. In the end, no one sings how it really was anymore. Only how they feel."

"And you?" I asked him. "How are you feeling?"

He shrugged. "Half drunk, half guilty," he said. "Like always when I sing about him. I feel like someone dancing on a grave, hoping the person underneath will take it with humor."

"He does," said the shadow. "But not in the way you think."

Later, the noise level rose. Someone started singing a song so old that no one knew who had written it. He kept appearing between the lines, sometimes as a name, sometimes just as a shadow. No one sang "William" aloud anymore, but when the melody shifted at certain points, you knew exactly who they meant.

I leaned back, held the jug in my hand, and let the sounds wash over me. Laughter, arguments, the dull thud of someone slapping the table during a dice game. Outside, somewhere, a dog barked, a cart rumbled.

The tavern kept on telling its stories. It needed no books, no advice, no priests. It had beer, tongues, and enough pain to fill a hundred years' worth of tales.

"You know that at some point you too will just be a character in their story," said the shadow.

"What do you mean?" I thought.

"The old soldier," he said, "who sat in the corner and claimed to have seen him. Some will believe you, some will say you exaggerated, some will add things you never said. After you

comes the next one claiming to have been there. That's how it works. The tavern devours everyone. Not just the heroes."

I took a sip. "So be it," I said to myself. "If I'm going to be eaten, at least some part of me should be right."

As the night wore on, a veil settled over everything, the kind that only exists in taverns: too much smoke, too much alcohol, too many half-baked truths in the air. I heard snatches of stories all around me.

"...then he said, I'll kiss your crown if you dare..."

"...my father swears he once saw him, barefoot in the snow, without freezing..."

"...they say that if you place your hand on the stone at the gate on a night like this, you can feel its heart beating..."

The shadow laughed. "If you stand there long enough, you'll only feel your fingers freezing off," he said.

Eventually I got up, paid what I owed, and went outside. The air was cold but clear. The stars looked as if they had positioned themselves at the edge of the world to watch us lie to each other.

I walked along the path to the gate, as I had always done. Old dogs run their laps because otherwise they don't know what to do with their bones. Above me was the spot where meat had once hung. Down below, carved into the stone, the word was still there: BLOOD. The years hadn't polished it away. On the contrary, they had made it more deeply etched.

I placed my hand on it, not because I thought I could feel his heart, but because I wanted to know if my fingers were still able to distinguish something cold from something warm.

"The tavern will continue to tell its tale," I thought. "When I'm gone, when they're gone, when those up there have found their next traitor. It will twist his name, forget mine, add new names. The songs will change, the stains will remain. And somewhere, some bastard will sit in a corner and claim he understood everything better."

The shadow tilted its head. "So?" it asked. "Does that bother you?"

I considered it. Then I shook my head inwardly. "Perhaps this is the only justice we'll get," I thought. "That no one has sole control over history. Not those with ropes, not those with feathers, not those with fiddles. The tavern takes them all, mixes them together, and spits out something that the next generation has to live with."

"And what will remain of him?" asked the shadow.

I looked into the dark archway, where the wind played as it had when the cart had rolled through.

“A few sentences,” I thought. “A few wrong songs. A few right looks. A country that clings to its name when it no longer knows how to say ‘no.’ And a bastard who can’t sleep at night when someone claims he laughed.”

The shadow nodded slowly. "That's enough," he said. "That's certainly enough for a legend."

The city breathed. The castle snored. The tavern behind me continued to mutter, as if it were one large, drunken throat.

I took my hand from the stone, turned around, and went back. Not as a hero, not as a witness, not as a scribe. Just as someone who knows that the tavern will continue its story even without him—and that he will still come again, tomorrow, the day after, as long as his legs will carry him.

Because somewhere between the lies and the last sips, a small, true sentence always lingers.

And if it's only that one:

He was a man. And he did what he could.

At some point, you realize that it's no longer you who go to the tavern, but the tavern that goes into you. You carry it in your bones, in your liver, in the smell of your jacket, even when you've had enough and try to stay home. Then you sit alone, listen to the wood creaking, pretend to care about the wind – and in the end, you get up again, put on your boots, and walk the same way as always, as if there were a noose around your neck that leads not upwards, but to the door of the "Crooked Crown."

The faces had changed. The lines hadn't. Young men came in, barely old enough to know shaving and getting drunk, talking about battles they hadn't seen and freedom they thought was just a word on a banner. Old men sat in the corners, holding tankards like walking sticks, staring into a time that none of those at the next table could comprehend.

Wallace was no longer "the traitor William Wallace," as in the old records, nor simply "the great Wallace," as in the cheap songs. He was "the old man," "the one from back then," "the one they took apart." The names grow shorter the longer they survive. Like bones, the flesh gnawed away by time.

One evening, a young clerk came in, clean-cut, too clean for the shop. Quill pen in his pocket, ink stain on his fingers, coat without holes. He didn't sit down, he stood up as if he were the teacher and we were the class.

“On behalf of the council,” he began, and you could hear the nausea he felt at the very wording, “I am collecting reports. For an official chronicle. The history of our time. Names, events, dates. So that nothing is lost.”

The shadow laughed dryly. "Too late," he said. "The most important thing is already lost before you could even read."

A few men laughed, others rolled their eyes. "History of our time," one growled. "Write: We toiled, drank, and watched as those in power screwed us over. Your book is finished."

The writer grimaced as if he'd bitten into a lemon. "It's about accuracy," he said. "We finally want a clear picture. Not just the people's songs or the dry protocols. Something... in between."

"The in-between is right here," Iona said, tapping the floorboards. "But you won't be able to put it on paper."

He looked around. "I've been told," he said cautiously, "that someone sits here... a former soldier... who was there when..." He paused, searching for a word that wasn't "betrayed" or "glorified." "...when it all came to an end for Wallace."

All eyes turned to me. I felt them before I even lifted my head.

"That's him," said one. "That bastard in the corner."

The term had stuck with me, like a scar. Sometimes it had been an insult, sometimes a nickname, sometimes a minor compliment. I accepted it like everything else.

The writer approached cautiously, as if walking on a cracking frozen lake. "May I sit down?" he asked.

"Can I stop you from standing there?" I asked in return.

He sat down. Iona slammed a pitcher down in front of him without asking if he wanted anything. "If you want answers here," she said, "you'll need this."

He cautiously took a sip, grimaced, but pretended to enjoy it. People who are ashamed of beer are rarely any good.

"I've been told about you," he began again. "That you... well... don't believe everything you hear about him. That you were there. And yet..."

"Still manage to open your mouth," I helped him. "Yes. Still."

He took out his parchment, laid it on the table, placed a quill beside it, as if he were about to dissect me. "I want," he said, "to write down the truth. The real story. What was William Wallace like?"

The shadow groaned. "Again," he said. "The question no one can answer, and you of all people are standing in the light."

I drank, put down the jug, and looked at the boy. He was perhaps half as old as I was tired. But his eyes truly wanted to know something, not just confirm what he had already read in some book.

"Which version do you want?" I asked. "The one for the children, the one for the king, or the one that makes you sleep worse?"

"The last one," he said after a brief hesitation. "Otherwise, there's no point in bothering."

Iona listened while she did behind the counter what tavern women do: pace back and forth, listen, know more than everyone else.

"Tell him about the barn," murmured the shadow. "Not the cart. Nobody understands the barn, so start with that."

I leaned back. "He wasn't born a legend," I said. "He wasn't even meant to be a hero. He was a man who was told to shut up too many times by the wrong people. And at some point, he just didn't anymore. That's all."

The writer wrote. His fingers were quick, his wrist accustomed to molding lies and truths into the same mold.

"We found him soaked and tired in a barn," I continued. "No light from above, just beams, mice, hay. He smelled like us: of sweat, of rain, of fear. He had a sword, yes. But many do. The difference was: he had already lost more than we had, so he had less to lose."

"This is not a good start for a chronicle," muttered the writer.

"Then just write: 'It happened at that time,'" I said. "Then you'll be back with your glorious heroes. I'll tell you how it was."

The men at the next table were now silent. Even the dice lay untouched in the middle. The tavern can listen like a confessional, if it so chooses.

"He was loud on the battlefield," I said. "Not because he wanted to show off, but because no one listens when you give quiet orders. At night he was silent. Many didn't like that. They want heroes who give grand speeches around the campfire. He just sat there and looked at the dirt under his fingernails. Maybe he already knew then where he would end up."

The writer was writing, paused, and looked up. "You don't like him very much, do you?" he asked.

"I like him more than most of the people who talk about him," I said. "Because I don't need him as an excuse. I was a soldier, long enough. People like to shift responsibility onto others: 'I was just following orders.' You're doing the same to him: 'We were just carrying on his dream.' But all you were doing was lifting your own asses."

"No one will write that in the chronicle," whispered the shadow.

"Did he make mistakes?" the writer asked.

"More than enough," I said. "People died because of him who were never asked. Villages burned that never knew how to spell 'freedom.' He was wrong. About men, about moments. He was stubborn, and sometimes his stubbornness was nothing but wounded pride in fine armor. Satisfied?"

The boy looked confused. "But why... do so many people still talk about him? Why do they sing his songs? Why... do they hang figurines of him above their fireplaces?"

“Because he spoke up when others were silent,” I said. “Because he said no when the rest of us were just thinking, ‘Damn, it’s cold up here on the wall.’ Because he stood there when they came to get him, and didn’t try to hide in the shadows. Legends are rarely fair. But they have reasons.”

The writer breathed shallowly. "And... this day... its end... was he brave?"

“He was a human being,” I said. “He didn’t want to die. He was in pain. He was afraid. He didn’t beg. He didn’t laugh. He found words that hurt them. And then they hurt him until there was nothing left that could scream.”

Behind the counter, Iona mechanically polished a jug that was already clean.

“Write it down,” she said without looking up, “that they felt the need to tear him to pieces. Then future generations will know who was truly afraid.”

The shadow grinned. "If she were smart, she would start the chapter."

The writer swallowed. "You are tough," he said to me. "Against him. Against you. Against everyone."

“No,” I said. “I just don’t have the strength for icing anymore.”

The boy at the next table spoke up again. “But... if that’s how you think... why do you even let us sing the songs? Why don’t you step in every time and say, ‘That’s not how it was?’”

I looked at him. For a long time. "Because you need something," I finally said. "Something bigger than this filth. When you go to bed hungry at night and have to chop wood again the next morning, it helps to believe that someone was once there who wanted more than just a dry blanket. I don't want to take that away from you."

"But?" he asked.

“But I don’t want you to hide behind him,” I said. “When you mention his name, it’s not just to listen to stories. It’s to ask yourselves what you yourselves are willing to risk – without a cart, without a legend, just with your two hands.”

The tavern breathed heavily. Someone sneezed. Someone laughed awkwardly. Someone raised their mug and murmured their name – not the name of the man before them, but the name of the man we were talking about.

The writer leaned forward. "If I write all that down like that," he said, "people will say I belittled him."

“Then write their rubbish next to it,” I said. “Write two versions. The one with the laughing hero and the one with the man who stinks and trembles and still doesn’t kneel. Let people choose which one they can bear.”

"That's not how history works," he muttered.

“That’s life,” I said. “History always comes too late.”

The shadow chuckled softly. "You'll be kicked out of his beautiful book yet," he said.

The boy mustered all his courage. "Can you... can you tell me how he spoke? Not what. How."

I closed my eyes briefly. I heard his voice again, not loud, not powerful. Rough, deeper than mine, but not a shout.

"Like someone," I said, "who already knew that most people would only believe him when he was dead."

Nobody said anything. For a moment, the "Krumme Krone" was as silent as a church just before the first prayer.

Then a chair rumbled, someone stumbled, another person started laughing at something completely unrelated. Life forced its way back in, like smoke you can never quite get rid of.

The scribe rolled up his parchment. His fingers were black with ink, his forehead glistening with thought. "Thank you," he said. "I don't know what I can use from it. But... I now know what I must leave out."

"Leave out the laughter," I said. "And leave out the word 'noble' in lowercase. Then we'll be one step further."

He nodded, stood up, and left. At the door, he paused briefly, looked back once more, as if to make sure that I hadn't just been a character in one of his future sentences.

"Do you know what he's going to do to you?" asked the shadow.

"Well?", I thought.

"He makes you a footnote," he said. "'An unnamed soldier reported...', that sort of thing. And maybe a hundred years later someone reads it and thinks, 'He probably exaggerated too.' And so it goes on."

Iona came over and refilled my jug without asking. "You gave the boy the right poison," she said.

"I gave him what I had," I said.

"Poison," she repeated. "Truth is always poison for a nice, clean history book. But maybe that's exactly what he needs so he doesn't just write fairy tales."

The conversations around us had returned to their normal level. Dice clanked, someone cursed a lost bet, a woman laughed too loudly at a bad joke. But here and there I caught snippets: "...didn't laugh...", "...just a man...", "...more dirt on his boots than on his soul..."

The tavern did what it always does. It took the sentences, broke them into pieces, mixed them with old lies and new band-aids, and sent them on their way.

“In the end,” said the shadow, “no one will know whether you defended him or destroyed him.”

"Never mind," I thought. "The main thing is that they realize he was a human being at all."

I drank. Not to forget. I was too far gone for that. I drank to soften the edges of the memories a little, so they wouldn't cut me open from the inside.

The tavern continued its tale. Outside, children grew into men who believed history began in books. Inside sat those who knew it was passed down in spaces like this, from mouth to mouth, night after night, with all the grime that couldn't be sealed.

And somewhere in between, he was still hanging around: William Wallace, that stubborn dog of a man, who probably never dreamed that decades later a half-broken soldier would be sitting in a smoky pub trying to save him from too much halo.

"If he could see this," murmured the shadow, "he would shake his head."

"They tore it off him," I thought. "We're shaking for him."

There's a point you don't notice in the moment it happens, but only later, when you look back: there it was. Something stopped, and you carried on as if nothing had happened. And years later, you realize that since that point, you've essentially just been an echo.

For me, it wasn't a battlefield, a cart, a rope. It was an evening like many others, a rain too delicate to be taken seriously, and a cold that crept into my bones for nothing better to do. I sat in the "Crooked Crown," in my usual spot, in front of my mug, with my mind in shadow and my weariness at my back. So far, so normal.

The door opened, and a gust of wind came in, carrying the scent of wet stones, horse, smoke, something undefined. Two lads came in, young, both with that look that says, "I know where I'm going," and at the same time, "Please tell me where I should go." One wore a soldier's coat, new, not yet broken in. The other had peasant hands, cracked, finger-thick, with dirt in the grooves.

They didn't just sit down at any table. They sat down at the one that was free near me. People sometimes do that without knowing why. Maybe because they sense that stories lie there like old coins. Maybe because they just want a taste of the smoke that gathers around someone who's seen too much.

Iona placed beer in front of them without asking. "To warm up," she said. "And to wean them off it."

The soldier's son looked around. "So this is it," he muttered. "The tavern they're talking about."

"You're telling us about a tavern?" asked the farmer.

“Yes,” said the boy. “In our village they say there’s someone sitting here who...” He broke off, looked over at me.

The shadow chuckled. "Come on, bastard," he said. "Your fame has preceded you. The cathedral of your shit is filling up."

I took a sip and pretended I hadn't heard anything.

The boy turned the jug between his hands. "Did you know Wallace?" he finally asked. Directly. Without beating around the bush.

In the past, such a question would have hit me like a spear; today it's like an old arrow stuck somewhere in a crack in the planks.

"I've seen him," I said. "More than once."

The farmer pushed the jug aside, as if making room for what was coming next. "My grandfather," he said, "sworn he was in Stirling when they... well... when they were finished with him. My father says the old man always exaggerated. I thought I'd come here and ask someone who no longer needs to boast."

"People are placing a lot of hope in your bad mood," whispered the shadow.

"Your grandfather wasn't there," I said. "Not in the scenes you hear in the songs. Maybe he was standing somewhere far in the back, watching the smoke rise. But he wasn't at the front. I would have seen him there."

The boy grimaced. "I thought so," he muttered. "The old man said Wallace pushed the rope up with his chin and..."

"...and spat in God's face," added the other. "That's the kind of thing we've heard around here too."

Several heads turned. You throw the name into a room like this, and all thoughts pause for a moment.

"He didn't spit," I said. "Neither God nor executioner. Spitting is for men who still think it makes them feel bigger. He was above that."

"And what did he do then?" asked the soldier.

"He breathed," I said. "Until they broke him of the habit."

The farmer laughed nervously. "That's a lousy story."

"It's an honest one," I said.

The shadow nodded. "Now comes the part where you scratch the shine out of their eyes again," he said. "You should charge admission."

"But why is everyone still talking about him then?" asked the soldier. "In the camp, they say his ghost still walks the hills. One man swears he saw him. At night, in the fog. Tall, with a sword."

“They tell a lot of stories in the camp,” I said. “If they stopped telling stories, they would suddenly have to seriously ask themselves why they follow orders they hate.”

He stared into his mug. “I signed because I thought I was fighting for something,” he said. “Then I realized I’m just fighting for someone. The names change, the orders stay the same. And every time I ask what it’s all for, they say: freedom. And then they say his name. As if he were a coin you can use to pay for anything.”

The shadow whistled softly. “Young people aren’t as stupid as they used to be,” he said. “Or they ask better questions.”

Iona leaned against the counter and listened without pretending.

“Perhaps,” I said slowly, “you should leave your name alone for a while. Like a field you’ve tilled too often. Eventually, it doesn’t do any good to keep hoeing at it. Then only weeds grow. Perhaps it’s time you stopped using it as an excuse.”

“For what?” asked the farmer.

“For everything,” I said. “For drinking because times are bad. For fighting because the chain of command is long. For saying nothing when they come for the next one. ‘He tried – we can’t be like him anymore anyway.’ If you mention his name, it’s only when you’re simultaneously asking yourself what you’re doing with your own two hands. Not his.”

The soldier laughed bitterly. “That’s asking a lot of two pairs of hands that barely know how to use a plow and a wooden sword,” he said.

“That was all he had,” I replied. “Only the wood was sharper.”

The shadow snorted. “And its head is less damaged than yours, bastard,” it said.

It didn’t become silent, but the volume shifted. Those nearby listened, while those further away spoke louder so they wouldn’t have to hear each other.

“Tell us something that isn’t in the songs,” the farmer suddenly asked. “Something small. Something that only someone who was really there could know.”

I thought about it. There were enough. The way he rubbed his forehead when he was tired. The way he wiped his hands on his thighs before a battle, as if he could shake off his nervousness that way. The way he’d once laughed in the barn in the dark, just for a moment, when Fergus had told some dirty joke, and how that laugh had sounded more like a cough.

“He had bad teeth,” I finally said.

They both stared at me.

“What?” asked the soldier.

“Bad teeth,” I repeated. “One slightly crooked in the front, one broken, discolored from dirt, bad food, and constant jaw clenching. When he opened his mouth, you could see he was more of a field than a farmyard. Write that in your next heroic song.”

The farmer burst out laughing. Not a mocking laugh, but rather one of surprise at what kinds of images could fit into his mind.

"The great freedom-loving man with nasty teeth," he snorted.

"Why are you telling me this?" asked the soldier.

"Because otherwise you'll forget that he was real," I said. "No picture on the wall, no pristine face in a book. If you really want to understand someone, look in their mouth. There you can see if they were hungry, if they were silent, if they gritted their teeth too much. Your songs only ever show the eyes."

The shadow laughed hoarsely. "Now you're getting poetic, old dog," he said.

"Did it bother him?" asked the farmer.

"What?" I asked.

"That his teeth were like that," he said.

I shrugged. "No idea," I said. "He had other problems. Ropes, knives, whole damned armies. And a country that didn't want to know what it was as long as no one led the way."

The writer from the other day wasn't there, but it wouldn't have changed anything anyway. The tavern was taking notes, as it always did: in people's minds, in jokes, in half-sentences, in drinking stories that sounded different the next day but still had the same core.

"You will die," the shadow said suddenly.

"Thanks for the tip," I thought.

"I don't mean now, you donkey," he said. "But someday. And then all that will be left of you are the scraps they need. 'There was this guy who said his teeth were bad.' Maybe you'll become the one who brought down the heroes. A mere pawn in their big mouth."

"Better than nothing," I thought.

Later that evening, as the smoke thickened and the voices grew coarser, I stood up, my bones protesting softly, like old dogs who don't want to go out again. The farmer rested his forearms on the table.

"Will you be back tomorrow?" he asked.

"Probably," I said.

The soldier nodded. "Me too," he said. "I feel like I haven't even begun to understand."

"It never ends," I said. "You start, and you don't stop. You die in the middle, and the rest keeps going as if it were a finished song. Get used to it."

Iona watched me as I walked towards the door. "Be careful not to get left outside," she said.

"I'll be back," I said.

"That's not what I mean," she said. "Some people go out to the gate, put their hand on the stone, look into the arch, and only come back halfway. The other half stays stuck there with him."

"Too late," said the shadow. "The half that's hanging with him is already old. The other half is hanging with you."

Outside, the street was wet, but no longer muddy. Over the years, Stirling had developed a thin layer of habit. Bloodstains were rarely seen anymore, but other things were: chipped plaster, scratches where carts had hit the walls, carved symbols that no one could quite read anymore.

I went to the goal as always. Not out of duty, but out of habit. Old ways, old guilt. Above me was only stone. The trophies long gone, times changed, the methods refined – but the space was still there.

I stopped and placed my hand on the familiar spot in the stone floor. The word was almost completely gone by now, worn away by rain, boots, and years. Just a slight indentation, which you can feel when you know it's there.

"BLOOD," I thought. "Even if you can't read it anymore."

The shadow sat down next to me, drew its knees up as if it didn't have to worry about anyone stepping on its non-existent toes.

"So?" he asked. "What will you say now? If someone asks you tomorrow who he was?"

I thought of all the versions I'd chewed over in this book, in this head, in this cursed tavern: the bastard who set villages ablaze. The stubborn one who said no until it tore him apart. The man who didn't laugh when they wanted him to. The one with the bad teeth. The one with the voice that wasn't big, yet couldn't be silenced.

"I'm saying," I thought, "that he was one of those who made it harder for them to do wrong in peace. Not impossible. Just harder."

The shadow nodded slowly. "That's not much," he said.

"Yes," I said. "For a place like this world, that's quite a lot."

I took my hand off the stone and slowly straightened up. My bones cracked, my back protested, and my breathing became labored. Behind me, the tavern murmured on, ahead lay the night, and somewhere in between, stories unfolded that I could neither stop nor properly control.

I went back. Not because I thought I was needed, but because there was nothing else to do but sit there, listen, and occasionally interject when the lie became too blatant. The tavern would continue talking even without me. But as long as I had a few evenings left, I could at least try to keep some of their teeth blunt.

"Come on, you old bastard," said the shadow. "They'll keep telling the story. With or without you. But it's a bit more honest with you."

I nodded. "Honest enough," I thought, "that it hurts, and dishonest enough that it's bearable."

The door of the "Crooked Crown" opened, the smoke wafted towards me like a familiar enemy. I stepped inside, leaving the night outside, and sat down on my bench.

The tavern owner continued his story. And I was still there to listen.

That was enough for now.

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Author: Michael Lappenbusch

E-mail: admin@perplex.click

Homepage: <https://www.perplex.click>

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