

PROLOGUE

Trapped by the weight of a single cotton sheet, Salimbene listened to the bedchamber's sickness-tainted air rattle in and out of his chest. Something was about to happen, cataclysmic as an earthquake. His aching bones, his burning blood, the strange, knowing presence behind his eyes – they all told him. This night was an ending. His life, *this* life, was ending. Soon he'd be reborn. But as what, he didn't know. He couldn't see it. Not yet.

So he drooped his lacklustre eyelids low enough to deceive the physick . . . and waited.

Barbazan, done at last with his poking and prodding, his grunts and dire mutterings, retreated to the lamplit corridor beyond the chamber's open door. The king stood there, magnificent in a fine blue robe and priceless jewels. Four days since he'd dared cross the chamber's threshold. One more ominous sign.

'Is there hope?' the king whispered, too afraid to ask for the future out loud. His long, grey-striped beard was oiled and heavily perfumed, clouding him in a sweet stink. Even over the mingled stench of vomit and shit, suppurating flesh and useless incense, Salimbene could smell it: a blending of hyssop, sandalwood and jasmine. Royal scents, meant only for the great. 'Tell me, Barbazan. Is there hope, or must he die?'

Pitilessly revealed by the corridor's hanging lamps, the physick's face folded and stretched, malleable with grief. Or was it revulsion? Shit and vomit were commonplace in a sickroom, no reason for disgust. But this strange, disfiguring illness also brought boils and pustules and endlessly weeping lesions. Not a pretty suffering, only ugliness and filth. A gradual, stinking decay that not even the most obscure unguents could halt.

‘My lord king,’ Barbazan said, carefully. Lamplight shone on patches of sun-browned scalp, visible through his carefully crimped, brittle black hair. ‘There is always hope.’

The king’s face twisted. ‘So you think he will die.’

‘Whether your son lives or dies will be as Carsissus decrees, my lord king.’ The physick’s tone hinted at reproof. ‘But I will fight to keep him.’

‘And if that battle is won?’ said the king. ‘Do you tell me he is not near to ruined with this affliction?’

A moment, then the physick looked down. His hands fell to his sides, hiding in folds of moss-green lamb’s wool almost as fine as that worn by the king. Barbazan made a rich living in service to Zeidica’s ruler.

‘Alas,’ he admitted. ‘But my lord king—’ He looked up again. ‘You should not despair. You are a vigorous man, and your new queen is lush. Surely another son will quickly follow, to sit your throne in his time.’

‘I do not understand this calamity.’ The king sounded stronger. Close to anger. ‘Why am I punished, Barbazan? What sin is mine, to deserve this?’

Two frowning gazes slid into the chamber. Then the king shifted his resentful eyes to the physick’s guarded face. What he saw there made him wince, and swallow.

‘Speak your truth,’ he commanded. ‘Your words will not ruin you unless you repeat them elsewhere.’

‘My lord king . . .’ Barbazan shook his head. ‘You know I am counted a great man of healing. In my sixty-five years I have seen all manner of sickness and death. No mysteries of the body remain for me.’

‘I do know it. Why else would you be trusted as physick to my court? Seek not for praise, Barbazan. Answer me instead.’ The king pointed into the chamber. ‘What pestilence devours his flesh?’

‘Great and gracious king, I cannot name it,’ said the physick, full of sorrow and dread. ‘I have never seen its like in my life.’

‘Meaning what, Barbazan?’

‘Meaning your son’s affliction is not natural.’

‘Not natural?’ The king’s head lifted, as though he braced for a blow. ‘Do you tell me—’

‘Alas, my lord king.’ Barbazan’s words were almost a groan. ‘I fear your son’s illness springs from some poisonous canker of the spirit.’

A terrible silence. Then the king and the physick pressed their palms to their eyes, swiftly, that they might be spared the sight of evil. They spat on the corridor’s stone floor, expelling evil from their souls.

Watching them, feeling his heart labour in his wasted, painful chest, Salimbene felt a different, sharper pain. They were branding him unclean. They were calling him *curse*d.

The king wrapped his heavily ringed fingers about the diamond sunburst chain resting on his breast and squeezed until its golden links threatened to buckle. ‘You are certain?’

‘Yes, my lord king,’ Barbazan whispered. ‘Forgive me. I am.’

‘And he cannot be saved?’

‘I do not say that, my lord. But—’

‘*Should not* be saved?’

Barbazan frowned. ‘A question for a priest, I think.’

‘I am asking you, Barbazan.’

‘My lord king, I—’ The physick placed his capable hands together, palm to palm. ‘I am sworn to heal the body. Beyond that, my authority wavers.’

‘Does it?’ The king laughed, a harsh bark. ‘Then I envy you. Because my authority cannot waver. As Zeidica’s king I must be priest and physick both to my kingdom. And as its priest I must face every truth . . . no matter how painful.’

‘What truth, my lord king?’ Barbazan sounded fearful.

‘That thanks to you I now understand my sin. My sin, Barbazan, was Salimbene’s mother.’

‘His – his mother?’

The king’s lips pinched bloodless. ‘Yes. For when I married that woman, I took to wife a witch.’

‘My lord king . . .’ Uncomfortable, Barbazan shuffled his feet. ‘I know there were whispers. I dismissed them as the rotten fruits of jealousy. Instead of choosing a woman of Zeidica, your eye lit upon an outsider from Osfahr.’

‘A *witch* from Osfahr,’ said the king, his face dark. ‘They breed them as a dog breeds fleas in that cursed place.’

‘But my lord – she was examined. No flaw was found.’

‘She was a *powerful* witch. As full of secrets as ever she was with child.’

‘My lord king . . .’ Barbazan risked his life to touch the king’s arm. ‘If you knew her for a witch . . .’

The king knocked the physick’s hand aside. ‘*Know?* I did not *know!* She snared me in a web of wickedness, blinded me with her spells and evil conjures. It is only *now* that I see what has been hidden from me all these years. That rotting lump of flesh in there that you say is beyond all natural remedy? It is not my son.’

Barbazan’s mouth dropped open. ‘My lord?’

‘She said he is my son, but she is dead and he is dying, unnatural, and *you*, Barbazan, can you swear to me that my seed gave him life?’

‘If not your seed, my lord king, then whose?’

‘No man’s! Is it not plain? *She* gave him life, with foulest sorcery.’

‘*Sorcery?* Oh, no, my lord king—’

‘Can you swear she did not?’ Sweat glistened on the king’s brow. ‘Before the god of healing, Barbazan, with a sacred stone in your hand, *would you swear it?*’

Now the physick was sweating, salt trickles running down his temples and into the grooves in his parched cheeks. He looked like he was weeping. ‘My lord king, his face is yours when you were his age.’

‘Are you deaf?’ said the king, his eyes wild. ‘*She was a witch.* If her son wears my youthful face, it is her sorcery to blame. Her sorcery is to blame for *all* the ills of my life.’

‘My lord king, what ills do you—’

‘You are a fool,’ the king spat, glaring. ‘You call me vigorous but in nineteen years she birthed no other child. I call that ill!’

‘Your son’s birthing was bloody,’ Barbazan protested. ‘Your wife’s body was ruined, after.’

‘Another sign of sorcery! And it was sorcery kept me from discarding her when she was proved barren.’

Stepping back, Barbazan raised placating hands. ‘My lord king, I do not think we can—’

‘Is it not strange that her son sickened on the first blood moon since she died?’ The king was breathing heavily, making the dangled

sapphires in his ears swing and flash in the mellow light. ‘The blood moon, Barbazan! A witch’s glory time, when all foul deeds are shrouded in murkiest night! If she did not conjure him to life with sorcery, why else would he fail when the moon rose bloody? Or do you say, physick, that his moral decay springs from *my* loins?’

Barbazan gasped. ‘*No*, my lord king.’

‘No, my lord king,’ the king said grimly. ‘And well for you that you do not say it, for there is more than one physick in this world.’

‘Yes, my lord king,’ said Barbazan, his voice strangled. ‘My lord king, these are weighty matters, far beyond my reach. I should return to your – to my patient.’

The king lifted a finger. ‘Wait.’

Still as death on his pillows, from beneath his lowered eyelids Salimbene watched the king stare at him. Watched his lips thin, and the leap of muscle along the bearded jaw that had softened with the passing years. And as he watched, saw his fate decided.

‘Go, Barbazan,’ said the king. ‘And never return. You are no longer needed here. See to my wife. I wish to know how many days must pass before my seed will fall on her fertile, natural ground.’

Barbazan’s shocked stare leapt into the bedchamber, and out again. ‘But – my lord king—’

‘*You dare dispute me?*’

Shuddering, the physick bent almost double. ‘No, my lord king.’

‘Barbazan . . .’ The king placed a fist beneath the physick’s chin and forced the frightened man’s head up. ‘You said yourself, Carsissus will decide if he lives or dies. Is that not the truth?’

‘Yes, my lord king,’ Barbazan whispered. ‘That is the truth.’

Lowering his fist, the king nodded. ‘The solemn truth. For we are mortal, Barbazan, and flawed. The gods have no need of our interference.’

‘No, my lord king.’ Cautiously, the physick unbent himself. ‘I – I will see to the queen, my lord. And in this matter—’ A final, flickered glance into the chamber. ‘I will trust the gods.’

‘*Silently* trust,’ said the king, his face full of dire warning. ‘Barbazan, you are wise.’

Barbazan withdrew and for a long time after, the king stood silent in the bedchamber’s open doorway. Salimbene waited, barely

breathing. There had been a mistake, surely. Surely he had misunderstood. For seventeen years he and this man had lived as king and prince. Father and son. Friend and friend. Friends did not leave each other to die, alone and in miserable agony.

Fathers did not condemn their sons to that.

Still unspeaking, the king reached for the chamber door's carved ivory handle. Tightened his jewelled fingers around it. Started to pull.

Salimbene sat up. The pain sank its talons deeper into his corrupted flesh, but he ignored it. With her dying breath his mother had warned him . . . but he'd refused to believe her. How could he believe her? He was the king's *son*. His pride. His joy. His heir.

'Please, my lord. Wait. Speak to me.'

The king said nothing. The door kept closing.

'*Father!* You'd abandon me? Leave me to die? *Why?*'

The door's closing paused. The king sighed. 'A true prince would not have to ask.'

A soft, final thud of wood against wood. The chamber sank into deeper shadow, its only light the small lamp on the table beside the bed.

Stunned, Salimbene screwed his crusted eyes tightly shut. Betrayal was a dagger twisting in his heart. Salt tears flooded his eyes, unstoppable, and spilled to sting the weeping lesions on his face. But not for long. Soon enough rage rose to burn away the grief. To burn away kind memories, leaving nothing but hate. And with the hate came fresh strength.

Beneath his wool-stuffed mattress was hidden a great secret. His mother's last and greatest gift.

Biting his scabbed lip, smothering the pain to a thin mewl, Salimbene kicked free of his sheet and half-rolled, half-fell, out of his princely bed. His linen sick-shirt tore free where seeping pus had glued it to his skin. Swift blots of blood spread across the older, yellower stains. He had to wait again, unevenly breathing on hands and knees, until he was strong enough to lift the mattress and grope beneath it. When at last his fingers touched the book of spells that had once belonged to his mother, Jelani of Osfahr, the true queen of Zeidica, it felt like a kind of coming home. Bound in gold-stitched calfskin, each stiff page covered with careful ink,

no Zeidican would know what the book said. Its words were written in Osfahri.

'Keep this safe from prying eyes, my love,' his mother had said in her native tongue, that they'd shared since first he learned to speak. *'No one can know you have it. Your life is forfeit if it's found.'*

Bidding farewell to him on her deathbed, she was so thin he was sure he could see the bones and slowing blood below her skin.

'The key to my power, the same power that sleeps in you, is in this book, Salimbene,' she'd whispered, despite her suffering. *'You feel the power waking, don't you? You've had the dreams.'*

Of course she'd known, without him telling her. Never in his life could he hide the truth from his mother. She was a witch. A sorceress of Osfahri. Since learning the truth of her as a child, just turned four, he'd held her life in his hands. But it had been safe there. She knew it.

'When the time comes, use your magic freely,' she'd told him, her sunken eyes brilliant even as the shadows closed in. *'Never fear it. Salimbene, my precious son, one day you will be a sorcerer king, the most magnificent the world has ever seen. This is your birthright. Do you believe me?'*

'Yes,' he'd said, weeping. Not sure if he did believe, only desperate to please her. *'But I know nothing of magic, of power. How will I—'*

Seventy-two empty days had passed since she died, and still he could feel her thin, cold fingertips on his wet cheek.

'Everything you need is in the book, my son. Trust it. Trust yourself. But Salimbene . . . you must beware the king. After I'm gone he'll be a danger to you.'

His father a danger? How could that be? Shocked, he'd tried to argue. But she wouldn't let him. And even as her gasping breath failed, and her brilliant eyes dimmed, she fought to save him.

'Salimbene, I beg you. Do not trust the king! And know there is one more danger you must beware. The Oracle of Nicosia. It has the power to destroy you. Find it, my love, no matter the cost. Find it and destroy it. Only then will you be untouchable. Promise me, Salimbene. Promise!'

So he'd promised her, not understanding, and then held her close as she died.

CHAPTER ONE

Brassy-sweet, a single wavering trumpet blast rent the cold air. The destriers reared, ears flattened, nostrils flaring, then charged each other with the ferocity of war.

'Huzzah!' the joust's excited onlookers shouted, throwing handfuls of barley and rye into the pale blue sky. The dry seeds fell to strike their heads and shoulders and the trampled, snow-burned grass beneath their feet. Blackbirds, bold as pirates, shrieked and squabbled over the feast as children released from the working day's drudgery shook rattles, clanged handbells, blew whistles and laughed.

Oblivious to all save sweat and fear and the thunder of hooves, the two battling nobles dropped their reins and lowered their blunted lances. A great double crash as both men found their marks. Armour buckled, bodies swayed, clods of turf flew. Their destriers charged on despite each brutal strike.

With a muffled cry, his undamaged lance falling, abandoned, Ennis of Larkwood lurched half out of his saddle, clawed for his dropped reins, lost his balance and fell. For three strides his horse dragged him, both arms and his untrapped leg flailing wildly, helmeted head bouncing on the tussocked dirt. Then the stirrup-leather broke and he was free. Squires burst from the sidelines like startled pheasants, two making for the snorting horse, three rushing to their fallen lord.

Heedless of the vanquished, the crowd cheered victorious Black Hughe, youngest son of old Lord Herewart. Hughe let slip his ruined lance, pushed up his helmet's visor and raised a clenched, triumphant fist as his roan stallion plunged and shied. The mid-afternoon sun shimmered on his black-painted breastplate, thickly chased with silver-inlaid etchings.

‘Fuck,’ Balfre muttered, wishing he could reach beneath his own armour and scratch his ribs. ‘Did a more rampant coxcomb ever draw breath?’

Standing beside him, sadly plain in undecorated doublet and hose, his brother sighed. ‘I wish you wouldn’t do this.’

‘Someone must,’ he said. ‘And since you refuse, Grefin, who else is there? Or are you saying our dear friend Hughe isn’t ripe for a little plucking?’

Grefin frowned. ‘I’m saying the duke will be ripe to toss you into the dankest dungeon he can find once he hears what you’ve done. You know he’s got no love for—’

‘Aimery clap his heir in irons?’ Balfre laughed. ‘Don’t be an arse, Gref. His pride would never let him.’

‘And your pride will get you broken to pieces, or worse!’

Hughe had pranced his destrier to the far end of the makeshift tourney ground, so his gaggle of squires could prepare him for the next joust. Ennis was on his feet at last, battered helmet unbuckled and tugged off to reveal a wash of blood coating the left side of his face. Much of his close-cropped flaxen hair was dyed scarlet with it. He needed a squire’s help to limp off the field. As the shouting for Hughe died down there came a scattering of applause for Ennis, no more than polite recognition. Harcia’s rustics had little patience for defeat.

Balfre shook his head. ‘You know, if Hughe’s a coxcomb then Ennis is a pickled dullard. Any donkey-riding peasant with a barley-stalk could push him off a horse.’

‘My lord!’

Turning, he looked down at the eager young squire who’d run the short distance from their rough and ready tourney-stall and halted at his elbow.

‘What?’

The squire flinched. ‘Master Ambrose says it be time for your bout, and to come, my lord. If it please you.’

‘Tell Ambrose to polish my stirrups. *Fuck*. Does he think the joust will start without me?’

‘No, my lord,’ said the squire, backing away. ‘I’ll tell him to wait, my lord.’

Balfre watched the youth scuttle to Master Armsman Ambrose. ‘Speaking of pickled dullards . . .’ He grimaced. ‘I swear, Grefin, that turnip-head must’ve snuck into Harcia from Clemen. He’s witless enough to be one of scabrous Harald’s subjects. Don’t you think?’

But his brother wasn’t listening. Instead, Grefin was raking his troubled gaze across the nearby jostling villagers, and Ennis having his split scalp stitched by a tourney leech, and beyond him the small, untidy knot of lesser men who’d come to test their armoured mettle and now stood defeated, and the heavily hoof-scarred tilt-run with its battered wicker sheep-hurdle barrier, to at length settle on Hughe and his squires. The chuffer had climbed off his destrier and was exchanging his dented black-and-silver breastplate for one unmarked but just as gaudy. It would be a vaunted pleasure, surely, to dent that one for him too.

‘Balfre—’

If this weren’t such a public place, be cursed if he wouldn’t hook his brother’s legs out from under him and put his arse in the dirt where it belonged.

‘Hold your tongue, Grefin. Or better yet, since you’ve no stomach for sport, trot back to the Croft and lift your lance there, instead. Plant another son in your precious wife. After all, you’ve only sired one so far. You must be good for at least one more.’

‘Balfre, don’t.’

‘I mean it,’ he said, keeping harsh. Refusing to see the shadow of hurt in Grefin’s eyes. ‘If all you can do is carp then you’re no good to me. In truth, it havocs me why you came in the first place.’

‘To keep you from breaking your neck, I hope,’ said Grefin, still frowning. ‘What havocs me is why *you* came! Look around, Balfre. We stand in an open field, far from any great house, and those who cheer and groan your efforts are villagers, herdsman, peddlers and potboys.’

‘So you’d deny the local churls an hour or two of entertainment? You’re turning mean-spirited, little brother.’

Grefin hissed air between his teeth. ‘It’s a question of dignity. Aside from you, and Hughe, and Ennis, who of any note came today to break his lance? Not our cousin. Not even Waymon, and he’s a man who’ll wrestle two drunk wild boars in a mire.’

‘Come on, Gref,’ he said, grinning despite his temper. ‘Even you have to admit that was funny.’

‘Side-splitting, yes. And I’m sure the squires who broke themselves to save Waymon from being ripped wide from throat to cock laughed all the way to the bone-setter!’

‘Grefin—’

‘No, Balfre. You’ll listen,’ his brother said, and took his elbow. ‘You’re Harcia’s heir. You owe its duke more than this joust against a gaggle of mudder knights fit only to ride the Marches.’

Wrenching his arm free, Balfre looked to where Ambrose and his squires stood waiting. His stallion was there, his unbroken lances and his helmet. Catching his eye, Ambrose raised a hand and beckoned, agitated.

He looked again at his niggling brother. ‘Where and how I choose to romp is my concern. Not yours. Not Aimery’s.’

‘Of course it’s Aimery’s concern. He has enough to fret him without you risking yourself here. Those bastard lords of the Green Isle—’

Familiar resentment pricked, sharper than any spur. ‘You can throw down that cudgel, Grefin. When it comes to the Green Isle, Aimery has his remedy.’

‘Balfre . . .’ Grefin sighed. ‘He needs more time.’

‘He’s had nearly two years!’

‘It’s been that long since Malcolm died. But Mother died in autumn, and here we are scant in spring.’

‘What’s Mother to do with it? She wasn’t his Steward!’

‘No,’ Grefin said gently. ‘She was his beating heart. He still weeps for her, Balfre. And for Malcolm. Both griefs are still raw. And now you’d have him weeping for you, too?’

The chilly air stank of churned mud and horse shit. A troupe of acrobats was amusing the crowd as it waited for the last joust. Motley painted canvas balls and striped wooden clubs danced hand-to-hand and man-to-man through the air, the jonglers’ skill so great they never dropped even one. From time to time they snatched a cap from a villager’s head and juggled that too. The field echoed with delighted laughter.

Balfre glared at them, unamused. Aimery weep for him? That

would be the fucking day. ‘I never knew you had such a poor opinion of my lance-skills.’

‘This has nothing to do with jousting,’ Grefin retorted. ‘Please, Balfre. Just . . . let it go. Who cares what a sophead like Hughe mutters under his breath?’

‘I care!’ Blood leaping, he shoved his brother with both hands, hard enough to mar Grefin’s dark green doublet. ‘When what he mutters is heard by a dozen men? *I care*. And if you cared for me, *you’d* care.’

‘I do! But Balfre, you *can’t*—’

‘Oh, fuck off, Grefin! Before I forget myself and give those gaping churls reason enough to gossip for a week!’

Grefin folded his arms, mule-stubborn. ‘I don’t want to.’

‘And I don’t care what you want.’

Holding his brother’s resentful stare, unflinching, Balfre waited. Grefin would relent. He always did. There was a softness at the core of him that made sure of it. A good thing for Harcia he wasn’t Aimery’s heir. Such a softness would leave the duchy’s throat bared to faithless men like Harald of Clemen.

At last Grefin huffed out a frustrated breath. ‘Fine. But never say I didn’t warn you,’ he said, and retreated.

Still simmering, Balfre returned to Ambrose. The Master Armsman near cracked his skull in two, shoving his gold-chased helmet onto his head.

‘For shame, my lord,’ Ambrose said in his rasping voice, come from a sword-hilt to the neck in the desperate, long-ago battle that had made Aimery duke. ‘Dallying like a maid. This might be a rumptiony shigshag we be at but still you should be setting of a timely example.’

Balfre bore with the reprimand. The armsman had served two dukes of Harcia already, thereby earning for himself a small measure of insolence. With a nod, he held out his hands so the turnip-head squire could gauntlet him. The burnished steel slid on cleanly, cold and heavy.

Ambrose started his final armour inspection. ‘You been watching that rump Hughe?’

‘I have,’ he said, twisting his torso to be certain of no sticking

points in his breastplate, which was gold-chased like his helmet and worth more than Hughe's horse. 'Nothing's changed since the last time we bouted. He still drops his lance a stride too soon, and sits harder on his right seatbone.'

'True enough.' Ambrose slapped his pupil's steel-clad shoulder. 'And shame be on his tiltmaster. But for all that, he be a brutey jouster. You'll be kissing dirt, my lord, if you don't have a care.'

'Then shame be on *my* tiltmaster,' Balfre said, flashing Ambrose a swift smirk. 'If I do kiss the dirt, I'll have to find myself a new one.'

Because this was no formal tourney they lacked judges to keep time or award points and penalties. There was the lone hornblower, though, for the sake of the ragged crowd. As Hughe remounted his restive stallion, one of his squires ran to the man and gave an order. Obedient, the appointed villager blew his horn to alert the crowd to the next joust.

Balfre nodded at Ambrose, then crossed to the wooden mounting block where his destrier was held fast by two squires. As he approached, one of them was doltish enough to shift too far sideways. The stallion lashed out its foreleg and caught the man on his thigh with an iron-shod hoof. Squealing, the squire crumpled.

'Maggot-brain!' said Ambrose, hurrying to drag him clear. Then he gestured at turnip-head. 'Don't stand there gaping, you peascod. Hold the cursed horse!'

The excited villagers set up another din of handbells and rattles and whistles. Stood at a distance in their second-rate armour, Ennis and the vanquished mudder knights cast envious looks at the stallion. Quivering with nerves, eager for the joust, the horse tossed its head and swished its thick black tail. As Balfre reached the mounting block it bared its teeth and snapped, strong enough to rip fingers from an unprotected hand.

'*Bah!*' he said, and punched the stallion's dish-round cheek. 'Stand still!'

Walking to and fro, the hornblower sounded another rallying blast, coaxing more raucous cheers from the crowd. On the far side of the tourney ground Hughe kicked his roan destrier forward, scattering his squires like beetles. One tottered behind him, awkwardly carrying his lance.

Rolling his eyes, Balfre picked up his reins, shoved his left foot into his stirrup and swung his right leg up and over his jousting saddle's high cantle. The moment he settled on his destrier's back he felt the animal tense beneath him, its breath coming in angry grunts. Not even his heaviest gauntlets muffled its throttled energy, tingling from the curbed bit to his fingers. Through the steel protecting his thighs and lower legs he could feel his mount's barrel ribs expand and contract, and the pent-up furious power in the muscular body beneath him. This was his best horse, and they were well-matched in both temper and skill. Only for Black Hughe would he risk the beast here. But Hughe was owed a mighty drubbing, and to be sure of it he'd chance even this animal.

With a decided tug he closed his helmet's visor then held out his hand. 'Lance!'

The weight of the carved, painted timber woke old bruises and strains. Stifling an oath, he couched the lance in its proper place, pricked spurs to his horse's flanks, then softened the bit's sharp bite.

The destrier leapt like a flycatcher, snorting. White foam flew from its mouth. Prisoned within his gold-chased helm, his vision narrowed to a slit and the crowd's roaring a hollow boom, Balfre laughed aloud. Aside from a writhing woman pinned on his cock, was there anything better in the world than a lance in his hand, a grand horse between his legs, and a man before him a handful of heartbeats from defeat?

No. There wasn't.

Snorting, ears pricked, the destrier settled into a stately, knee-snapping prance. He sat the dance with ease, guiding the stallion to the start of the tilt-run with nothing more than his shifting weight and the touch of his long-shanked, elaborate spurs. There he halted, and paid no heed to the crowd's wild cheering or the stallion's threatening half-rears.

'Black Hughe!' he called, loud enough to be heard through his helmet. 'You stand ready?'

'I indeed stand ready, Balfre!' Hughe shouted back. 'Do I have your pardon now, for the unseating of you later?'

'You'll have my pardon once you answer for your slur.'

'My lord,' said Hughe, defiant, then closed his own visor and demanded his lance.

As the hornblowing churl took his place midway along the rough tilt-run, horn ready at his lips, the watching villagers and mudder knights fell silent. Only the blackbirds kept up their squabbling, seeking the last grains of seed.

The horn sounded again, a single trembling note. Balfre threw his weight forward as he felt his stallion's quarters sink beneath him, felt its forehand lift, saw its noble head and great, crested neck rise towards his face. It bellowed, a roaring challenge, then stood on its strong hindlegs. Night-black forelegs raked the air. He loosened the reins, gripped the lance and spurred the stallion's flanks. The horse plunged groundwards, bellowing again . . . and charged.

Blurred, breathless speed. Pounding heart. Heaving lungs. Nothing before him but Black Hughe on his horse and the memory of his hateful taunt, dagger-sharp and unforgivable.

Seven thundering strides. Six. Five.

He tucked the lance tight to his side, closed his thighs, dropped the reins. Blinkered his eyes free of sweat . . . and took aim . . . and struck.

A double shout of pain, as his lance-head impacted Hughe's armoured body and shattered, as Hughe's undamaged lance struck then glanced harmlessly aside. Pain thrummed through him like the ringing of a great bell, like the clashing of a hammer against the anvil of the world. His fingers opened, releasing the splintered remains of his lance. Then they closed again, on his dropped reins. He hauled on them, unkindly, and his destrier shuddered to a head-shaking halt. A tug and a spurring, and he was turned back to look for Hughe.

Herewart's youngest son was sprawled on the tilt-run's dirt like a starfish, his fancy breastplate dented, his helmet scratched, his brown eyes staring blindly at the sky.

'My lord! My lord!'

And that was Ambrose, the old, scarred man, running hoppy and hamstrung towards him. Turnip-head and another squire scurried at his heels. Hughe's squires were running too, the ones that weren't dashing after his ill-trained horse.

Ambrose, arriving, snatched at the destrier's reins. His pocked face, with its faded sword marks, stretched splitting-wide in a totty-tooth smile.

‘A doughty strike, my lord, *doughty!* The best from you I’ve surely seen! Lord Grefin will bite his thumb, for certain, when he’s told what he missed.’

Grefin. A curse on Grefin and his milksop mimbling. Balfre shoved up his visor, then kicked his feet free of the stirrups and twisted out of his saddle. The jar in his bones as he landed on the hoof-scarred ground made him wince. Ambrose saw it, but nobody else. He held out his hands for the squires to pull off his gauntlets, and when they were free unbuckled and tugged off his helmet for himself.

‘Take the horse,’ he commanded. ‘I would speak to Black Hughe.’

‘My lord,’ said Ambrose, holding stallion and helmet now. ‘We’ll make ready to depart.’

The villagers and mudder knights were still cheering, the ragtag children shaking their rattles and handbells and blowing their whistles. He waved once, since it was expected, then turned from them to consider old Herewart’s son. The lingering pains in his body were as nothing, drowned in the joy of seeing his enemy thrown down.

‘Lord Balfre,’ Hughe greeted him, his voice thin as watered wine. His squires had freed him from his helmet and thrust a folded tunic beneath his head. ‘Your joust, I think.’

With a look, Balfre scattered the squires who hovered to render their lord aid. Then he dropped to one knee, with care, and braced an aching forearm across his thigh.

‘Hughe.’

Black Hughe was sweating, his face pale beneath the blood seeping from a split across the bridge of his nose. More blood trickled from one nostril, and from the corner of his mouth. He looked like a knifed hog.

‘I’m not dying, Balfre,’ Hughe said, slowly. ‘I bit my tongue. That’s all.’

‘And to think, Hughe, if you’d bitten it the sooner you’d not be lying here now in a welter of your gore, unhorsed and roundly defeated,’ he said kindly, and smiled.

Hughe coughed, then gasped in pain. ‘My lord—’

‘Hughe, Hughe . . .’ Leaning forward, Balfre patted Black Hughe’s bruised cheek. Mingled sweat and blood stained his fingers. He didn’t

mind. They were his prize. 'I'm going now. Without your horse and armour. I didn't joust you for them.'

'My lord,' said Hughe, and swallowed painfully. 'Thank you.'

'Not at all. And Hughe, for your sake, heed me now. Remember this moment. Engrave it on your heart. So the next time you think to slight my prowess with my lance? You think again – and stay silent.'

Hughe stared at him, struck dumb. Balfre smiled again, not kindly. Pushed to his feet, spurning assistance, gave Hughe his armoured back and walked away.

Temper sour as pickled lemon after his fractious dealings on the Green Isle, Aimery of Harcia disembarked his light galley in no mood for delay. Not waiting to see if his high steward and the others were ready, he made his way down the timber gang-plank, booted heels sharply rapping, and leapt the last few steps with the ease of a man half his age. The surety of steady ground beneath his feet at once lifted his spirits. Ah! Blessed Harcia! Never mind it was little more than a stone's throw from the mainland to the Green Isle. He'd stick a sword through his own gizzards before confessing to a soul how much he hated sailing.

'Tis good to be home, Your Grace,' said his high steward, joining him.

Staring at the busy harbour village of Piper's Wade crowded before them, Aimery breathed in the mingled scents of fresh salt air, old fish guts, people and beasts. Some might call the air tainted, a stench, but never him. It was the smell of Harcia, his duchy, sweeter than any fresh bloom.

'We're not home yet, Curteis. Not quite.' He smiled. 'But this'll do. Now, let's be off. I can hear the Croft calling.'

His party's horses had been stabled against their return at nearby Piper's Inn. With their baggage to be off-loaded from the galley and transported by ox-cart, he led his people to the inn with purposeful haste, greeting the villagers who greeted him with a nod and a friendly word in passing, making sure they knew he was pleased to see them but alas, could not stop . . . only to be halted in the Piper's empty, sunlit forecourt by a wildly bearded man in embroidered rags.

‘My lord! Duke Aimery!’ Skinny arms waving, the man shuffled into his path. A soothsayer from the old religion, half his wits wandered off entirely. Lost, along with most of his teeth. Twig-tangled grey hair, lank past his shoulders, framed a seamed and sun-spoiled lean face. His pale grey eyes were yellowed with ill health, and sunken. ‘A word, my lord! Your pardon! A word!’

It was held bad luck to spurn a soothsayer. Aimery raised a warning hand to his four men-at-arms. ‘Keep yourselves. There’s no harm here. See to the horses and you, Curteis, settle our account with the innkeeper.’

They knew better than to argue. As he was obeyed, and his scribe and body squire hastily took themselves out of the way, Aimery turned to the ragged man.

‘You know me then, soothsayer?’

The soothsayer cackled on a gust of foul breath. ‘Not I, my lord. The stars. The little frogs. The wind. The spirits in the deep woods know you, my lord. But they whisper to me.’

‘And what do they whisper?’

Those sunken, yellow-tinged eyes narrowed. ‘I could tell you. I should tell you. But will I be believed? Do you honour the spirits? Or . . .’ The soothsayer spat. Blackish-green phlegm smeared his lips. ‘Are you seduced by the grey men, my lord?’

The grey men. The Exarch’s monks, harbingers of a new religion. It had barely scratched the surface of Harcia, though its roots grew deep in other lands. The soothsayer stared at him, hungrily, as though his reply must be a feast.

‘I’m seduced by no one,’ he said. ‘Every philosophy has its truth. Speak to me, or don’t speak. The choice is yours. But I’ll not stand here till sunset, waiting.’

The soothsayer cocked his head, as though listening. Then another gusting cackle. ‘Yes, yes. I hear him. A needle-wit, this Aimery. Prick, prick, prick and see the blood flow.’ A gnarled finger pointed to the early morning sky, eggshell-blue wreathed in lazy cloud. ‘Three nights past, my lord. As the moon set. A long-tailed comet. The sign of chaos. Were you witness? It made the black sky bleed.’

Three nights past at moonset he’d only just crawled into his

borrowed bed on the Green Isle, head aching with arguments. ‘No. I didn’t see it. I was asleep.’

‘Asleep then, asleep now.’ Eyes stretching wide, the soothsayer shuffled close. ‘Time to wake, my lord duke, and see the trouble festering under your roof.’

A clutch at his heart. ‘What trouble?’

‘There was a man who had three sons. Lost one. Kept one. Threw the third away. The fool.’

‘What do you mean? What—’

‘Be warned, my lord duke,’ the old man wheezed. ‘Unless you open your eyes you will sleep the cold sleep of death.’ A rattle in the scrawny throat, a sound like the last breath of a dying wife. A dying son. ‘And no right to say you were not told. You have to know it, Aimery. A long-tailed comet cannot lie.’

But a man could. A mad man, his wits scattered like chaff on the wind. Aimery stepped back. ‘Be on your way, soothsayer. You’ve spoken and I’ve listened.’

‘Yes, but have you heard?’ The soothsayer shook his head, sorrowful. Or perhaps merely acting sorrow. Who could tell, with a mad man? ‘Ah well. In time we’ll know.’

It was nonsense, of course. He had little time for religion, old or new. But the soothsayer looked in a bad way, so he pulled a plain gold ring from his finger.

‘Take this, old man. Buy yourself a warm bed and hot food. And when next the spirits whisper, whisper to them from me that a faithful servant should be better served.’

The soothsayer’s eyes glittered as he stared at the ring. Then he snatched it, and with much muttering and arm-waving hobbled out of the forecourt.

‘Your Grace,’ Curteis murmured, arriving on soft feet that barely disturbed the raked gravel. ‘Is aught amiss?’

Aimery frowned after the soothsayer, an indistinct bundle of rags vanishing into the high street’s bustle. Mad old men and their ramblings. Throw a stone into any crowd and you’d likely strike at least three.

‘No. Can we go?’

Curteis nodded. ‘Yes, Your Grace. As it please you.’

They rode knee-to-knee out of the inn's stable yard in a clattering of hooves, with his body squire and his scribe and his men-at-arms close at heel.

'Be warned, Curteis,' he said, as they scattered pie-sellers and cobblers and fishwives before them along Piper's Wade high street, 'and share the warning with them that ride behind. I wish to sleep in my own bed under my own roof sooner rather than later. Therefore we shall travel swiftly, with few halts, and should I hear a tongue clapping complaint I swear I'll kick the culprit's arse seven shades of black and blue.'

'Yes, Your Grace,' said Curteis, smiling. He was well used to his duke.

With the past two weeks fresh in mind, Aimery scowled. 'I tell you plain, man, I've heard enough clapping tongues lately to last me till my funeral.'

'The lords of the Green Isle were indeed fretsome, Your Grace.'

'Fretsome?' He snorted. 'Snaggle-brained, you should call them. Vexatious. Full of wind. Especially that cross-grained fuck Terriel.'

'Your Grace,' agreed Curteis. 'Lord Terriel and his noble brothers farted many noisome words. But you set them well straight.'

Yes, he did. And woe betide a one of them who again dared defy his judgement. That man, be he ever so lordly, even the great and grasping Terriel, would find himself so handily chastised there'd be scars on his great-grandson's arse.

Bleakly satisfied, still impatient, Aimery urged his iron-dappled palfrey into a canter, then swung left off the high street onto Hook Way, which would lead them eventually to his ducal forest of Burnt Wood. If the rain held off and no mischance befell them, with the horses well rested they'd be in and out of the forest by day's end. Spend the night in Sparrowholt on its far side, leave at dawn on the morrow, ride hard with little dallying and with fortune they'd reach the Croft before sunset.

And so it proved. But when he did at last trot beneath the arching stone gateway of his favourite castle's inner bailey, feeling every one of his fifty-four years, he found himself ridden into yet another storm. For standing in the Croft's torchlit keep, clad head to toe in unrelieved black velvet, was old Herewart of nearby Bann Crossing. He trembled

in the dusk's chill, tears swiftly slicking his withered cheeks. Waiting with him, stood at a wary distance, Balfre and Grefin.

'What is this, Balfre?' Aimery demanded of his accidental heir, even as his gaze lingered on his youngest son. His favourite, now that Malcolm was dead. 'Why am I greeted with such confusion?'

He'd sent a man ahead, to warn of his arrival and stir the castle's servants to duty. As they hurried to take the horses and relieve Curteis and the scribe of their note-filled satchels, and the men-at-arms waited with their hands ready on their swords, he saw Balfre and Grefin exchange disquieting looks. But before his heir could answer, Herewart let out a cry cracked-full of grief and approached without leave or invitation.

'Your Grace, you must hear me! As a father, and my duke, only you can grant me the justice I seek!'

'Hold,' he said to the men-at-arms who were moving to protect him. Then he looked to his steward. 'Curteis, escort Lord Herewart within the castle. See him comforted, and kept company in the Rose chamber until I come.'

Very proper, though he was also weary, Curteis bowed. 'Yes, Your Grace.'

'Your Grace!' Herewart protested. 'Do not abandon me to an underling. My years of loyalty should purchase more consideration than that. I demand—'

'*Demand?*' Summoning a lifetime's worth of discipline, Aimery swung off his horse to land lightly on his feet. 'My lord, be mindful. Not even a lifetime of loyalty will purchase a demand.'

Herewart's colour was high, his wet eyes red-rimmed and lit with a burning fervour. 'A single *day* of loyalty should purchase the justice I am owed. And be warned, Aimery. Justice I'll have, as I see fit, and from your hand – or there will be a reckoning. This is not cursed Clemen, where *injustice* wears a crown!'

Silence, save for Herewart's ragged breathing and the scrape of shod hooves on the flagstones as the horses hinted at their stables. Aimery looked to his sons. Grefin stood pale, arms folded, lower lip caught between his teeth. There was grief for Herewart there, and fear for his brother. As for Balfre, he stood defiant. He knew no other way to stand.

Belly tight, Aimery looked again at Herewart. ‘What has happened, my lord?’

‘My son is dead, Your Grace,’ said Herewart, his voice raw. ‘My youngest. Hughe.’

The blunt words tore wide his own monstrous, unhealed wound. ‘I’m sorry to hear it, Herewart. To lose a son untimely is—’

‘You must know he was murdered,’ Herewart said, bludgeoning. ‘By your son and heir, Balfre.’

‘*Liar!*’ Balfre shouted, and would have leapt at the old man but for Grefin’s restraining hand. ‘It was ill chance, not murder, and he’d still be alive had you taught him how he should speak of Harcia’s heir! The fault is yours, Herewart, not mine, that your son’s bed tonight is a coffin!’

Aimery closed his eyes, briefly. Oil and water, they were, he and this son. Oil and flame. *Balfre, you shit. When will you cease burning me?* ‘What ill chance?’

‘None,’ said Herewart, glowering. ‘Hughe’s death was purposed. Your son challenged mine to a duel and killed him.’

‘*Duel?*’ Balfre laughed, incredulous. ‘It was a joust! I unhorsed him by the rules, and when I left him he was barely more than winded. How can you—’

‘No, my lord, how can *you!*’ said Herewart, a shaking fist raised at Balfre. ‘My son made a ribald jest, harmless, and *you*, being so tender-skinned and pig-fat full of self love, you couldn’t laugh and let it go by. You had to answer him with your lance, you had to goad him into unwise confrontation in the company of churls and mudder knights and take your revenge by taking his life! He breathed his last this morning; his body broken, your name upon his blood-stained lips.’

Pulling free of his brother’s holding hand, Balfre took a step forward. ‘Your Grace, Hughe’s death isn’t my—’

Aimery silenced him with a look, then turned. ‘My lord Herewart, as a father I grieve with you. And as your duke I promise justice. But for now, go with Curteis. He’ll see you to warmth and wine while I have words with my son.’

Herewart hesitated, then nodded. As Curteis ushered him within the castle, and the inner bailey emptied of servants, squires,

men-at-arms and horses, Grefin tried to counsel his brother but was roughly pushed aside.

‘Balfre,’ Aimery said, when they were alone. ‘What was Hughe’s jest?’

His face dark with temper, Balfre swung round. ‘It was an insult, not a jest. And public, made with intent. I couldn’t let it go by.’

‘Grefin?’

Grefin glanced at his brother, then nodded. ‘It’s true. Hughe was offensive. But—’

‘But *nothing!*’ Balfre insisted. ‘For Herewart’s son to say my lance is riddled with wormwood, with no more strength to it than a pipe of soft cheese, and by lance mean my cock, never mind we talked of jousting, he questioned my ability to sire a son. He as good as said I wasn’t fit to rule Harcia after Aimery. And that’s treason, Grefin, whether you like it or not.’

Grefin was shaking his head. ‘Hughe was wine-soaked when he spoke. So deep in his cup he couldn’t see over its rim. He was a fool, not a traitor.’

‘And now he’s a dead fool,’ said Balfre, brutally unregretful. ‘And a lesson worth learning. My lord—’ He took another step forward, so sure of his welcome. ‘You can see I had no choice. I—’

‘Balfre,’ Aimery said heavily, ‘what I see is a man possessed of no more wit and judgement at the age of three-and-twenty than were his when he was *five*.’

Balfre stared. ‘My lord?’

‘You killed a man for no better reason than he had less wit than you!’

‘But Father – I was wronged. You can’t take Herewart’s part in this!’

Oh Malcolm, Malcolm. A curse on you for dying.

Aimery swallowed, rage and disappointment turning his blood to bile. ‘Since last you saw me I have done nothing but ride the Green Isle, hearing complaints and chastising faithless lords who count their own petty needs higher than what is best for this duchy. And now *you*, Balfre, you encourage men to defy my decree against personal combat. What—’

‘It was a *joust!*’ Balfre shouted. ‘You’ve not banned jousting. I

was obedient to all your rules. I made sure of a tilt barrier, my lance was well-blunted, and I—’

‘And you killed a man, regardless,’ he said, fists clenched. ‘Much good your obedience has done you, Balfre. Or me.’

Balfre’s hands were fisted too. ‘That’s not fair. Father—’

‘*Do not call me Father! On your knees, miscreant, and address me as Your Grace!*’

Sickly pale, Balfre dropped to the damp ground. ‘Your Grace, it’s plain you’re weary. You shouldn’t be plagued with the Green Isle. Appoint me its Steward and I’ll—’

‘Appoint *you?*’ Aimery ached to slap his son’s face. ‘Balfre, if I let you loose on the Green Isle there’d be war within a week.’

‘Your Grace, you misjudge me.’

‘Do I?’ He laughed, near to choking on bitterness. ‘And if I were to break my neck hunting tomorrow and the day after I was buried you learned that Harald of Clemen had yet again interfered with Harcian justice in the Marches? Tell me, would you tread with care or would you challenge *him* to a joust?’

‘Harald is a cur-dog who sits upon a stolen throne,’ said Balfre, his lip curled. ‘Thieves and cur-dogs should be beaten, not cosseted. If Harald feared us he’d not dare flout your authority, or entice Harcia’s men-at-arms to break your decrees, or demand unlawful taxes from our merchants and—’

‘So you’d challenge him with a naked sword, and slaughter two hundred years of peace.’ Aimery shook his head, stung with despair. ‘Never once doubting the wisdom of your choice.’

‘Your Grace, there’s no greater wisdom than overwhelming strength and the willingness to use it.’

And so the decision he’d been avoiding for so long, like a coward, was made for him. He sighed. ‘I know you think so, Balfre. Grefin—’

Grefin looked up. ‘Your Grace?’

‘The Green Isle has been left to its own devices for too long. Therefore I appoint you its Steward and—’

Forgetting himself, Balfre leapt to his feet. ‘*No!*’

‘Your Grace—’ Alarmed, Grefin was staring. ‘I’m honoured, truly, but—’

‘Enough, Grefin. It’s decided.’

‘No, it isn’t!’ said Balfre. ‘You can’t do this. Like it or not I’m your heir. By right the Green Isle’s stewardship is mine. You *can’t*—’

Aimery seized his oldest son’s shoulders and shook him. ‘I must, Balfre. For your sake, for Harcia’s sake, I have no other choice.’

‘You’re a duke,’ said Balfre, coldly. ‘You have nothing but choices.’

‘Ah, Balfre . . .’ Run through with pain, he tightened his fingers. ‘The day you understand that isn’t true is the day you will be ready for a crown.’

Balfre wrenched free. ‘Fuck you, Your Grace,’ he said, and walked away.

CHAPTER TWO

Some time later, alone with his father, Grefin blinked away weariness and cleared his throat. ‘It wasn’t murder, my lord. Balfre was angry. But he didn’t murder Hughe.’

‘Grefin, Grefin . . .’ Staring into the Rose chamber’s flame-leapt fireplace, Aimery shook his head. ‘You always defend him.’

He felt his body tense. The spirits save him, not this brawl again. ‘He’s my brother.’

‘And he’s my son! But that doesn’t—’

‘The wrong son,’ he muttered, then held his breath.

Slowly, Aimery turned. Seeing the naked pain in his father’s face, Grefin shifted in his chair and looked down. ‘I’m sorry.’

‘You should be.’

There was a splash of dried mud on his woollen hose. He scratched at it, trapping dirt beneath his fingernail. ‘My lord, I did try to stop him. But you know Balfre. And Hughe’s slur was wicked. Drunk or sober, he meant to wound.’

Aimery turned back to the fire. ‘Yet you still say it wasn’t murder.’

His shoulders rose and fell. 'You'd have me brand Herewart a liar? Is that it?'

Hughe's father, scarcely comforted and spurning his duke's offer of a bed for the night, was on the road back to Bann's Crossing. Riding home to his dead son, laid out in his finery on a trestle surrounded by sweet candles and weeping women.

Remembering Malcolm, and their mother, Grefin watched his knuckles turn white.

'The old man claims you weren't there when Hughe fell,' said his father. 'He claims Hughe's squires told him you fought with Balfre, and stormed off.'

Curse it. If only he'd been permitted to meet with Herewart by his father's side. But no, he'd been kept out of the room as though he were still a child. As though he couldn't be trusted to speak the truth, dispassionate. As though speaking up for his brother was the same as telling lies.

'It's true Balfre and I fought,' he said, holding resentment at bay. 'And I left him. But I didn't go far. I saw the joust. I tell you, my lord, Balfre's not to blame. Hughe fell awkwardly. It was bad luck, that's all.'

Aimery swore under his breath. 'No, Grefin. It was bad judgement. There should never have been a joust. Can you admit that much, at least? Or is there *nothing* Balfre could do that you won't excuse?'

At the end, when the leeches had no more help for his mother and it came his turn to sit with her for the last time, she'd surprised him by rousing out of her stupor.

'You're the youngest,' she'd whispered. 'My wee babe. Even so, you're older than Balfre. I fear you always will be. Stand for him, Grefin. Take his part, no matter what. He's not like Malcolm was. Your father can't fathom him. But you do. You must. Always.'

He'd promised he would. Of course. But sometimes he wondered if his mother had known what she was asking.

'My lord . . .' Grefin braced his elbows on his knees and leaned forward. 'I'm not saying your anger is unjust. Balfre was wrong to call the joust. But must you make me the Green Isle's Steward in his place? He won't forgive it.'

Aimery swung round again. Though the chamber's candlelight threw shadows, they weren't deep enough to hide his rage. 'How can I make him Steward, Grefin? What will Herewart say, and the other lords, if I elevate Balfre the very day of Hughe's death?'

'Then wait,' he said, close to pleading. 'Let Hughe be buried with all sorrow and honour. Give Balfre time to express the regret I know he feels, even if his wounded pride won't let him show it, then—'

'I have no time for Balfre!' his father shouted. 'I've squandered too much time already! The Green Isle must be mastered now, not a month from now. A month from now will be too late. Since Malcolm's death it's grown monstrous unruly and I *won't* see us return to the battles and butcheries of my youth, with family pitted against family and no quarter shown. The day I lost my father, my uncle and both my brothers is burned into memory. How will *I* be remembered if I let such bloodshed happen again?' He struck his fist to the mantel over the fireplace. 'The fault here is mine. I kept holding back, waiting to name Balfre as Steward, hoping I'd see some judgement in your brother, the smallest glimpse of Malcolm in him, but all I've done is delude myself. Balfre's not fit to—'

'Now you are being unjust, my lord.'

'If that's your opinion, perhaps I'm mistaken in you too!'

Grefin leapt up, goaded beyond customary respect. 'Entirely mistaken, my lord, if you think I'll stay silent as you use me to punish Balfre!'

'I do *not* use—'

'Yes, you do! And I dislike it, very much. But because I see you have no choice, Father, I'll be your Steward. Only you must remember this. Balfre is still your heir. And if he's to be the duke you want him to be, in his time, you can't deny him the Green Isle's stewardship for ever.'

Aimery struck the mantel again, so hard that in the hearth burning logs collapsed into charcoal. Sparks flew, hissing his fury. '*Whelp!* You presume to command *me*? Not even Malcolm dared—'

'Malcolm loved you too much not to speak his mind. And so do I.' Heart pounding, Grefin folded his arms. 'Balfre has every right to expect the stewardship. But I know he has to pay a price for Hughe.'

And so does he. So I'll be your Steward of the Green Isle for one year. Balfre will accept that.'

Aimery's eyes glittered in the candlelight. 'He'll accept whatever I give him.'

'Father—'

'*Enough*, Grefin. Leave me. I need solitude, so I might think.'

Defeated, he sighed. 'Yes, my lord. But can I at least tell Balfre you'll speak with him before you retire?'

'No,' said Aimery. 'Keep him out of my sight.'

Torn, as he was so often torn between his father and the only brother he had left, he paused at the elegant Rose chamber's door. 'It's not his fault he isn't Malcolm. It's not his fault he lived, and Malcolm died.'

In the flame-crackled silence, Aimery's indrawn breath sounded loud. 'You think because you've made me a grandfather you're too old for a thrashing? You're not, Grefin, believe me.'

From his first squalling cry, Malcolm had been Aimery's favourite. And their mother had loved her sickly youngest son best. All his life Balfre had stood stranded between them, necessary, but not needed. Now, with Malcolm dead, he was needed . . . but not wanted.

'You should give Balfre a chance, Father. You never have. I think he'd—'

'*Enough, Grefin! Get out!*'

So much for building bridges. Grefin bowed. 'As you wish, Your Grace. Good night.'

Heartsick and still numbly disbelieving, Balfre prowled the confines of his lushly appointed privy chamber. *Grefin* was made Steward of the Green Isle. Grefin, best loved and faery-favoured. Grefin, who'd heard Black Hughe's black taunt and refused to lift a lance in his brother's defence.

'*Bastard!*'

Stomach roiling, rich red wine turned to vinegar in his mouth, he hurled his goblet at the wall. Heavy green Maletti glass shattered against Ardennese tapestry-work, the spilled wine staining its vivid hunting scene like fresh blood. He was hard put not to weep. Grefin's treachery buried dragon-talons in his bowels. No wonder he was bent

in half. He crabbed sideways to a padded settle and dropped. The lamplit room stank of crushed, fermented grapes and betrayal.

A knocking at the door of the outer chamber turned his head. His useless wife was elsewhere and he'd dismissed the servants, so he was forced to answer the summons himself.

'Let me in.' Grefin, standing on the threshold. 'I've things to say.'

Balfre smiled. In his veins his blood bubbled, dangerous. 'Brother Steward. Come to gloat?'

'Don't be a noddle, Balfre,' Grefin said, impatient. 'Let me in.'

If he could change what had happened by beating his brother bloody, he would. But this war could only be won with words. He stepped back. 'Fine. Join me, and welcome.'

'You're alone?' said Grefin, leading the way into the privy chamber. 'Where's Jancis?'

'I don't know.' He made for the sideboard. 'My wife has taken to aping yours, and so does as she pleases. What do you want?'

'I told you. To talk.'

Picking up a bottle of brandy, he offered his brother a bright smile. 'Shouldn't you be celebrating your good fortune with Mazelina? Surely you've told her the happy news.'

'I wanted to see you first.' Grefin nodded at the brandy. 'Might I have some of that, if you've not emptied the bottle?'

'Of course, little brother. As if you need to ask. Isn't everything mine as good as yours?'

'Balfre—' Grefin stared, his brows pinched tight, then moved to the fireplace and thrust a fresh log into the lowering flames. 'This isn't my doing. I never asked Aimery to make me Steward.'

'Then refuse the appointment.'

'I tried. He won't let me.'

'Try harder.'

Grefin sighed. 'I can't.'

'Yes, you can. You just don't want to.'

Their gazes met, like the clashing of swords. Grefin was the first to look away. 'You can't blame Aimery for being angry. You did defy him, challenging Hughe. And he sees your defiance as a stain on his honour.'

'What of my stain? What of Hughe and his filthy tongue? Where's

my honour if I don't dispute such rank and public slander? Or doesn't that matter?'

'Of course it matters,' Grefin muttered. 'But curse it, Balfre, you know what Herewart is. If he'd not seen you punished he'd stir trouble with the lords, say that Aimery tramples justice to protect his son.'

'So I'm trampled instead, my rights as Harcia's heir mangled like a hog's guts in the mud? Where's the justice in that?'

'Balfre, I understand you're disappointed. But try to see it through Aimery's eyes. He—'

'Fuck Aimery's eyes!' Shaking, he sloshed brandy into a fresh goblet. Drained it dry as those dragon-talons twisted deeper into his guts. 'We both know the old bastard won't keep this secret. Within the week all of Harcia will know I'm disinherited the stewardship, and by month's end Clemen will know it too. We'll hear Harald laughing all the way from Eaglerock.'

'Harald?' Grefin groaned. 'Why must everything come back to Harald?'

He stared. 'Why? I swear, Grefin, you're as blind as Aimery. It's a fucking mercy you're not the one stepped into Malcolm's boots.' He refilled the goblet, hand still unsteady. 'At least not the whole way.'

'Not even part way,' said Grefin. 'I don't want to be duke.'

'Good, for you'd make a poor one!' he retorted. 'Don't you see, Grefin? Sooner or later Harcia will be mine. And if Harald still rules Clemen then? By the Exarch's balls, how will I keep us safe from that slaving mongrel if Aimery's already taught him I'm not to be feared! Has the old fool thought of that? Fuck if he has!'

Another sigh, then Grefin looked again to the brandy. 'Do I get a drink, or don't I?'

He walked away from the sideboard. 'Am I your fucking servant now? Pour it yourself.'

So Grefin tipped brandy into another goblet and drank, more deeply than was his habit. Balfre, looking over his shoulder, seeing the misery so close to his brother's plain surface, turned from the chamber's narrow, shuttered window. Fuck. Despite everything, and no matter how much he resented it, Grefin's honest pain could still pain him. They were brothers, tied hand and foot by blood and

memories and death. Nothing could change that, though he often wished otherwise.

‘How long have you had that doublet, Gref? A year? You should’ve turned it to dishcloths months ago.’

‘When it’s only been mended twice?’ said Grefin, eyebrows raised. ‘I don’t think so. Besides, you keep the household tailor busy enough for both of us.’

He snorted. ‘Spoke like a true nip-purse. Are you certain sure we’re related?’

‘Mother seemed to think so.’

‘You do know she’s dying again, from shame, seeing you put together like a third-rate Ardennese merchant with a hole in his money chest.’

Grefin tugged at his dark blue velvet doublet, unleavened by so much as a single pink pearl. ‘Bite your tongue. I’m as well-dressed as a *second*-rate merchant, thank you.’ Then he frowned. ‘And don’t speak of Mother like that.’

He raised a placating hand. ‘Sorry.’

‘It’s just . . .’ Grefin drank more brandy. ‘I miss her.’

‘I know.’ A headache was brewing behind his eyes. He pressed a knuckle hard against his forehead, rubbing ‘So. How was the duke when you left him?’

‘Not sweet,’ said Grefin, after an uncomfortable pause. ‘Herewart’s grief has left him raw.’

‘Will he see me tonight?’

‘No.’

‘And if I want to see him?’

‘Do you?’

He laughed, unamused. ‘No.’

‘Well, then.’ Grefin nodded at the scattered shards of Maletti glass beneath the wine-spoiled tapestry. ‘You broke a goblet.’

‘And if I did?’

‘It’s a pity,’ said Grefin, shrugging. ‘They were Mother’s favourites.’

And so they were. ‘It was an accident.’

‘Like Hughe?’

The sharp question stabbed him onto his feet. ‘Meaning?’

Grefin's eyes had shaded to the cold blue of winter, and the grief in his face was turned to wariness . . . and doubt. 'You spoke to him, after the joust. Couldn't you tell he was mortal hurt?'

'I'm not a leech.'

'There was no hint, no sign, that he—'

'It was a joust,' he said, as temper stirred again. Tangled in all his adult feelings for the man Grefin had become, the childhood pride of a little brother tottering faithfully in his footsteps. Where was that little brother now? Where was the Grefin who thought Balfre could do no wrong? 'Sometimes men die when they joust. I never forced Hughe to ride against me. And I never hobbled his horse or sat a burr under his saddle or cut through his stirrup leather or weakened his lance. All I did was win. Is winning enough to make me a murderer?'

'I know you never meant Hughe to die,' Grefin snapped. 'But admit this much, Balfre. When you're angry you don't see straight. You don't even try. I think you saw Hughe was hurt and because he'd hurt you first, you just didn't *care*.'

He was sore tempted to smash another glass goblet. 'Why should I flinch for Black Hughe's spilled blood or weep because he's a corpse now, and rotting? He was an upstart, a brash-boy, he mocked his betters and never knew when to hold his nasty tongue. Did *he* care when he slandered me? Fuck if he did! So no, I didn't care he was hurt and I don't care he died of being the poorer man in a joust!'

Grefin's face twisted. 'You should.'

'And you should care I've had my birthright stolen. The Green Isle is mine, Grefin. Not yours.'

'The Isle belongs to Aimery. Whoever is named its Steward, that man holds it in trust for Harcia's duke.'

'And we both know I should be that man. *Please*, Gref.' Stepping close, he took hold of his brother's shoulder. 'Tell Aimery that for love of me you won't steal the Isle like a common thief.'

'I can't.' Shrugging free, Grefin put down his empty goblet. 'I've already said I'd be Steward for a year.'

Balfre moistened his lips. 'You've promised him that?'

'I have.' Grefin stared, defiant. 'For both of us.'

His hot blood had turned to ice, freezing heart and bone. 'I don't

remember lending you my tongue. Tell me, brother, what else did I say?’

‘Balfre—’

‘*What else?*’

Grefin turned away, his own temper escaping. ‘D’you think you can defy the duke and be winked at? Kill a man, and be winked at? So you’ll wait one more year before you’re Steward. That’s *nothing*.’

‘Says the man who’s been made Steward in my place!’

‘Oh, Balfre.’ Turning back, Grefin shook his head. ‘Can you think of no one but yourself? The duke held that old rump Herewart in his arms and *wept*. That old rump is broken with his grief. It was his *son* you killed. *Fuck*. I begged you not to hold that joust. Why, just once, didn’t you listen to me?’

A good question, in hindsight.

Abruptly exhausted, Balfre dropped again to the settle. ‘So that’s that, is it? You’re to be Steward and I’m to be made a laughing stock.’

Grefin dropped to the settle beside him. ‘I’m sorry.’

As if that made any difference. As if that made what he’d done all right.

‘Aimery does what he must for Harcia,’ Grefin added. ‘He might not be the easiest of fathers but he is a good duke.’

‘Sometimes,’ he admitted, grudging, then let out a slow breath. ‘But mostly he scares me shitless. He loves peace so much he’s afraid to think of war. He thinks Clemen is no danger. He thinks Harald—’

‘Is a fool and a rascal who’ll stumble into trouble without our help.’ Grefin looked at him sidelong. ‘And he’s right.’

‘I know you think so. But Gref, what if he’s wrong?’

‘What if he is? Are you saying the only remedy must be the spilling of Clemen blood?’

‘Clemen’s spilled our blood, in the Marches.’

‘And we’ve spilled theirs,’ said Grefin. ‘We’ve both of us done our share of bleeding. But do you want Marcher squabbles spilled over the borders? Would you flood both duchies scarlet?’

‘I’d never let it come to that. I don’t want Clemen ruined. Just brought to heel.’

In the fireplace, flames flickered. Shadows danced on the

tapestry-hung stone walls. With a muttered curse Grefin braced his elbows on his knees and pressed his hands to his face.

‘When we were boys,’ he said, muffled, ‘after Malcolm was squired to Deness of Heems and it was just the two of us, you always wanted to play King of Harcia. Remember? You brandished a wooden sword and wore a crown you wove from willow-wands, and when I wouldn’t call you *Your Majesty* you’d get so angry . . .’

Balfre’s heart thudded hard. ‘Doesn’t every boy dream of being a king?’

‘Maybe.’ Grefin let his hands fall. Shifted a little, to look at him squarely. ‘But we’re not boys any more.’

‘More’s the pity. Things were fucking simpler then.’

A startled moment, then Grefin laughed. ‘Yes. They were.’

‘And you have to admit, Gref, they’d be simpler now,’ he pointed out, carefully careless, ‘if the old kingdom returned and Harcia and Clemen were reconciled under one rule. Clemen’s people would be happier were they rid of cursed Harald.’

Grefin thudded his shoulder blades against the wall. ‘No doubt. Only the last king of Harcia died some two hundred years ago and those crowned days died soon after when the kingdom split. I know you still dream of the old Harcian kingdom reborn, Balfre, but you must know that’s folly. It’s far too late to turn the clock back.’

Said Aimery and his faithful echo Grefin. But they were mistaken. Ancient wrongs could be put right. Stolen thrones could be reclaimed. The Kingdom of Harcia had been mighty, once . . . and would be again, when he was done.

But that wasn’t something he was ready to share with his brother.

‘I know,’ he said, heaving a deceptively rueful sigh.

‘Do you?’ Grefin frowned. ‘Really?’

‘Yes, really.’ He punched a fist to Grefin’s knee. ‘It’s late. You should go. Mazelina will be thinking I’ve shoved you down the garderobe.’

Grefin’s answering smile was tinged with relief. ‘Given into temptation, you mean.’

‘Oh, go fuck yourself,’ he suggested. ‘Better yet, fuck your wife.’ When his brother only stared, uncertain, he shoved. ‘Go, Grefin. I

might sting over the Green Isle but if you think I'd throw myself from the top of the Croft for losing it, you're moonshot.'

'So . . .' Grefin stood. 'I'm forgiven?'

Balfre blinked. Forgiven? For capitulating to Aimery. For taking what wasn't his. For thinking he could speak on anyone's behalf but his own. *Forgiven?*

Grefin really was moonshot.

Maybe in a year, when – *if* – Grefin kept his word, and the Green Isle's stewardship passed from his brother's unlawful hands to his. Maybe then he could find it in him to forgive the day's betrayal. But not now, with Grefin's presumption of pardon so glibly thoughtless, so *arrogant*. So like Aimery he could spit.

'Yes,' he said, smiling, as the dragon-talons clutched anew. 'You're forgiven.'

The smile lasted until the outer chamber's door closed behind his little brother. Then he staggered to his feet, snatched up the bottle of brandy and poured what remained of it down his dry throat. Choked. Gasp for air.

'Fuck. *Fuck!*'

He was too angry to stand, had to rage about the luxurious chamber that served only to remind him of what he didn't possess. In every castle of Harcia it was the same, he and Jancis and her mewling daughter granted the apartments that had belonged to Malcom. He held no castle of his own, outright. A clutch of manor houses, yes, with villages and farmland yielding him wealth. After Aimery, before Grefin, he was the richest man in Harcia. But it didn't make up for his lack of moat and drawbridge and keep.

Grefin would have a castle, now he was Steward of the Green Isle.

The thought had him smashing the emptied brandy bottle onto the floor, sent him hunting for a fresh one. But then he stopped, panting. What was the point? There wasn't enough brandy in the duchy, in the *world*, to numb his reawakened, all-consuming pain. He needed a living distraction, something soft and warm. A woman.

'Jancis!' he roared. 'Jancis, where the fuck are you?'

He found his wife in the nursery, clad in unbecoming tawny wool, holding her swaddled brat of a daughter and talking with a

servant. ‘Get out,’ he told the girl. She picked up her linen skirts and fled.

‘My lord,’ Jancis whispered, standing with the brat’s crib between them. ‘I heard. About Hughe, and the stewardship. I’m so sorry.’

Oh, but she was a colourless shadow, his wife, with her pale hair and pale skin and eyes like watered glass. So thin, so flat-chested, sunlight almost passed right through her. No wonder he struggled to sire a living son. Aimery was to blame for that. From misplaced loyalty to one of his nobles, Aimery had cradle-promised him to Jancis, and when Malcolm died forced the wedding upon him. After two sons miscarried he’d begged his father on both knees for release, but the old fulmet wouldn’t let him put the barren bitch aside – even though her father was dead by then and couldn’t be offended. So he was yoked to her until Aimery was bedded for good in his own coffin.

He could feel the brandy in his belly, burning like dragon-fire. ‘How did you hear? Who told you?’

‘I was with Mazelina in her apartments. We heard the servants gossiping.’

Fucking servants. He should rip out their tongues. ‘And?’

‘And what?’ his wife said, tears rising. ‘I don’t understand.’

Held tight to her uninspiring breasts, the brat wriggled and cooed. Jancis started to look down, then stopped herself.

‘And do you have a fucking opinion?’ he demanded. ‘Or is that too much to ask?’

His insipid wife’s pale cheeks washed pink. ‘I think it’s wrong that Grefin’s made Steward. Why did Aimery do such a thing?’

‘Don’t you mean *How am I to blame*, that Aimery would kick me in the balls before the watching world? Isn’t that what you mean?’

Like his privy chamber, the nursery was generously lit with oil lamps and firelight. Jancis’s plump tears glowed with a golden warmth.

‘No,’ she whispered. ‘Of course not. However Hughe died, I know the fault’s not yours.’

‘Herewart says otherwise.’

Jancis gasped. ‘Herewart calls murder on you? And Aimery *believes* it? That’s why he’s named Grefin his Steward? But – but that’s wicked unjust!’

She was a barren bitch and he could never love her. So what did it say of him, that her swift defence of his honour was a balm, and welcome?

‘What a needle-wit you are,’ he said roughly, sneering. ‘So sharp you must prick yourself twice a day, at least.’ Her face paled again at the taunt. ‘There’ll be talk,’ he added, needing to goad her. ‘Will you stand it?’

Her resentful eyes met his. ‘Will you?’

The tart reply was a surprise. Jancis hardly ever challenged him. Perhaps he’d like her better if she did. Perhaps if she had greater mettle she’d find the strength to give him sons.

And if mules were horses a peasant in the saddle could be mistook for a lord.

‘Mind your shrewish tongue,’ he said, skirting the crib to close on her. ‘You’re the cause of this, Jancis.’

The brat snuffled as her holding arms tightened. ‘How is it my fault? I never—’

‘Hughe’s dead because he slandered me!’ he shouted, backing her into the wall. ‘And he slandered me because of *you*! What corruption is in you, Jancis, that your feeble body must spit out my sons before they’re formed?’

‘No corruption, Balfre! Indeed, you do me wrong!’

‘*I wrong you?*’ He almost laughed. ‘*Bitch!*’

‘I’m sorry, Balfre,’ she whispered. ‘I’d give anything to give you sons. Perhaps if I could find a wise woman who knows of such things I might—’

‘*A witch? Woman, are you mad?*’

She cried out. ‘No, no. I won’t look for one! I promise! Please, Balfre, don’t—’ She was weeping, half-turning to shield the brat, starting to slide down the wall. ‘Don’t hurt her!’

Like a man watching a mummery, he saw himself looming over his unwanted wife and girl-child. Saw his fist raised to strike. Saw her tears, and her terror. Heard the child’s frightened wails. Sickened, shaken, he turned away. Never in his life had he struck a woman. *Any man who beats a woman makes of himself a beast.* A lesson learned at his formidable mother’s knee. How ashamed she’d be, could she see him now.

Helping Jancis to stand, he felt her trembling fear of him beneath his hands and flinched. ‘I’m sorry,’ he said, as she settled the brat in its crib. ‘Jancis . . .’ Helpless, he stared at her. ‘Fuck. I wish – I wish—’

She looked up. ‘I know, Balfre. So do I.’

Without warning, his throat closed. ‘It’s not right that Grefin’s made Steward. Ever since Malcom died, Aimery has looked for ways to—’ He breathed hard, fighting the pain he resented so much. ‘The honour of the Green Isle belongs to me.’

‘Your father’s made his decision,’ Jancis said, shrugging. ‘There’s nothing you can do.’

Her defeated acceptance rekindled his anger. ‘Fuck that. I don’t accept it. You wait. I’ll change the old bastard’s mind.’

From atop the Croft’s battlements, wind-tugged and shivering despite his padded doublet and heavy woollen surcoat, Aimery watched the summoned lords of his council clatter on horseback across the stone bridge leading to the castle’s outer bailey. Though he stood high, and they were distant, he could tell they weren’t happy. But then, neither was he.

Out of long custom, Harcia kept an itinerant court. As he travelled the duchy, showing his face, hearing disputes, he often met with his greatest barons. Together they nipped trouble in its rancorous bud, which meant a great council was held once, at most twice, in a year. Its holding was a disruption, an upheaval in many lives. That reckless Balfre was the cause this time would not endear him to the men cruel fate had decreed he’d one day rule.

Aimery sighed. If only Balfre understood that.

Horse by horse, Harcia’s barons vanished from sight as they passed into the keep: Deness of Heems, Lord Keeton, Lord Ferran, Maunay of Knockrowan, Reimond of Parsle Fountain, Lord Orval. Last of all, Joben, Balfre’s cousin on his mother’s side. There was a younger cousin, eager for a place on the council. But history taught that dukes who favoured family over their duchy’s loyal barons came to foul ends.

I must punish Balfre harshly in the eyes of every lord. Not just to save him, but to save myself too. And Harcia.

Footsteps behind him, and then a lightly cleared throat. Curteis.
'Your Grace, the council gathers in the Great Hall.'

'Let them wait. I'll come presently.'

'Your Grace.'

Alone again, Aimery feasted his gaze on the open countryside around the Croft. Once woodland had grown almost as far as the eye could see. But Harcia had cut down nearly all of its forests, hungry to turn tall trees into swift galleys. A mistake, that had proven. The men of Harcia weren't natural sailors. They failed to read the treacherous tides and currents of the northern sea. Those mistakes, and three seasons of vast storms, had wrecked Harcia's galleys to driftwood. One more reason for his duchy's struggle to find wealth in the world. Aside from the Green Isle's splendid horses, they had precious little. He was doing his best, sapling by sapling, to bring back those slain forests and with them the natural riches Harcia had squandered. He'd not see them reborn in his lifetime, but Balfre would. If he continued the work his father had started.

Balfre.

Aimery felt his breathing hitch. When would his son realise he must be a better man than the man who'd knocked Black Hughe from saddle to coffin? Than the man who blamed Jancis for their sorrows and looked with sour envy upon Grefin and his thriving son?

He must know he disappoints himself. He must know he breaks my heart.

Even so, there was courage in him, and the capacity for love. If he was spoiled a little, if he wasn't Malcolm, surely he wasn't yet rotten. Surely he could still be saved.

For Harcia's sake he must be.

Staring over his battlements, seeing in his mind's eye every village and creek and manor that by birthright he owned yet only held in trust, Aimery felt a sting of tears. As much as he'd loved Malcolm, did love Grefin, tried to love Balfre, did he love his harsh, rugged duchy.

Blinking away the sting, he turned from the battlements. He could hide up here no longer. Hard tasks did not soften with the passing of time.

* * *

Grefin was waiting in the Great Hall, in company with the council. In company with Herewart, returned to the Croft after Hughe's funeral, still dressed head to toe in mourning black. The old man's sharp grief was blunted, the pain instead settled deep in his bones and moulding his face into a portrait of permanent loss. Herewart had no place on the council, but he was owed this public apology.

'My lords,' Aimery said, raising a hand to acknowledge their sober greetings. 'Be seated. I'd not keep you longer than necessary. Grefin, stand with me.'

As they obeyed he took his own chair, the hugely carved ducal seat with its bearskin covering and bear-claw decorations. Let the bear's strength suffuse him, let its courage rouse his blood. Bears were mighty and ferocious. Bears did not weep.

He could feel Grefin at his right hand, high-strung beneath the outward calm. As always, dressed more like sober, self-effacing Curteis than a duke's son, in dark blue velvet lacking jewels and gold thread. That would have to change. Clothes proclaimed the man . . . or, in his case, the Steward. But Mazelina would see to that. His youngest son's wife was a lively woman of unbounded tact and common sense.

'My lords,' he said again, once his barons were settled, 'your summons to council arises from our dear brother Herewart's grievous loss. He knows my privy heart in this, but I'll share it now so none here might wonder. A son's untimely death is a sorrow no father should suffer. And I tell you *my* sorrow is doubled, for the part my heir played in Hughe's death.'

'Your Grace, we all grieve,' said Reimond of Parsle Fountain. Time-grizzled, with thinning hair and two fingers lost from his left hand. He turned to Herewart. 'Hughe was a fine man, boon friend to my own Geffrei. That he should die—'

'By mischance,' Joben said quickly, not caring if he gave offence. Only two years parted him and Balfre, and as boys they'd been peapod close. 'There was no malice.'

Reimond glowered, while the other barons tapped fingers and muttered. 'But there was temper, Joben. Temper and poor judgement. Your Grace—'

'Peace,' said Aimery sharply. 'This is not a debate upon the

character of my eldest son. I know him, heart and soul, better than anyone. Balfre is—'

'Here,' said his son, unwelcome and gallingly disobedient, as he entered the Great Hall. 'Come to plead my case before Harcia's duke and his council.'

'Balfre, you *noddle*,' said Grefin under his breath, dismayed. 'What are you doing?'

The council, and Herewart, stared at Balfre as he approached. Not a popinjay this afternoon, but a sparrow, he wore an undyed linen shirt and mud-brown woollen hose. He came barefoot and bareheaded, not an ear- or finger-ring to be seen. Plain Grefin by comparison was turned gaudy bright.

Searching his barons' faces, Aimery fought to keep his own face still. Balfre's brazen defiance of established protocol was a barbed blade twisting in his guts. And he could see Reimond felt the same, his forehead knitted in disapproval. Indeed, only Joben showed any favour. Deness of Heems and the lords Keeton and Ferran echoed Reimond's unmasked disgust.

Heedless of their hostile stares, Balfre halted and folded into a bow. 'Your Grace,' he said, straightening, his steady gaze supremely confident. 'I come to you humbled, seeking forgiveness. When I blinked at your disapproval of rowdy sporting I acted out of youthful bravado, discarding your wise judgement for my own. Your Grace, you deserve much better. And before these great lords, whom I have also offended, I swear on my life I will never again fail you or Harcia – and I ask that you let me prove it by granting me all my rights as your heir.'

Breathing out softly, Balfre pressed a hand to his heart, making his words a solemn vow. Then, letting his gaze lower to the flagstoned floor, he folded first to his knees and then to utter prostration, arms outstretched before him in an extravagance of entreaty.

From a great, cold distance, Aimery heard the hall's air whistle in and out of his chest. There was rage . . . and there was, he now discovered, a place beyond rage. He stared at the stunned faces before him.

'Balfre is my heir,' he said, as though no time had passed, as though his other son had never entered the hall. 'And when I die he

will be your duke. But the tragedy of Hughe's death makes plain that he yet has much to learn. Therefore I declare that for the span of a year and a day my younger son Grefin, here standing beside me, shall be hailed Steward of the Green Isle, my voice and my authority in that place.'

Reimond of Parsle Fountain cleared his throat. 'And if Balfre proves himself a slow learner?'

'For his sake, Reimond . . .' Aimery bared his teeth in a smile. 'I hope he proves otherwise.' He stood. 'My lords of the council, my lord Herewart, I invite you to withdraw with me and my well-loved son Grefin, that we might spill wine in memory of Black Hughe and then celebrate our new Steward!'

With every man watching, with Grefin breath-caught and torn, to his sorrow, he took a step forward . . . and stepped over his other son. Stepped again and kept walking, leaving Balfre prostrate and speechless in his wake. And as Grefin followed, and the other lords followed Grefin, he did not look back.