



# The Hallowed Hunt



LOIS McMASTER BUJOLD

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## CHAPTER ONE

### **T**HE PRINCE WAS DEAD.

Since the king was not, no unseemly rejoicing dared show in the faces of the men atop the castle gate. Merely, Ingrey thought, a furtive relief. Even that was extinguished as they watched Ingrey's troop of riders clatter under the gate's vaulting into the narrow courtyard. They recognized who he was—and, therefore, who must have sent him.

Ingrey's sweat grew clammy under his leather jerkin in the damp dullness of the autumn morning. The chill seemed cupped within the cobbled yard, funneled down by the whitewashed walls. The lightly armed courier bearing the news had raced from the prince's hunting seat here at Boar's Head Castle to the hallow king's hall at Easthome in just two days. Ingrey and his men, though more heavily equipped, had made the return journey in scarcely more time. As a castle groom scurried to take his horse's bridle, Ingrey swung down and straightened his scabbard, fingers lingering only briefly on the reassuring coolness of his sword hilt.

The late Prince Boleso's housemaster, Rider Ulkra, appeared around the keep from wherever he'd been lurking when Ingrey's troop had been spied climbing the road. Stout, usually stolid, he was breathless now with apprehension and hurry. He bowed. "Lord Ingrey. Welcome. Will you take drink and meat?"

"I've no need. See to these, though." He gestured to the half dozen men who followed him. The troop's lieutenant, Rider Gesca, gave him an acknowledging nod of thanks, and Ulkra delivered men and horses into the hands of the castle servants.

Ingrey followed Ulkra up the short flight of steps to the thick-planked main doors. "What have you done so far?"

Ulkra lowered his voice. "Waited for instructions." Worry scored his face; the men in Boleso's service were not long on initiative at the best of times. "Well, we moved the body into the cool. We could not leave it where it was. And we secured the prisoner."

What sequence, for this unpleasant inspection? "I'll see the body first," Ingrey decided.

“Yes, my lord. This way. We cleared one of the butteries.”

They passed through the cluttered hall, the fire in its cavernous fieldstone fireplace allowed to burn low, the few red coals half-hidden in the ashes doing nothing to improve the discomfort of the chamber. A shaggy deerhound, gnawing a bone on the hearth, growled at them from the shadows. Down a staircase, through a kitchen where a cook and scullions fell silent and made themselves small as they passed, down again into a chilly chamber ill lit by two small windows high in the rocky walls.

The little room was presently unfurnished but for two trestles, the boards laid across them, and the sheeted shape that lay silently upon the boards. Reflexively, Ingrey signed himself, touching forehead, lip, navel, groin, and heart, spreading his hand over his heart: one theological point for each of the five gods. *Daughter-Bastard-Mother-Father-Son. And where were all of You when this happened?*

As Ingrey waited for his eyes to adjust to the shadows, Ulkra swallowed, and said, “The hallow king—how did he take the news?”

“It is hard to say,” said Ingrey, with politic vagueness. “Sealmaster Lord Hetwar sent me.”

“Of course.”

Ingrey could read little in the housemaster’s reaction, except the obvious, that Ulkra was glad to be handing responsibility for this on to someone else. Uneasily, Ulkra folded back the pale cloth covering his dead master. Ingrey frowned at the body.

Prince Boleso kin Stagthorne had been the youngest of the hallow king’s surviving—of the hallow king’s sons, Ingrey corrected his thought in flight. Boleso was still a young man, for all he had come to his full growth and strength some years ago. Tall, muscular, he shared the long jaw of his family, masked with a short brown beard. The darker brown hair of his head was tangled now, and matted with blood. His booming energy was stilled; drained of it, his face lost its former fascination, and left Ingrey wondering how he had once been fooled into thinking it handsome. He moved forward, hands cradling the skull, probing the wound. Wounds. The shattered bone beneath the scalp gave beneath his thumbs’ pressure on either side of a pair of deep lacerations, blackened with dried gore.

“What weapon did this?”

“The prince’s own war hammer. It was on the stand with his armor, in his bedchamber.”

“How very...unexpected. To him as well.” Grimly, Ingrey considered the fates of princes. All his short life, according to Hetwar, Boleso had been alternately petted and neglected by parents and servants both, the natural arrogance of his blood tainted with a precarious hunger for honor, fame, reward. The arrogance—or was it the anxiety?—

had bloated of late to something overweening, desperately out of balance. *And that which is out of balance...falls.*

The prince wore a short open robe of worked wool, lined with fur, blood-splashed. He must have been wearing it when he'd died. Nothing more. No other recent wounds marked his pale skin. When the housemaster said they had waited for instructions, Ingrey decided, he had understated the case. The prince's retainers had evidently been so benumbed by the shocking event, they had not even dared wash or garb the corpse. Grime darkened the folds of Boleso's body...no, not grime. Ingrey ran a finger along a groove of chill flesh, and stared warily at the smear of color, dull blue and stamen yellow and, where they blended, a sickly green. Dye, paint, some colored powder? The dark fur of the inner robe, too, showed faint smears.

Ingrey straightened, and his eye fell on what he had at first taken for a bundle of furs laid along the far wall. He stepped closer and knelt.

It was a dead leopard. Leopardess, he amended, turning the beast partly over. The fur was fine and soft, fascinating beneath his hands. He traced the cold, curving ears, the stiff white whiskers, the pattern of dark whorls upon golden silk. He picked up one heavy paw, feeling the leathery pads, the thick ivory claws. The claws had been clipped. A red silk cord was bound tightly around the neck, biting deeply into the fur. Its end was cut off. Ingrey's hairs prickled, a reaction he quelled.

Ingrey glanced up. Ulkra, watching him, looked even more bleakly blank than before.

"This is no creature of *our* woods. Where in the world did it come from?"

Ulkra cleared his throat. "The prince obtained it from some Darthacan merchants. He proposed to start a menagerie here at the castle. Or possibly train it for hunting. He said."

"How long ago was this?"

"A few weeks. Just before his lady sister stopped here."

Ingrey fingered the red cord, letting his brows rise. He nodded at the dead animal. "And how did this happen?"

"We found it hanging from a beam in the prince's bedroom. When we, um, went in."

Ingrey sat back on his heels. He was beginning to see why no Temple divine had yet been called up to take charge of the funeral rites. The daubing, the red cord, the oak beam, hinted of an animal not merely slain but sacrificed, of someone dabbling in the old heresies, the forbidden forest magics. Had the sealmaster known of this, when he'd sent Ingrey? If so, he'd given no sign. "Who hung it?"

With the relief of a man telling a truth that could not hurt him, Ulkra said, “I did not see. I could not say. It was alive, leashed up in the corner and lying perfectly placidly, when we brought the girl in. We none of us heard or saw any more after that. Until the screams.”

“Whose screams?”

“Well...the girl’s.”

“What was she crying? Or were they...” Ingrey cut short the *just cries*. He’d a shrewd suspicion Ulkra would be a little too glad of the suggestion. “What were her words?”

“She cried for help.”

Ingrey stood up from the exotic, spotted carcass, his riding leathers creaking in the quiet, and let the weight of his stare fall on Ulkra. “And you responded—how?”

Ulkra turned his head away. “We had our orders to guard the prince’s repose. My lord.”

“Who heard the cries? Yourself, and...?”

“Two of the prince’s guards, who had been told to wait his pleasure.”

“Three strong men, sworn to the prince’s protection. Who stood—where?”

Ulkra’s face might have been carved from rock. “In the corridor. Near his door.”

“Who stood in the corridor not ten feet from his murder, and did nothing.”

“We dared not. My lord. For *he* did not call. And anyway, the screams...stopped. We assumed, um, that the girl had yielded herself. She went in willingly enough.”

*Willingly? Or despairingly?* “She was no servant wench. She was a retainer of Prince Boleso’s own lady sister, a dowered maiden of her household. Entrusted to her service by kin Badgerbank, no less.”

“Princess Fara herself yielded her up to her brother, my lord, when he begged the girl of her.”

*Pressured*, was how Ingrey had heard the gossip. “Which made her a retainer of *this* house. Did it not?”

Ulkra flinched.

“Even a menial deserves better protection of his masters.”

“Any lord in his cups might strike a servant, and misjudge the force of the blow,” said Ulkra sturdily. The cadences sounded rehearsed, to Ingrey’s ear. How often had Ulkra repeated that excuse to himself in the depths of the night, these past six months?

The ugly incident with the murdered manservant was the reason Prince Boleso had suffered his internal exile to this remote crag. His known love of hunting made it a dubious punishment, but it had got the Temple out of the royal sealmaster’s thinning hair. Too little payment for a crime, too much for an accident; Ingrey, who had observed the shambles next morning for Lord Hetwar before it had all been cleaned away, had judged it neither.

“*Any lord* would not then go on to skin and butcher his kill, Ulkra. There was more than drink behind that wild act. It was madness, and we all knew it.” And when the king and his retainers had let their judgment be swayed, after that night’s fury, by an appeal to loyalty—not to the prince’s own soul’s need, but to the appearance, the reputation of his high house—this disaster had been laid in train.

Boleso would have been expected to reappear at court in another half year, duly chastened, or at least duly pretending to be. But Fara had broken her journey here from her earl-ordainer husband’s holdings to her father’s sickbed, and so her—Ingrey presumed, pretty—lady-in-waiting had fallen under the bored prince’s eye. One could take one’s pick of tales from the princess’s retinue, arriving barely before the bad news at the king’s hall in Easthome, whether the cursed girl had yielded her virtue in terror to the prince’s importunate lusts, or in calculation to her own vaulting ambition.

If it had been calculation, it had gone badly awry. Ingrey sighed. “Take me to the prince’s bedchamber.”

The late prince’s room lay high in the central keep. The corridor outside was short and dim. Ingrey pictured Boleso’s retainers huddled at the far end in the wavering candlelight, waiting for the screams to stop, then had to unset his teeth. The room’s solid door featured a wooden bar on the inside, as well as an iron lock.

The appointments were few and countrified: a bed with hangings, barely long enough for the prince’s height, chests, the stand with his second-best armor in one corner. A scattering of rugs on the wide floorboards. One was soaked with a dark stain. The sparse furnishings left just room enough for a quarry to dodge and run, a gasping chase. To turn at bay and swing...

The windows to the right of the armor stand were narrow, with thick wavery circles of glass set in their leads. Ingrey pulled the casements inward, swung wide the shutters, and gazed out upon the green-forested folds of countryside falling away from the crag. In the watery light, wisps of mist rose from the ravines like the ghosts of streams. At the bottom of the valley, a small farming village hacked out of the woods pushed back the tide of trees: source, no doubt, of food, servants, firewood for the castle, all crude and simple.

The fall from the sill to the stones below was lethal, the jump to the walls beyond quite impossible even for anyone slim enough to wriggle out the opening. In the dark and the rain. No escape by that route, except to death. A half turn from the window, the armor stand would be under a panicked prey's groping hands. A battle-ax, its handle inlaid with gold and ruddy copper, still rested there.

The matching war hammer lay tossed upon the rumpled bed. Its claw-rimmed iron head—very like an animal's paw—was smeared with dried gore like the blotch on the rug. Ingrey measured it against his palm, noted the congruity with the wounds he had just seen. The hammer had been swung two-handed, with all the strength that terror might lend. But only a woman's strength, after all. The prince, half-stunned—half-mad?—had apparently kept coming. The second blow had been harder.

Ingrey strolled the length of the room, looking all around and then up at the beams. Ulkra, hands clutching one another, backed out of his way. Just above the bed dangled a frayed length of red cord. Ingrey stepped up on the bed frame, drew his belt knife, stretched upward, cut it through, and tucked the coil away in his jerkin.

He jumped down and turned to the hovering Ulkra. "Boleso is to be buried at Easthome. Have his wounds and his body washed—more thoroughly—and pack him in salt for transport. Find a cart, a team—better hitch two pairs, with the mud on the roads—and a competent driver. Set the prince's guards as outriders; their ineptitude can do him no more harm now. Clean this room, set the keep to rights, appoint a caretaker, and follow on with the rest of his household and valuables." Ingrey's gaze drifted around the chamber. Nothing else here... "Burn the leopard. Scatter its ashes."

Ulkra gulped and nodded. "When do you wish to depart, my lord? Will you stay the night?"

Should he and his captive travel with the slow cortege, or push on ahead? He wanted to be away from this place as swiftly as he could—it made his neck muscles ache—but the light was shortening with autumn's advent, and the day was half-spent already. "I must speak to the prisoner before I decide. Take me to her."

It was a brief step, down one floor to a windowless, but dry, storeroom. Not dungeon, certainly not guest room, the choice of prisons bespoke a deep uncertainty over the status of its occupant. Ulkra rapped on the door, called, "My lady? You have a visitor," unlocked it, and swung it wide. Ingrey stepped forward.

From the darkness, a pair of glowing eyes flashed up at him like some great cat's from a covert, in a forest that whispered. Ingrey recoiled, hand flying to his hilt. His blade had rasped halfway out when his elbow struck the jamb, pain tingling hotly from shoulder to fingertips; he backed farther to gain turning room, to lunge and strike.

Ulkra's startled grip fell on his forearm. The housemaster was staring at him in astonishment.

Ingrey froze, then jerked away so that Ulkra might not feel his trembling. His first concern was to quell the violent impulse blaring through his limbs, cursing his legacy anew—he had not been caught by surprise by it since...for a long time. *I deny you, wolf-within. You shall not ascend.* He slid his blade back into its sheath, snicked it firmly home, slowly unwrapped his fingers, and placed his palm flat against his leather-clad thigh.

He stared again into the little room, forcing sense upon his mind. In the shadows, the ghostly shape of a young woman was rising from a straw pallet on the floor. There seemed to be bedding enough, a down-stuffed quilt, tray and pitcher, a covered chamber pot, necessities decently addressed. This prison secured; it did not, yet, punish.

Ingrey licked dry lips. “I cannot see you in that den.” *And what I saw, I disavow.* “Step into the light.”

The lift of a chin, the toss of a dark mane; she padded forward. She wore a fine linen dress dyed pale yellow, embroidered with flowers along the curving neckline; if not court dress, then certainly clothing of a maiden of rank. A dark brown spatter crossed it in a diagonal. In the light, her tumbling black hair grew reddish. Brilliant hazel eyes looked not up, but across, at Ingrey. Ingrey was of middle height for a man, compactly built; the girl was well grown for her sex, to match him so.

Hazel eyes, almost amber in this light, circled in black at the iris rim. Not glowing green. Not...

With a wary glance at him, Ulkra began speaking, performing the introduction as formally as if he were playing Boleso’s house-master at some festal feast. “Lady Ijada, this is Lord Ingrey kin Wolf-cliff, who is Sealmaster Lord Hetwar’s man. He is come to take you in charge. Lord Ingrey, Lady Ijada dy Castos, by her mother’s blood kin Badgerbank.”

Ingrey blinked. Hetwar had named her only, *Lady Ijada, some minor heiress in the Badgerbank tangle, five gods help us.* “That is an Ibran patronymic, surely.”

“Chalionese,” she corrected coolly. “My father was a lord dedicat of the Son’s Order, and captain of a Temple fort on the western marches of the Weald, when I was a child. He married a Wealding lady of kin Badgerbank.”

“And they are...dead?” Ingrey hazarded.

She tilted her head in cold irony. “I should have been better protected, else.”

She was not distraught, not weeping, or at least, not recently. Not, apparently, deranged. Four days in that closet to sort through her thoughts had left her composed, but for a certain tightness in her voice, a faint vibrato of fear or anger. Ingrey looked around the bare hall, glanced at Ulkra. “Take us to where we may sit and speak. Some

place apart. In the light.”

“Um...um...” After a moment’s thought, Ulkra gestured them to follow. He did not, Ingrey noticed, hesitate to turn his back upon the girl. This prisoner did not fight or bite or scratch her jailers, it seemed. Her pace, following him, was steady. At the end of the next passage, Ulkra waved to a window seat overlooking the back side of the keep. “Will this do, my lord?”

“Yes.” Ingrey hesitated, as Lady Ijada gracefully swept her skirts aside and seated herself on the polished boards. Should he retain Ulkra, for corroboration, or dismiss him, to encourage frankness? Was the girl likely to become violent again? The unbidden picture of Ulkra crouching in the corridor above this one, waiting in the dark for screams to stop, troubled his mind. “You may go about your tasks, housemaster. Return in half an hour.”

Ulkra frowned uncertainly at the girl, but bowed himself out. Boleso’s men, Ingrey was reminded, were out of the habit of questioning the sense of their superiors’ orders. Or perhaps it was that any who dared were got rid of, one way or another; and these were the remainder. Residue. *Scum*.

A little awkwardly, for the short length of the seat forced them uncomfortably close together, Ingrey sat beside her. His presumption of prettiness, he decided, had been inadequate. The girl was luminous. Unless Boleso had gone blind as well as mad, she must have arrested his eye the moment it fell upon her. Wide brow, straight nose, sculpted chin...a livid blotch darkened one cheek, and others ringed her fair neck, a pattern of plum-colored bruises. Ingrey lifted his hands to lie lightly over them; she flinched a little, but then bore his probing touch. Boleso’s hands were somewhat larger than his own, it appeared. Her skin was warm under his fingers, fascinating, transporting. A golden haze seemed to cloud his vision. His strangling grip tightened—he whipped his hands away, his gasp masked by hers, and clenched them on his knees. *What was that...?*

To cover his confusion he bit out, “I am an officer of the Royal Sealmaster. I am charged to report to him all I see and hear. You must tell me the truth of all that happened here. Begin at the beginning.”

She sat back, her startled glance altering to a piercing regard. He caught her scent, neither perfume nor blood but grown woman, and, targeted by that gaze, for the first time wondered what he looked like—and smelled like—to her. Riding reek, cold iron and sweat-stained leather, chin dark-stubbed, tired. Weighed with sword and knife and dangerous duties. Why did she not recoil altogether?

“Which beginning?” she asked.

He stared at her for a blank and stupid instant. “From your arrival here at Boar’s Head, I suppose.” Was there another? He must remember to return to that question.

She swallowed, possessed herself, began: “The princess had started out in haste for her father’s hall, with only a small retinue, but she was overtaken by illness on the road. Nothing out of the usual, but her monthly time brings her dire headaches, and if she doesn’t rest quietly through them, she becomes very sick. We turned aside to this place, for it was as close as anything, and besides, Princess Fara wished to see her brother. I think she remembered him from when he was younger and less...difficult.”

*How very tactful.* Ingrey could not decide if the turn of phrase was diplomacy or dry wit. *Caution*, he concluded, studying her closed and careful expression. Wits, not wittiness, kept close about her.

“We were made welcome, if not to her custom, then to this place’s ability.”

“Had you ever met Prince Boleso before?”

“No. I’ve only been a few months in Princess Fara’s service. My stepfather placed me there. He said—” She stopped, began again. “Everything seemed usual at first. I mean, for a lord’s hunting lodge. The days were quiet, because the prince invited her guardsmen out to the hunt. Prince Boleso and his men were very boisterous in the evenings, and drank a great deal, but the princess did not attend, being laid down in her chambers. I took down complaints from her of the noise twice, but I was little heeded. They set the dogs on a wild boar they’d caught alive, out in the courtyard beneath her window, and made bets on the fight. Boleso’s huntsman was very distressed for his hounds. I wished Earl Horseriver had been there—he could have quelled them with a word. He has a deadly tongue, when he wishes. We bided here three days, until the princess was ready to travel again.”

“Did Prince Boleso court you?”

Her lips thinned. “Not that I could tell. He was equally obnoxious to all his sister’s ladies. I knew nothing of his...regard, supposed regard, until the morning we were to leave.”

She swallowed again. “My lady—Princess Fara—told me then I was to stay. That this might not have been my first choice, but that it would do me no harm in the long run. Another husband would be found for me, after. I begged her not to leave me here. She would not meet my eye. She said it was no worse a barter than any, and better than most, and that I should look to my own future. That it was just the woman’s version of the same loyalty due from a man to his prince. I said I did not think most men would...well, I’m afraid I said something rude. She refused to speak with me after that. They rode away and left me. I would not beg at her stirrup, for fear the prince’s men would mock me.” Her arms crossed, as if to clutch a tattered dignity about her anew.

“I told myself...maybe she was right. That it would be no worse than any other fate. Boleso wasn’t ugly, or deformed, or old. Or diseased.”

Ingrey couldn't help checking himself against that list. At least he did not match any of the named categories, he trusted. Though there were others. *Defiled* sprang to mind.

"I did not realize how mad he'd grown until they'd left, and then it was too late."

"Then what happened?"

"At nightfall, they brought me to his chamber and thrust me within. He was waiting for me. He wore a robe, but under it his body was naked and all covered over with signs drawn in woad and madder and crocus. Old symbols, the sort you sometimes still see carved on ancient wooden foundations, or in the forest where the shrines once stood. He had his leopard tied up in a corner, drugged. He said—it turned out—it seemed he had not fallen in love with me after all. It wasn't even lust. He wanted a virgin for some rite he had—found, made up, I am not sure, he seemed very confused by this time—and I was the only one, his sister's other two ladies being one a wife and the other a widow. I tried to dissuade him, I told him it was heresy, dire sin and against his father's own laws, I said I would run away, that I would tell. He said he'd hunt me down with his dogs. That they would tear me apart as they had the pig. I said I would go to the Temple divine in the village. He said the man was only an acolyte, and a coward. And that he would kill anyone there who took me in. Even the acolyte. He was not afraid of the Temple, it was practically the property of kin Stagthorne and he could buy divines for a pittance.

"The rite was meant to catch the spirit of the leopard, as the old kin warriors were supposed to do. I said, it could not possibly work, nowadays. He said, he'd done it before, several times—that he meant to capture the spirits of every wisdom animal of the greater kinships. He thought it was going to give him some sort of power over the Weald."

Ingrey, startled, said, "The Old Weald warriors only took one animal spirit to themselves, one in a lifetime. And even that risked madness. Miscarriage. Worse." *As I know to my everlasting cost.*

Her velvety voice was growing faster, breathless. "He hauled the leopard up by its strangling cord. He hit me and threw me down on the bed. I fought him. He was muttering under his breath, spells or raving or both, I don't know. I believed him, that he had done this before—his very mind was a menagerie, howling. The leopard distracted him in its death throes, and I wrenched out from under him. I tried to run, but there was nowhere to go. The door was locked. He'd put the key in his robe."

"Did you scream for help?"

"I suppose so. I scarcely know. My throat was raw, after, so I suppose I must have. The window was hopeless. The forest beyond seemed to go on forever, in the night. I called on my father's spirit, on his god, for my aid, out of the dark."

Ingrey couldn't help thinking that in such an extremity Lady Ijada would call on her proper patroness, the Daughter of Spring, the goddess to Whom virginity was sacred. It seemed very strange for a woman to call on Her Brother of Autumn. *Though this is His season.* The Lord of Autumn was the god of young men, harvest, the hunt, comradeship—and war. And the weapons of war?

“You turned,” said Ingrey, “and found the hammer handle under your hand.”

The hazel eyes widened. “How did you know?”

“I saw the chamber.”

“Oh.” She moistened her lips. “I struck him. He lunged at me, or...or lurched. I struck him again. He stopped. Fell, and did not rise. He wasn't dead yet—his body spasmed, when I was groping in his robe for the key, and I nearly fainted. I fell to the floor on my hands and knees, anyway, and the room darkened. I...it...Finally, I got the door unbarred and called his men in.”

“Were they—what? Angry?”

“More frightened than angry, I think. They argued forever, and blamed each other, and me, and whatever they could think of. Even Boleso. It took them ages to decide to lock me up and send a courier.”

“What did you do?”

“I sat on the floor, mostly. I was feeling very unwell. They asked me such stupid questions. *Had I killed him?* Did they imagine he'd bludgeoned himself? I was glad for my cell, when they finally put me in it. I don't think Ulkra ever noticed I could bar its door from the inside.”

Ingrey wondered. In the most neutral voice he could muster, he said, “Did Prince Boleso complete his rape?”

Her face lifted; her eyes glinted. “No.”

Truth rang in that voice, and a kind of rocky triumph. In the uttermost extremity, abandoned by all who should have protected her, she'd found that she need not abandon herself. A powerful lesson. *A dangerous lesson.*

In an equally flat tone he asked, “Did he complete his rite?”

This time, she hesitated. “I don't know. I am not sure...what his intent was.” She gazed down into her lap; her hands gripped each other. “What will happen next? Rider Ulkra said you would take me in charge. Where to?”

“Easthome.”

“Good,” she said, with unexpected fervor. “The Temple there will surely help me.”

“You do not fear your trial?”

“Trial? I defended myself! I was betrayed into this horror!”

“It is possible,” he said, still very level-voiced, “that some powerful people will not care to hear you proclaim so. Think. You cannot prove attempted rape, for one thing. A half dozen men could testify that you appeared to go to Boleso willingly.”

“Compared to fleeing into the woods to be eaten by the wild beasts, willing, yes. Compared to bringing a brutal death on anyone who tried to help me, willingly.” She stared at him in sudden incredulity. “Do you not believe me?”

“Oh, yes.” *Oh, yes.* “But I am not your judge.”

She frowned, a glint of white teeth pressing into a lower lip gone pale. In a moment, her spine straightened again. “In any case, if the rape was not witnessed, the unlawful rite was. They all saw the leopard. They saw the secret drawings on the prince’s body. Not assertions, but material things, that any man might reach out and touch.”

*Not anymore.* If not innocent, she was *an* innocent, Ingrey had no doubt. *Lady Ijada, you have no idea what you are pitting yourself against.*

A step sounded on the floorboards; Ingrey looked up to see Ulkra approaching, seeming to loom and crouch simultaneously. “Your pleasure, my lord?” he inquired nervously.

*To be anywhere but here, doing anything but this.*

He’d been over two days in the saddle. He was, he decided abruptly, too mortally tired to ride another mile today. Boleso could be in no hurry to gallop to his funeral, and divine judgment. And Ingrey had no burning desire to rush this accursed naïve girl to her earthly judgment, either. She was not afraid of the right things. Five gods help him, she seemed not afraid of anything.

“Will you,” he said to her, “give me your word, if I order your guard lightened, that you will not attempt to escape?”

“Of course,” she said. As if surprised he even felt a need to ask.

He gestured to the housemaster. “Put her in a proper room. Give her her things back. Find a decent maid, if any is to be found in this place, to attend her and help her pack. We’ll leave for Easthome with Boleso’s body at first light tomorrow.”

“Yes, my lord,” said Ulkra, ducking his head in relieved assent.

Ingrey added as an afterthought, “Have any men of the household fled, since Boleso’s death?”

“No, my lord. Why do you ask?”

Ingrey gave a vague gesture, indicating no reason that he cared to share. Ulkra did not pursue the question.

Ingrey creaked to his feet. He felt as if his muscles squeaked louder protest than his damp leathers. Lady Ijada gave him a grateful curtsy, and turned to follow the housemaster. She looked back over her shoulder at him as she turned onto the staircase, a grave, trusting glance.

His duty was to deliver her to Easthome. Nothing more. Into the hands of...no one friendly to her cause. His fingers clenched and unclenched on his hilt.

*Nothing more.*

## CHAPTER TWO

**T**HE CORTEGE, SUCH AS IT WAS, LUMBERED OUT THE CASTLE gate in the dawn fog. Ingrey set six of Boleso's guards riding before and six behind what might charitably be described as a farm wagon. The wagon was burdened with a hastily cobbled-together oblong box, heavy with Boleso's body and the coarse salt, meant to preserve game, which made his last bed. In some sad effort at proper ceremony, Rider Ulkra had found a stag hide to cover the coffin, and funereal cloths to wrap the posts at the corners of the wagon bed, in lieu of draperies unlikely to survive the local roads. Whatever attempts the guardsmen had made to furbish up their gear for this somber duty were lost from view in the clinging mists. Ingrey's eye was more concerned for the security of the ropes that bound the box in place.

The teamster that Ulkra had drafted was a local yeoman, owner of both wagon and team, and he kept his sturdy horses well in hand during the first precarious turns and bumps of the narrow road. By his side, his wife hung on grimly but expertly to the wooden brake, which shrieked against the wheel as the wagon descended. She was a staid older woman, a better female chaperone for his prisoner, Ingrey thought, than the slatternly and frightened young servant girl Ulkra had first offered, and she would be guarded in turn by her husband. Ingrey trusted his own men, but remembered that inner bar on the prisoner's chamber door; whatever Lady Ijada had supposed, Ingrey was quite sure that obstacle hadn't been an oversight on Ulkra's part.

The whitewashed walls and conical green slate tower caps of the castle disappeared dreamlike among the smoke-gray trees, and the road widened and straightened for a short stretch. Ingrey gave a quiet salute to the two of his own escort bringing up the rear, which was as silently returned, and urged his horse forward around the wagon and its outriders. In the lead, the other two pairs of Ingrey's guards bracketed Lady Ijada.

The prisoner rode her own horse. Ingrey did not know whether Earl Horseriver's stables or Lady Ijada's own family had furnished her mount, but it was a fine showy chestnut, well fleshed and supple in action. It sidled and snorted in its freshness, its ears flicking nervously. If she should clap her heels to the beast's sides and attempt some cross-country escape, it would not be easy to ride her down. She showed no signs of doing so just yet, however; she sat the mare lightly, with an occasional touch on the reins to keep it from outpacing the other horses. This morning Lady Ijada wore

a riding habit suitable to a noblewoman's hunting party, with a jacket dyed burnt-brown traced with copper thread, a polished gleam of boots peeping from the hems of her split skirts. Her dark hair was tied back severely and bundled in a crocheted net at her nape. Her creamy neckcloth just hid Boleso's purplish finger marks.

Ingrey had no intention of making idle conversation with his charge, so merely favored her with a polite nod and pushed on to the head of the column. He rode in silence for a time. The dripping of water from high branches in the steep woods and the gurgling of freshets, running melodiously beneath the road through hollowed-log culverts, sounded loud in his ears despite the creaking of gear, groaning of the wagon wheels, and plodding of hooves behind him. They rounded a last dropping curve, the road leveled, and they emerged from beneath the leafy canopy into an unexpected well of light.

The sun had broken through a gap in the ridges to the east, turning the moist air to floating gold and the far slopes to a fiery green. Only one trickle of smoke, probably from a party of charcoal burners, marked any human occupation in the dense carpet of woods rising beyond the hamlet and its fields. The sight did not lift Ingrey's spirits. He frowned down at the mud of the road instead, then reined his horse aside to check that the tail of the cortege cleared the trees without incident. He turned back to find himself riding beside Lady Ijada.

She was staring around with muted pleasure in her eyes, which appeared bright hazel-gold in this new light. "How the hills glow! I love these forests between the bitter heights and the tilled lands."

"It's difficult and dangerous country," said Ingrey, "but the roads will improve once we descend from the wastes."

She tilted her head at his sour expression. "This place does not please you? My dower lands are a like waste, then, west of here in the marches where the mountains dwindle." She hesitated. "My stepfather is of your mind about such silent tracts—but then he is a town-man bred, a master of works for the Temple in Badger-bridge, and likes trees best in the form of rafters and gates and trestles. He says it were better I made my face my dower than those haunted woods." She grimaced abruptly, the light fading in her eyes. "He was so pleased for me when one of my Badgerbank aunts found me the place in the Horserivers' high household. And now this."

"Did he imagine you would snare a husband, under the princess's eye?"

"Something like that. It was to be my great chance." She shrugged. "I've since learned that high lords get to be such by being more concerned, not less, with dowers than other men. I should have anticipated..." Her mouth firmed. "I might have anticipated some seducer, arrogant in his rank. It was the heretical sorcery and howling madness that took me by surprise."

For the first time, Ingrey wondered if the husband whose eye Ijada had snared

might have been Earl Horseriver. Four years he had been married to the hallow king's daughter, and no children yet; was there anything more to the delay than ill luck? Reason indeed for the princess to barter her handmaiden out of her household at the first opportunity—and if jealous enough of her lovely rival, to a fate Fara must have known would not be pleasant...? *Had* the princess known of her brother's perilous plans? *Aside from the rape, you mean?*

*Which beginning?* Lady Ijada had asked, yesterday. As though there were a dozen to choose among.

“What did you think of Earl Horseriver?” Ingrey inquired, in a neutral voice. The earl was landed, of an ancient kin, but his most arresting power at present was doubtless his ordainer's vote, one of the thirteen needed to confirm a new hallow king. Yet such political concerns seemed quite over this young woman's head, however level it might be.

Now the lips pursed in a thoughtful frown. But not in dismay, Ingrey noted, nor in any flush of embarrassment. “I'm not sure. He's a strange...man. I almost said *young man*, but really, he scarcely seems young. I suppose it's partly the untimely gray in his hair. He's very sharp of wit, uncomfortably so at times. And moody. Sometimes he goes about for days in silence, as if lost in his own thoughts, and no one dares speak to him, not even the princess. At first I thought it was because of his little, you know, deformities, the spine and the oddly shaped face, but truly, he seems not to care about his body at all. It certainly doesn't impede him.” She glanced at Ingrey with belated wariness. “Do you know him well?”

“Not since we are grown,” said Ingrey. “I have a near tie to him by blood through his late mother. I met him a few times when we were both children.” Ingrey remembered the young Lord Wencel kin Horseriver as an undersized, clumsy boy, seeming slow of wit, with a rather wet mouth. Perhaps shyness had rendered Wencel tongue-tied; but the boy-Ingrey had lacked sympathy for a smaller cousin who did not keep up, and had made no effort to include him. Fortunately, in retrospect, Ingrey had made no effort to torment him, either. “His father and mine died within a few months of each other.”

Though the aged Earl Horseriver had died quietly and decently, of an ordinary stroke. Not in his prime, baying and foaming, his feverish screams echoing through the castle corridors as though rising from some pit of agony beneath the earth...Ingrey bit back the memory, hard.

Her eyes flicked toward him. “What was your father like?”

“He was castlemaster of Birchgrove, under the lordship of old Earl Kasgut kin Wolfcliff.” *And I am not.* Would her rather too-quick wits notice, or would she merely assume him a younger son? “Birchgrove commands the valley of the Birchbeck, where it runs into the Lure.” Which did not, precisely, answer the question she'd asked. How had they drifted onto this dire subject? Her tone, he realized, had been as