

## The Stone Floor

In the darkness a rat ran over his foot. He knew it was a rat by the scuffling, but there was no light to tell him which direction it came from or whether there would be more to follow.

He pulled his legs tighter against his body, ignoring the pain, and rolled around until he was sitting upright. He seemed to be wedged between two boulders, but their surfaces were shaped to the touch. He reached out and pressed his palm against one, then ran it upwards: it curved inwards first, and then out to a lip. He recognised the shape as a storage jar but it was larger than any he had ever seen.

The one on the other side was the same. Leaning forward, he reached out an arm round each jar, and found more of them stretching away at either side. He placed a hand over the lip of the nearest and it rested on a stone plug, wrapped in damp cloth. He pulled the hand back and held it to his nose. He sniffed: his nostrils were caked in hard snot, inside and out, but he knew the smell of wine.

Then he felt the ground underneath him. He was lying on some kind of torn woollen cloth: when he squeezed it between his fingers, it felt slick and damp. Underneath was rock. It was uneven, like the inside of a cave.

He fell back against the wall. He wanted to stretch his shoulders against it, but the surface was pitted with indentations. It was impossible to lean anywhere without a knob of rock digging into him. So he gave up and pulled his legs up to his chin, the bad one twisted under the other, and closed his eyes to try and think away the pain. But it was everywhere – in his leg, his back, his upper arms, above all down the side of his head. He knew he was injured there, but he was afraid to reach up and touch. Instead he buried his head in his crossed arms and drifted away again.

When he next woke he had no idea how long he had been sleeping. It might have been minutes, or hours. His stomach was cramped with hunger but it had been that way for as long as he could clearly remember. He had a vague picture in his mind of being upside down, and a horse's hooves galloping too close, and being thrown on the ground. Over and over again. But most of what he remembered had become a sort of dream that he kept returning to, no matter how much he wanted to stay away. Awake. The smell of horse dung and burning firewood. Drunken men arguing. Darkness. Awake. Cold rain falling. Branches grabbing at his hair from above. Darkness. Awake. Falling. Blood exploding behind his eyes. Pain. Darkness. Snow in his nostrils. Arthwyr, high on a mountain ledge with his back to the sky, screaming with rage. Awake. The rat running over his foot.

Darkness. Sometimes he thought he was asleep when he was awake. He wanted to be asleep, most of the time; and he welcomed the drifting mind that meant he would soon be unconscious again. But then the real dreams were often terrible, full of fear and falling and spearpoints sucked out of his ribcage in rivers of blood. Rivers draining into the clean snow. So he would come awake with a start, confused and shaking, and smack his lips to keep himself awake and out of the dream. Drifting and dreaming, asleep and awake, all of it hurt more than any pain he had known in his life.

When the light came, it burnt his eyes. Always footsteps first, and grumbling voices. Then the darkness turned to shadow, and a moment later the air was full of blinding light. He knew it was just a torch held aloft, in someone's hand, but he had to close his eyes all the

same, covering his face with his fingers. There was never enough time to adjust: just a vague blurring at the edges; the outlines of the jars; and the smell of food.

The light went as fast as it came, and he would have to find the bowl on the floor. Several times he spilt part of it, as he scrabbled across the rock, banging his head and hands against unseen objects. When he found the food it was never enough: crusts and some kind of vegetable slop that had been left too long, and once a merciful strip of salt pork. But he scooped it all up with his fingers, and when it was gone he stayed on his knees with his face in the bowl until all the warmth had gone.

When he was thirsty he turned to the rock and licked it. There were places there where water oozed out of the wall, and the dripping never ceased, not even in his dreams.

No-one touched him till they came to take him away. It started with the same sounds, the same concealing light. He clutched his eyes and shook his head and prayed to all the gods for it to go away, but this time the feet came closer. He could see leather straps and mildewed buckles at the edge of his vision, and then he was being lifted roughly and his hands were pulled away from his face, and he had to press his eyes tight shut against the burning. They dragged him to his feet, but he was too limp to stand. So instead they took his arms and hauled him over the rough stone with his head bowed and his feet trailing, and while they were dragging him his vision became gradually sharper.

Darkness. But not the terrible empty darkness of before. He was in the open air, and it was night. His knees and feet were no longer banging against stone, but slipping over wet grass.

He could smell animals. He looked up, and there were stars in the distance.

He could hear voices. They were muted, as if his head was swathed in cloth. He tried to turn his head as he was pulled along, but he was too weak even to do that. Instead he concentrated on sucking in great gulps of cold air that sank to his stomach like handfuls of swallowed snow.

Then the stars went away, and a door opened around him, and he was back inside. They dropped him, and the floor was stone: for a moment he thought they had taken him back to where he had been before, but this was no rough cave-stone. It was shaped and chiselled and broken into solid flat flags that stretched for as far as he could see. And there was light here too: the flickering gentle light of a fire burning, and torches casting comforting shadows down on the floor all around him. He scrabbled at them for a minute, but he knew they were illusions. The floor was as smooth as the rock world back on the Alaun estuary. Caressed and softened by a million waves, but there were no waves here. He leant his cheek against the stone, and kept his eyes down. Then he curled into a ball, moaning softly. Another moment or two, and someone would hurt him again.

‘Is that him?’

The voice was scarred, and harsh. The speaker, whoever he was, understood a little about cruelty. Catt drew his forearms up to his face and tried to imagine himself into a better place, but his flesh remained pressed against cold stone.

Footsteps. They were soft and padded, but they were moving closer to him, across the floor.

‘He’s just a farm boy.’ The same voice, but closer now. Still muffled. ‘Probably wandered too far from his valley.’

‘No, that’s him.’ A new voice. Younger. ‘They call him Catt.’

‘A farm boy’s name. I was expecting something more impressive.’

‘He has talents. Your own daughter says as much.’

‘I know.’ Something hard dug into Catt’s shoulders. A foot, probing. Its owner, wondering whether to kick. ‘Perhaps she made a mistake. One cripple looks much like another.’

‘She saw him clearly. When they rode in. This creature is special. She made me keep him till you arrived.’

‘Decent of her. Does he talk?’

More footsteps, moving fast. Hands grasping him by the arms. Stretching them out sideways till pain lanced through his shoulders. Fingers in his hair, grasping. Hauling his head back. Forcing him to look upwards.

For a moment he thought it was Arthwyr. The king himself, crawling out of the snow to drag him back from the dead. Then the mist in his head cleared a little and the face took on a new shape. A thick, greying beard, hanging in matted clumps. Black eyes with folds of grey flesh suspended beneath. A short, stocky torso that threatened to burst out of a thick leather tunic. Pockmarked skin. The mouth, twitching at the corner.

Like Arthwyr’s bastard brother.

‘Do you know me, boy?’

This was the creaking voice, the injured throat. Catt shook his head.

‘But you know a king when you see one. They tell me you keep company with kings.’

(TO BE CONTINUED)